

Holiday Greetings,

I was lucky enough to be visiting with E. Thomas Holiday, columnist emeritus of the Houston Banner, the other day. He had had a good week at Shady Rest Manor and Campground. There were no TV fights, no food complaints, just a solid seven days where he could write his multi-volume memoir and sneak cigars out in the parking lot. A good week.

His mood was loquacious, overflowing with stories about the old days. And, as we are in the holiday season, his stories had a definite holiday bent. The thing about Mr. Holiday is that when he gets going, when the spirit is with him, he will give you ten stories in two minutes and expect that you're going to keep up. Well, I did my best, and this is what I managed to record.

"The year was twenty-eight or thirty one, I can't recall. The snow was so deep that we had to tunnel all through the town. We couldn't keep up. Couldn't plow it or tow it or shovel it enough to keep up. And down it came, day after day week after week, until it was eight or nine feet deep. So we dug tunnels. We dug tunnels down Cedar and up Ellsworth and through Main. We dug enough tunnels to make an ant farm jealous. We actually had to string lights in those tunnels just so folks could see their way home."

"Ole Ollafson got lost in there. He was never the brightest light on the block and always directionally challenged and lost he got. Wandered in and around and up and down until he was pretty near exhausted. He ended up at the Stenruud's place clear across town and pleaded for them to take him in for a while until he could recover his wherewithal. Well they had the room what with their boys being overseas so they said sure, why not. Well, it was April 13th of that year before he got back to his own place. That's when the snow was melted sufficiently to get a view, when street signs and front porches were visible enough to get your bearings. That was deep snow, young fella'. That was as deep as it gets."

I was just about to ask a follow up question in an effort to ascertain the veracity of the tale when E. Thomas began to grin his contagious grin. He held his finger up to his lips to hush me and began to tell me about the Municipal Christmas Tree of '29.

"In those days Houston was in fierce competition with Hokah as to who would have the best Christmas tree. It was an annual event. The citizens of both towns took great pride in the size, decoration and illumination of their respective trees. They would scour Southeast Minnesota for the finest tree available and haul it back to the town's center. In Hokah that was the empty lot next to St Peter's and in Houston it was beside the Skeffington building.

A large oaken barrel was what they made the tree stand out of and then they would secure the trunk to ground stakes with heavy wire. The wires were painted sort of invisible so as not to distract from the tree. I never figured out how they did that.

Now, the typical contest tree was thirty to forty feet tall and twenty feet in diameter, give or take. A tree like that requires a lot of ornaments and garlands and popcorn and whatnot. But the even bigger challenge was lighting that baby. We used candles in those days, a custom that has fallen out of use, for more or less obvious reasons. That's where Johnny Johnson came in. The boy was a genius. Johnny came up with the idea of attaching a thousand candles to the tree with a long, continuous waxed string. The candles circled the tree from bottom to top and with a twist of the string they pretty much stayed in place.

But the idea that the string would be a fuse to light all the candles from one match was a true inspiration, even for Johnny. We were all excited when it came time for the ceremonial lighting just after dusk on Christmas Eve. What Mr. Johnson had not taken into account was that the fuse was continuously attached to the bottom of each candle, thereby missing its wick by about three inches. When touched off the fuse burned brilliantly around and around the tree but only melted the candles. By the time the fuse had burned halfway up the tree a critical mass was reached. A critical mass of candle wax, pine tar, oxygen and a brightly burning fuse.

Rather than each candle being lit in succession, the effect was more like a bomb. The whole thing went up all at once. Man, you've never seen such a thing. The choir dove for cover, the Mayor was knocked elbows over teakettle and Johnny lost his eyebrows and his Santa hat. Luckily nothing more serious than hurt pride and a treeless Christmas resulted from the miscalculation. It could have been much worse; good thing those wires held. There were two trophies awarded that year. One trophy was for Best Tree Still Standing and the other for Exceptional Achievement in Lighting.

That's pretty much how the tradition of the Holiday Bonfire got started over in Caledonia. They saw the flash from Houston and heard the boom and they decided on the spot to institute their own pyrotechnical display. Least ways, that's how I remember it."

And with that, Mr. Holiday wished me, and all of you, the happiest of holidays and a safe new year.