

Augusta Military Academy

Oral History

by Duke Fancher, '58
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The Christmas Tree

Doc Savedge often visited New York City for the first few days of each Christmas vacation before going to Richmond to be with his family. He had many friends in New York and did quite a bit of Christmas shopping during those visits to The Big Apple.



By Christmas of my third year at AMA, Doc knew members of my family pretty well. My mother lived in Washington, D.C., but we generally spent the Christmas holidays in New York with an aunt and uncle, who lived in an apartment in Manhattan.

One particular Christmas, the decision was made that I would travel directly to New York with Doc and my mother would arrive there later.

Sometime before Christmas of 1956, my aunt mentioned something to Doc about the difficulties of buying a really nice Christmas tree in Manhattan. He asked her exactly what she was looking for and that began a Christmas I will never forget...

Doc gave **Peter Kelley, '59**, and me the assignment to get the Jeep and wander around the back roads of Fort Defiance and look for a cedar tree which met Doc's very detailed specifications. It had to be a certain height, a certain circumference, no double trunk and perfectly symmetrical. Once we identified a tree, we were to mark it and take him to see it. It took several afternoons of searching for us to find what we thought was the ideal one.

Quite typically, Doc didn't like our first selection. I remember it was damned cold that December and there was no heat in the Jeep, of course, but what the heck, we were 16 and on a mission.

Finally, THE tree was selected and we cut it down as low to the ground as possible, following Doc's instructions, and removed it from some farmer's fence line. I'm sure that we must have asked permission to do that, but I have no specific recollection of doing so.

The Chemistry Lab next door to Doc's classroom was not used during the winters in those years... something about the heat, I imagine. It was the perfect place to store the tree. We placed it in a large, aluminum trash can and water was added. Someone came up with the bright idea of adding sugar to the water to keep the tree fresh.

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Doc decided that it should be a silver tree – remember, this was 1956! He purchased many cans of white and silver spray paint on several runs to **Colonel Cy McCue**'s hardware store in Verona, with instructions that he wanted to see NO green anywhere on the tree and NO brown bark on the trunk.

This was a major undertaking, with many cadets working on the tree. I was the First Lieutenant Battalion Adjutant at the time and maintained the penalty books. Some of the cadet “volunteers” did some spray painting to work off penalty tours. It was all quite an exercise and before it was finished, had drawn the attention of a considerable number in the cadet corps.

It took days and days of work and by the time it was finished, there was the distinct aroma of something fermenting in the Chemistry Lab. The sugar seemed to be reacting with the sap of the tree. But what a fantastic Christmas tree it was!

On the eve of the first day of Christmas vacation, the tree was tightly wrapped in an old tablecloth, tied, and put in the trunk of Doc's black and white Chrysler Windsor, sticking out of the trunk several feet.

As usual, Doc's car was filled with cadets on their way home for Christmas. Several stops were made between Fort Defiance and New York to leave kids with their families for the holidays. It was a long day. The tree was discussed at each stop. We finally arrived in New York well after dark. As I recall, the last of the travelers left the car at Grand Central Station in New York to catch a train to Connecticut.

Then the tree arrived at its destination. I recall that my aunt wanted to prepare dinner for our arrival, but not knowing when we would get there and with Doc's restrictions on eating meat on Fridays in those years, she settled for scrambled eggs.

We then turned our attention to the tree. Doc decided that it should have blue and silver ornaments and blue and white lights. Another mission...for the next morning. Doc knew of shops and stores that would certainly be selling exactly what he had in mind. We shopped and he must have spent a small fortune on unique, beautiful ornaments and strings of blue and white lights.

At the same time, we shopped for Christmas gifts for his friends and relatives and I remember one stop at Sam Goody's for record albums.

The tree was wonderful!

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In the few days that Doc was in New York before he left for Richmond, he and I visited the Metropolitan Museum, went to Carnegie Hall and saw a Broadway show.

In the meantime, the silver tree was getting a lot of attention. Word spread among my aunt's neighbors and everyone wanted to see the tree – this live tree, all silver and white. Neighbors brought their cameras.

It was a wonderful Christmas and I regret that I don't have a picture of the tree.

It was pure Doc Savedge to demand a perfect Christmas tree. He viewed this project as one no less important than accomplishing your studies, decorating for the Final Ball or working on the "Recall".

It was a time to remember. And I also remember a teacher who added so much to one Christmas and during my time at AMA. He taught me much more than Chemistry and Biology and played such an important part in my life!

You can view the 1958 RECALL here:

<https://galleries.amaalumni.org/Recalls/Recall-1958/>