



More Than A Tree

Early that morning I put on the one and only Christmas shirt I own, and a pair of tiny Christmas tree earrings. On the sweatshirt is a red truck carrying a Christmas tree. I was headed to a party, and I wanted to look the part.

I'm normally not that much of a party person and crowds aren't my first choice of places to spend time. Like many people in the natural resources field, I'm really pretty introverted, and am most comfortable with folks in one-on-one situations. Small groups at the most. But that day was the day of the cutting of the Capitol Christmas Tree on the Chippewa National Forest, and a call had been put out for folks to show up and help.

I was assigned the task of Forest Service representative on one of several buses that was to transport the crowd to the site of the Tree. My job was to help get folks where they were going, share some bits of information, and generally make myself handy once we got there. Possibly they would be needing help in the food distribution area. Flexibility was said to be the key to success on this day. Not being one that is inclined to stand about for long without being useful, I made myself a little "back door" plan, involving the possible distribution of some very nice stickers bearing the logo of the Tree project. I fixed my attitude in my head: have fun or stay home! I nabbed a roll of stickers, and stuck it in our pack. I thought of my role as being Ambassador of Good Will, aka "Sticker Girl".

The morning started with a line of busses loading from several different sites, due to the need to distribute the parking load in the small community of Cass Lake. You could park at the rest area or the Tribal building. There were also Leech Lake Transit buses coming from I don't know where, and school buses bringing loads of third graders. I was but a tiny cog in a big wheel that was moving a crowd of people towards a small spot in the woods. Those in the know were holding their breath that the forest roads would hold up under the recent rains. The background story there involved not only some road machinery on-site to deal with issues, but an agreement from nearby loggers that they could bring in even bigger machinery, should we manage to get a Coach bus stuck in the mud.

I imagine there were some of us who were sweating out these details. I was not one of them, because I was too busy learning how to use the microphone on the bus, in order to convey the key points I had been handed that morning. Two very nice young men had been assigned to my bus, with a set of facts about the Tree. High school seniors, these FFA members made excellent greeters as folks boarded the bus. In between, I could hear them practicing their lines off the fact cards they had gotten not even an hour ago. I coached them on the pronunciation of the name of the Speaker of the House, the dignitary that establishes the date for the lighting of the tree once it

is installed at the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. Making small talk to fill in the waiting time and ease the tension, I learned one boy intends to become a diesel mechanic. Upon graduation, the other is headed to the Balkan oil fields to join his brother.

As each little group of people boarded the bus and got settled, I used my sticker gig as a prop to add my greetings to their day. That is how I met some of the families of a few of my fellow Forest Service employees. The mother of the child in the Forest Service stocking cap is our Transportation Planner. I imagine his mom was tied up with road issues on that day. Sitting in the back of the bus was a little girl with a bad nose bleed, her sister and her grandma. Her daddy was what we call the Incident Commander, the guy in charge of all our doings on that day. The young biologist that found the tree and submitted it for consideration to become the 50th Capitol Christmas Tree was on board, with his fiancé and his folks. Dressed in black and home for the funeral, a daughter grieving the very recent loss of her father, a former Forest Service employee on the Chippewa, found comfort in bringing her family out to the ceremony.

In between arrivals, I spent a little time visiting with the bus driver. It's not every day you drive a bus into the woods, and I wondered if he knew what he was in for. When he told me he had only been driving bus for a year, curiosity got the better of me and I asked if he had operated any other big vehicles. He asked me if his Navy time counted. When we off-boarded at the tree site, I thanked the man for his patience.

Some of our passengers I thought perhaps I knew, but wasn't quite sure within the context of a crowd. Turns out, I had met some of them before. Neighbors, we shared a meal at the Hunter's Supper last year in the local church. The very last person to board the bus was an interesting looking man, carrying a special case. I wondered what kind of a case you would bring to a tree cutting event. I gave him a sticker.

I did my best to convey the points that had been given to me, turned backwards in a moving bus, with one knee stabilizing me on the seat. Our FFA boys did swell. Their questions later prompted me to speak a little about wildlife, and our forest management activities in this area, which is part of where that July 2012 windstorm hit the forest so hard. We are still salvaging the wood, preparing the sites, and working towards regenerating especially the pine forest types. I'm afraid that a busload of passengers will bring you some questions you cannot answer, but that is just the breaks of the game. One I still ponder is what do they do with the tree after they are done with it in Washington? It took a while for me to catch on that one of the passengers was recording an awful lot of what I was saying. I imagine she was with the press. I hope I didn't represent us too poorly.

At the tree site, I found an awful lot of work had gone into making it possible to have a ceremony on that day. A clearing had been built around the tree, the ground smoothed out to facilitate a crowd, and straw spread so that we would not be in mud. Given the weather, that was sure a smart move. A large tent was set up; inside which were some of the 10,000 ornaments that people from all over Minnesota have been making to accompany this tree. Ten thousand ornaments to mirror 10,000 lakes. About 4,000 – 5,000 of the ornaments will be on the main tree, which is an 88 foot tall white spruce. The rest of the ornaments will be used to decorate 70

smaller trees going to various Washington offices. All of these ornaments have their own stories, and are a reflection of the caring and interest of so many different citizens.

Also inside the tent was the food area. Hot drinks and food were being provided by the Leech Lake Events staff, with Forest Service folks helping with the serving. Things looked to be in good order, so I took my stickers and made my way around the tables in the tent.

I didn't expect it to be that way, but I discovered that handing out stickers opens the door for you to meet a lot of people, touch them in a small way, and learn a snippet of their lives. The logo for the tree project involves artwork that is simple and beautiful, the colors deep and inviting. A small memento of the day, most people are eager to hold something in their hands that they can take away and help them to remember. Stickers fill the bill.

I made my way outside into the crowd where buses were constantly arriving and there was always a fresh crop of people to greet. I found that it did not take long for the school kids to discover there were stickers involved. Maybe you already knew this, but little kids just love stickers! Soon I found myself inundated in wave after wave of children, hands out in anticipation of their little prize.

From time to time, I could come up for air, and visit for a moment with people I knew or who seemed to have a desire. Remember that I really am not a crowd person, but I must say there were an incredible number of friendly faces in that crowd. At some point in the morning, one of my Forest Service colleagues found me and conveyed there was an S.O.S. from the food area, but try though I might, I could not make it past the fresh waves of children to respond to that need. I'm afraid I totally failed at food support. The Sticker Girl had her hands full.

Later, I learned that we had the equivalent of a small town out on that site. There were over 500 members of the public, with about 170 children, and another 100 workers including employees, volunteers, partners, media, contractors, and presenters. I think I met an awful lot of them.

I found the task of handing out stickers to be so absorbing, I wasn't always fully aware of where exactly I was in the crowd. I walked up to a brightly colored individual, all dressed in orange. I wondered about that. He seemed distracted. His companion was cold in the chilly, damp air. It wasn't until sometime later that I realized I had handed Jim Scheff a sticker. The Logger of the Year, it was Jim's job that day to cut the tree. I heard through a mutual friend (we both shop at the local antique shop/liquor store) that Jim was nervous about the event. Maybe he doesn't tend towards crowds, either. Don't worry so much, Jim. You and everyone else there did a great job.

A late arriving woman was concerned that she had brought her car into the site after they had missed the bus. A youngster with her told her they shouldn't drive in, that they weren't "special". Some special vehicles were being used to ferry in some of the dignitaries. There were Senators and Congressmen on site. I assured her she was special to me, and they all got stickers.

Spotting a friendly, sort of familiar looking fellow, I approached to a warm handshake and a welcoming smile. We shared a sticker, and it occurred to me afterwards that was one of our State Senators. Nice guy.

Some little groups of children were specially dressed. There were 2 drum groups there and some dancers to perform at the ceremony. Visiting with the young girls, they were eager to share with me the details of who had made their jingle dresses. One girl told me how she had rolled each jingle from parts of tobacco cans. As beautifully as they were dressed in their special clothing, they were all eager to get stickers.

As the morning continued, the school kids got busy, as they will do. Some of the kids found they could get one over on me, and get more than one sticker. I knew that was happening, but we made a game out of it as I learned to recognize the ones in more unique coats. The child with the pink jacket lining really should not expect to succeed at being incognito! At some point, I recall needing to take a little break and heading into one of the porta-potties. A small girl offered to hold my roll of stickers for me, but I declined when I spotted the twinkle in her eye. Good try, though.

The Tree Cutting Ceremony itself began with a few words from the Chippewa's Forest Supervisor, which were made especially interesting by the presence of a photographer's drone flying about. The Press is all over this story, and was out in force at this event. The mystery of the case carried by the man on the bus was solved when Larry Aitken stood up on stage, pulled out his pipe, and gave a special blessing. We heard from U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar, Congressman Rick Nolan, U.S. Senator Al Franken's staffer, and Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Chairwoman Carri Jones about the values of this state's natural resources and the importance of working together, but no one said it better than Larry. First in Ojibwe, and then in English, for me his words of communities coming together were profound. The wise stewardship of our amazing resources is a duty we all carry.

A fine job was done of cutting the tree, immediately suspended by two giant cranes, which maneuvered it to the cradle specially built on the truck donated for this event. There is a remarkable list of sponsors and contractors, each with a role in bringing the tree from the woods in Minnesota, stopping at 30 community celebrations along the 2,000 mile journey to D.C. There are so many behind the scene stories of what is happening; I can't begin to know them all.

One of my favorites involves the contractor who prepared the cutting ceremony site. From them I have borrowed a few photos to show you what things looked like. One is of the site before it was all ready for the crowd. One is of the family the day of the ceremony. It was an especially good day for the Kongsjords, because the preceding week Lloyd was gravely ill in a Duluth hospital. But he set it as his goal to get out of there and attend the ceremony, and that he did.



My very, very favorite photo is of Jim Jackson, walking out of the woods while the site is being prepared. Jim is a former Forest Service engineering technician. Retired many years, he has done a variety of things since then, leading such an active and full life. Since this photo was taken, Jim was seriously injured in a

logging accident. The photo first showed up on Facebook. The title was “Jim Jackson...with a smile”. Be well, Jimmy J. I will save a sticker for you.



More than a tree, the Capitol Christmas Tree gives us a focal point. A symbol of good will, a trigger for folks to come together in so many ways, to unite in an effort that captures their interest and imagination, a chance for community to develop. I have been amazed at the surprising amount of work that goes into getting a tree like this from the northern Minnesota woods all the way to Washington, D.C., the number and variety of stories of what goes on behind the scenes, and what you can learn about the lives of the people that are involved. No wonder they call it the People’s Tree.

As it turns out, my job at the Cutting Celebration was the very best job to be had. Sticker Girl, Ambassador of Good Will, Recipient of Joy. Thank you all for this most special of days.

by Kelly Barrett, Wildlife Biologist
Chippewa National Forest

Photos courtesy of Bob Hill, Cindy Steinberg, Lloyd’s Landscaping & RK Construction Services Inc.