

THE LAST CHRISTMAS TREE

At last! A story to make the National Enquirer blush.

BY TOM KUNCL



The Tree Acquisition Unit was ready. The lumberjacks and the roustabouts and the three waiting railroad flatcars were all standing by, the first to fell The Tree, the second to hump, shimmy and wrestle it into the third, which would transport it from the state of Washington to Lantana, Fla. "You can't cut one this year," said the forest ranger dourly. "Not enough rain. Could start a terrible fire, big tree like that." He elaborated, something about friction from dragging.

There must be some mistake, spattered the Unit Leader. This wasn't just any tree. This was THE NATIONAL ENQUIRER CHRISTMAS TREE, THE FAMOUS FIR, THE COLOSSAL CONIFER...

Sorry, pal.

The National Enquirer people were boughed but not broken. This was Injun country, they reasoned, and if Injuns can sell untaxed cigarettes there surely they can sell their own trees. And so the Tree Acquisition Unit hobnailed off and found a nearby reservation, made peace with the tribe through kindly words and respectful gestures and the transfer of an eye-popping number of fully negotiable National Enquirer simoleons, and arranged for the purchase of the largest tree around. But first, the Indians insisted on performing an ancient rain dance their elders could not perfectly recall, and grimly warned had never worked very well anyway. The dance was held without result, and the Indians — who, it turned out, would risk punishment just like anyone else for starting a forest fire — reneged.

Which sent the Tree Acquisition Unit howling off on a plane to Olympia, where they attempted to obtain a special tree-cutting exemption from the state Legislature through the judicious application of logic, diplomacy, and a hair-raising amount of National Enquirer simoleons, rained down upon influential lobbyists.

While that matter was pending, they skied back to the Tree Acquisition Site, where now stood 50 firefighters (on The National

The World's Tallest Christmas Tree!

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Enquirer's payroll) equipped with hundreds of gallons of fire retardant chemicals. A giant air tanker plane was rented to circle overhead, ready to dump tons of water if needed. A meteorologist was sent aloft to scout the probability of rain (zero). On the recommendation of the U.S. Army, a mighty Chinook helicopter was at the ready, on a one minute call, to lift The Tree and plop it onto a truck, eliminating any spark-producing friction caused in transport.

The Tree Acquisition Team waited for rain or for word from Olympia, whichever came first, but neither looked promising. The Unit Leader, whose name was Dino, phoned Lantana to report impending failure.

Jain Calder, the editor, took this news gravely. True, things looked bad, very bad, but one had to keep these things in perspective. What could the boss do, fire him?

Well, yes.

That night, Jain Calder, cynic, crusty tabloid editor, quietly said a prayer. For rain, 3,000 miles away.

And lo...

Some days later, The Unit arrived back in Lantana packing a 125-foot Christmas tree, THE WORLD'S LARGEST CHRISTMAS TREE, and Calder arrived at the office of Generoso Pope, famous publisher, famous ball buster, WORLD'S MOST BAFFLING HUMAN. Calder began to detail his team's triumph.

Impatient, busy with some matter before him, The Czar of Christmas barely looked up. As was his custom, he was smoking like an FDA test chimp.

"So you cut down a tree," he said. "What's the big deal? We always cut down a tree."

And that was that.

That was also two years ago today. For the first time since 1973 there will be no National Enquirer Christmas Tree in Lantana this year, because for the first time there will be no Generoso Pope. He died last year and the tabloid's new owners decided the cost of obtaining, decorating and dismantling The Tree (never publicly revealed, but, according to Calder, "you wouldn't get a heck of a lot of change back from a million dollars") was considered prohibitive, a luxury.

A lunacy, actually — the single most bizarre obsession of a man known for his bizarre obsessions. For 16 years, the tree became Generoso Pope's delirium, a one-of-a-kind extravaganza that no other historical figure, except perhaps P.T. Barnum, would have thought to undertake; and Barnum would have charged you \$10 to see it. Pope spent money on his tree without the slightest regard for any corporate bottom line.

A really huge Christmas tree has no branches on the bottom 30 feet or so, but that looks inelegant, so tons of branches from other trees had to be nailed on. A full-time decorator oversaw what had to be the world's oddest-at-first-glance motorcycle club, hired each year to do the nitty-gritty work of festooning the tree. They drove down on their Hogs each year from all parts of the country. Many of them had the tree, or the giant six-foot star that crowned it, tattooed on their arms. The names of each of them were scratched inside the big star that now languishes in a Pompano warehouse along with tons of other decorations.

A six-foot-deep bunker was built into the ground to receive the tree, which last year stood 126 feet high. It was anchored to a half-dozen huge concrete piers by heavy-gauge guy wires an engineer said would withstand 80 mile per hour

winds. Water was pumped into the bunker to keep the tree from becoming a fire hazard. When it was lit, you could see it for several miles. Fifteen thousand electric bulbs made it shimmer. More than 1,000 ornaments were affixed, along with a mile of garland and 250 giant bows. More than 350,000 other lights twinkled from nearly every shrub, tree and hedge on the grounds. Among them were individual displays that rivaled any window on Fifth Avenue.

The strangest display of all on The Enquirer grounds at Christmas — as executive editor, I had a ringside seat for much of it — was Pope himself.

Hated by Hollywood, reviled and ridiculed by the establishment media, (The Herald once ordained him "The High Priest of Low Brow"), still feared and cursed by legions of ex-employees who were fired because they could not learn to do things his demanding way, he was also, to those who knew him as I did, a first-rate mind, an amazing teacher and an enormously generous friend. And the oddest sort of duck.

One editor still at The Enquirer recalls the time Pope confronted his wife, Lois, and her mother in front of the tree:

"There was this huge line waiting to get on the grounds. Lois Pope and her mother were striding past it, moving up to the front.

"I heard Pope say, 'Where do you guys think you're going?'"

The two women stammered something.

"No cheating," Pope lectured. "Everyone waits in line here." Lois and her mom trudged back to the end of the line.

Pope turned to the horrified editor. "This place is a democracy," he said, and strode off.

It was several years before the editor shared that story with anyone.

"Who in hell would have believed it? Especially the part about democracy."

Almost every year, Pope's lieutenant, Guy Gallardo, found himself caught in a domestic cross fire between Pope and his wife. With a genuinely good eye for color and design, Lois would instruct Gallardo to make certain changes in displays or on the tree, when she visited the grounds in the morning. By afternoon, when Pope emerged to check the scene, Gallardo would be summoned with a growl.

"Why did you move that," Pope would ask.

"Because Lois told me to," Gallardo would counter.

"See if you can get her to sign your paycheck next week," Pope would growl. "In the meantime, move it back the way it was."

Inside the offices of The Enquirer at Christmas, the joy of the season was mitigated by the chaos it brought along. When hordes of visitors began descending on the wonderland on Dec. 11, the workday life of the staff sometimes became as crazed as one of the 2,000 active news files working every day. Buses pulled in all day and half the night from Miami, Jacksonville, Tampa and Pahokee, disgorging thousands. The employee parking lot became a chromium graveyard for those who parked there and failed to make their getaway before the unbelievable crush of nighttime traffic. Some visitors made it an all-purpose pilgrimage, viewing the tree, then gawking into the office windows, perhaps in hopes of catching a glimpse of a space alien or a chicken that could do calculus, or one of the other mind-boggling subjects of stories they'd read about in the paper.

One editor who braved the mob suddenly found himself buttonholed by a woman from somewhere around Akron, as he recalls today. She thrust into his hand a rock about the size of a baseball and told him it had been fired from a hovering UFO, striking her husband dead as he fished from a

rowboat. The nervous editor vowed to turn the strange weapon over to The Enquirer's crack staff of UFO-ologists for detailed analysis. He used it instead as a paperweight for a stack of old newspapers beneath his desk until an overzealous janitor pitched it.

After daily calls from the widow-turned-home, and finally under threats of a lawsuit to return it, the editor found a comparable rock and mailed it up to Ohio along with a gibberish note that said experts had determined the missile to not be of this Earth.

While the tree was annually billed as the world's tallest, it never won any official backing for that claim. Several staffers grayed prematurely trying to get the tree listed as such in the Guinness Book of World Records. There had once been, it seemed, a 150-foot tree erected at a mall opening in Oregon, and though it was never put up again, Guinness editors stubbornly refused to supplant it in their annals with Pope's tree. Efforts were made to enter it under several ingeniously modified categories, but Guinness was as implacable as Pope.

Wonderful tales would float through the office each year when the tree came down. It was to be sawed up and used to add a sun room to an old folks' home, one year's story went. Another said Jacques Cousteau was coming by to pick it up for use as a new schooner mast.

John Chappell, whose task it was to clean up the world's biggest mess, cleared up the mystery: "We cut it up and hauled it out to the dump," he said.

Pope often brought down from New York a wheezy quartet of musicians, whose repertoire, even at Christmas, tilted toward any tune with any reference in it to The Big Apple, back East college fight songs and ditties from Broadway shows the boss had seen and liked. Maybe they knew *Away in a Manger*, perhaps some four-tuff arrangement, but I never heard them play a song of the season that I can remember. We called them the Schmenge Brothers, but judiciously applauded their music widely.

Once Pope's then-teen-age son, Paul, whom we assumed to be the *dauphin*, and heir to the throne, walked up to his dad and a group of executives listening to the band.

"Where did you find these stiffies, at a garage sale?" he pointedly asked *pater*, with a look in his eye so undeniably genetic that I reached for my pulse and found none to count. Pope first looked shocked, annoyed. Then a monster movie grin spread across his face.

"You're all going to be working for this kid someday. How do you like him so far?" Pope chuckled.

Pope's largess outside was not quite equaled indoors at Christmas. There were no routine bonuses, but then again, no one expected one. For many of the editorial staff, every Friday was a Christmas of a kind, on which they received paychecks that reduced high-minded mainstream newsmen elsewhere to anguished tears. When I left, early in 1981, my salary was nearing \$200,000 a year. They may not export a lot of geniuses from the small town in Iowa where I was fetched up, but I never said to Gene Pope, "What, no Christmas bonus again this year?"

There was an annual Christmas party, an unbelievably lavish bash. Lucky, a mixed-breed floor mop of a dog, whom I believe Pope secretly disliked, but was forced to make a fuss over because we had rescued him from death in a

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pound and made him the paper's mascot, was usually invited to attend. Often it would be a return in triumph from a road trip in which he had posed with a celebrity for the paper's annual Christmas cover photo. In that shot, stars would be featured wearing a Santa suit, or at least a hat, and waving their good wishes for the holiday to Enquirer readers. A spokesman for Johnny Carson reportedly once told a pleading photo editor that "Johnny would rather have a picture of himself looking up Mother Teresa's skirt than to appear on the front page of *The National Enquirer*." Other celebrities were not so aloof. Bob Hope was an all-time favorite front-page St. Nick and important others stood still for the somewhat silly and sentimental portrait. It always sold a tremendous number of copies. As Pope once told me, and I never forgot: "More people eat corn than caviar."

-Pope could dish it out, but he couldn't take it. He didn't like to be on the receiving end of a gift. One editor who boldly gave G.P. a truly fine bottle of Scotch as a Christmas gift failed to endear himself. Instead, he embarrassed Pope, who reacted cruelly:

"I had a sip of that cheap booze you gave me," Pope said unexpectedly one day to the editor during a staff meeting.

"I must not be paying you enough. It tasted like kerosene. I used it to clean out the carb on the Chevy."

My favorite Enquirer Christmas memory is from a year I was not there to witness the gala. I was seriously ill, hospitalized at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore with a bone infection that had intermittently plagued me for years and had suddenly become dangerously out of control. Gene Pope turned loose the top medical reporters on our staff to determine the best place in the world for me to be treated and to identify the most prestigious doctors to be brought in for my care. When I was flown to Hopkins, I was met by Dr. Neil Solomon, author, syndicated columnist, adviser to *The Enquirer* on medical news. He came to my bedside every day to explain in layman's terms what the doctors intended to do. He reported to Pope, who sent out for medical texts and recent research papers on my illness — osteomyelitis — in order to follow what Solomon was telling him.

My hazy recollection is that Pope called me every day, including the morning I was wheeled in for more than seven hours of surgery and told there was an even chance I would lose my leg. On Christmas Eve day, a man who looked like he had just snowshoed his way down from Minsk sighed his way into my hospital room. He staggered under a load that included a miniaturized version of the big tree in Lantana, a gigantic fruit basket, a silk, stuffed Santa and an envelope containing a Christmas card I am now looking at with almost as much wonder as when I first saw it. I realized I had never seen his actual signature — only the crimson, abbreviated thunderbolt-looking scratch he used to sign off everything at *The Enquirer*. No one else in the shop was allowed to use a red pen.

On the bottom of the card he had written these words: "It might not be a 110-foot tree, but it's just as full of cheer and good wishes. Merry Christmas, Gene Pope."

The circulation field force employee who had come bearing the gifts shyly produced a Polaroid camera and asked my wife to step in close to my bed so he could snap pictures.

"I have to get one of these back out to the airport and down to the boss. He wanted to be sure the tree looked OK," he said.

The phone at my bedside rang not long after he had vanished. It was Gene Pope wanting to know if anyone unusual had shown up. He tried to growl away my thanks:

"I'm surprised those jerks could find the hospital, it's only the biggest building in town," he snorted. "By the way," he added, "there are some guys here who want to talk to you."

I next heard the slightly tipsy voices of a gaggle of my colleagues from the newsroom. Schemers, who on any other day of the year would cheerfully have eaten my liver, sincerely sang for me those two great old Christmas standards, *On the Sidewalks of New York* and *The Marine Corps Hymn* as the Schmenge Brothers played what sounded like *Hello Dolly* in the background. Pope was back on the line again:

"They can't sing, and they don't know how to get out a newspaper either. What the hell am I going to do with them?"

"Well, anyway, Merry Christmas, Tom. I'll see you later," he said, and hung up.

Well, Merry Christmas to you too, Gene Pope. I will see you later. But this year — bet on it — I'm going to find the biggest damn Douglas fir that will fit inside the small apartment of a recently divorced guy. And I'm going to hang more stuff on it than you ever saw. Maybe I'll even get a tattoo. There's still a streak of fool's gold tabloid crazy in me. Then I'm going to stand back and admire it, plug in the lights, drink a quart of Scotch, remember old times and sing a few bars of an un-Christmas song. Then I'll pull a prepared statement out of my frayed bathrobe pocket and give you time to hide before I read it.

"This tree's for you, Gene Pope," it will say.

I know. I know. It needs more tinsel on the left side.

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