

Editorial

O Christmas Tree

The Holiday Season. More precisely, the Christmas Holiday Season. A time for Peace and Goodwill to all men. Unfortunately, this year, as in recent years past, there is very little peace in the world and what goodwill we can collectively offer our fellow man might best be summed up in the phrase, "Hope you can make it through until this time next year."

I'm not old enough - or cynical enough, yet - to start referring to "The good old days," but my boyhood years spent in Northern Ontario, Cochrane to be specific, seem in retrospect to have been a lot more idyllic than the troubled times the youth of today is being forced to endure.

There was always something to do in the summer, 'up North,' even spending days wandering through and camping out in the "bush."

Winter would sometimes arrive in the third week of September and on many occasions last through the third week of May. But, no sweat, winter activities abounded for youngsters.

The Christmas seasons spent in Northern Ontario have always evoked special memories. Possibly because we were so close to Santa and the North Pole.

The closely-knit community of Cochrane seemed to become even more like a large extended family during the Christmas season and doors, never locked anyway, were always open to well-wishers and Christmas frolickers.

My fondest memories of Northern Christmas centre around my mid-to-late teen years and the annual "Great Christmas Tree Hunt."

With all due respect and empathy to environmentalists, there are few experiences in my life that can compare favorably with the sheer enjoyment, exhilaration and just good clean fun that was associated with the annual trek into the bush to find that one magical Christmas tree.

One Christmas season in particular stands out above the others.

I was about 17 and as in years past, me and my buddies canvassed the neighborhood to find out who needed Christmas trees and what sizes they desired.

My father, being an old soldier, was always in charge of the Christmas tree campaign, attended by his trusty aide-de-camp, the family dog, Glen.

Glen was a story by himself. Part German Shepherd and part Saint Bernard, he weighed at least 150 pounds and could make an empty room look crowded just by laying down.

Glen went everywhere with my father and sat in the front seat of the car with my dad on trips around town. The pair were a familiar sight in Cochrane with kids always waving and yelling out hello to Glen. I think they assumed my father was just Glen's chauffeur.

The day of the 'Great Christmas Tree Hunt' arrived and me and my buddies assembled in the kitchen. A friend of my father had given us a loan of his pick-up truck so we were all set. But not before some final instructions from my dad on the seriousness of our venture. No one was to be disappointed with their Christmas tree.

He gave each of us about a quarter-inch drink of Drambuie while he toasted to the success of our mission with a glass of Scotch, washed down with a nip of Drambuie, and we were off - me, my buddies, my dad and Glen.

When we got to the 'hunt area' - with permission already having been received from a friendly farmer - my dad and Glen would take up positions in the back of the pick-up to better reconnoitre the area.

With his Christmas tree list in hand, he would scan the bush, every now and then bellowing

Colin Gibson

Editor's Notebook



"STOP" and pointing to our intended prize.

It didn't matter whether the tree was five feet off the edge of the road or more than 50 feet into the bush, on command we piled out of the pick-up and took to the task at hand.

Finally it was time for our family tree and my dad bellowed "STOP." He pointed into the bush. There, about 20 feet from the road stood the most gorgeous Christmas tree any of us had ever seen - but it was obviously too large for our livingroom. "We'll make it fit," stated my father in a tone that brooked no argument, as he took a celebratory sip from his flask of Drambuie, signalling the end of yet another successful Christmas tree campaign.

The pick-up was overflowing. The trees were tied down, as were my buddies, and Glen rode (sat) in the back to keep everyone warm.

We parcelled out the other Christmas trees to the neighbors and it was time to get our family tree into the house. But it wouldn't fit.

Our house had a long glass-enclosed porch running along the side, so we removed some panels, cut off some of the tree and got it into the porch. No way was the tree going to go through the door. So we removed the french doors leading into the dining room to get the monster into the house.

By this time, the neighbors and their children had caught wind of the commotion at our place and the street in front of our house was rapidly filling up.

We had inadvertently broken other panes of glass in the porch, the family cat had escaped and was being chased madly down the road by my sister and here sat this monster tree in our dining room, halfway over the dining room table.

That was when my mother showed up. Needless to say, she was not impressed.

The dining room set had to be taken apart to make room for the tree, but we still couldn't get it to stand upright - this despite the fact the dining room had an unusually high ceiling.

My dad peered at the ceiling and it hit me what he was thinking. "No way, Dad, that's my bedroom above there," I shrieked. "That's what I was thinking," he replied in a malevolent way.

"Leave it to me," I begged, "I'll make it fit."

How, I'll never know, but within the hour the tree was standing. It took up a good third of the dining room, but it was beautiful. Even my mother admitted that, as she viewed the wreckage of what used to be a well-kept house.

Water from melted snow flowed throughout. Pine needles carpeted the floor. The french doors were leaning up against the dining room wall, there were still pieces of glass on the porch from broken windows. My sister was trying to calm a terrified cat and Glen was looking for a place to hide because in his excitement he had trampled about four of our neighbors.

That night we had a house party and invited the whole neighborhood to help decorate the tree.

Even today as I view decorated Christmas trees, even artificial ones, I have to smile as I think back to that special tree and the special times I had enjoying Northern Christmas.

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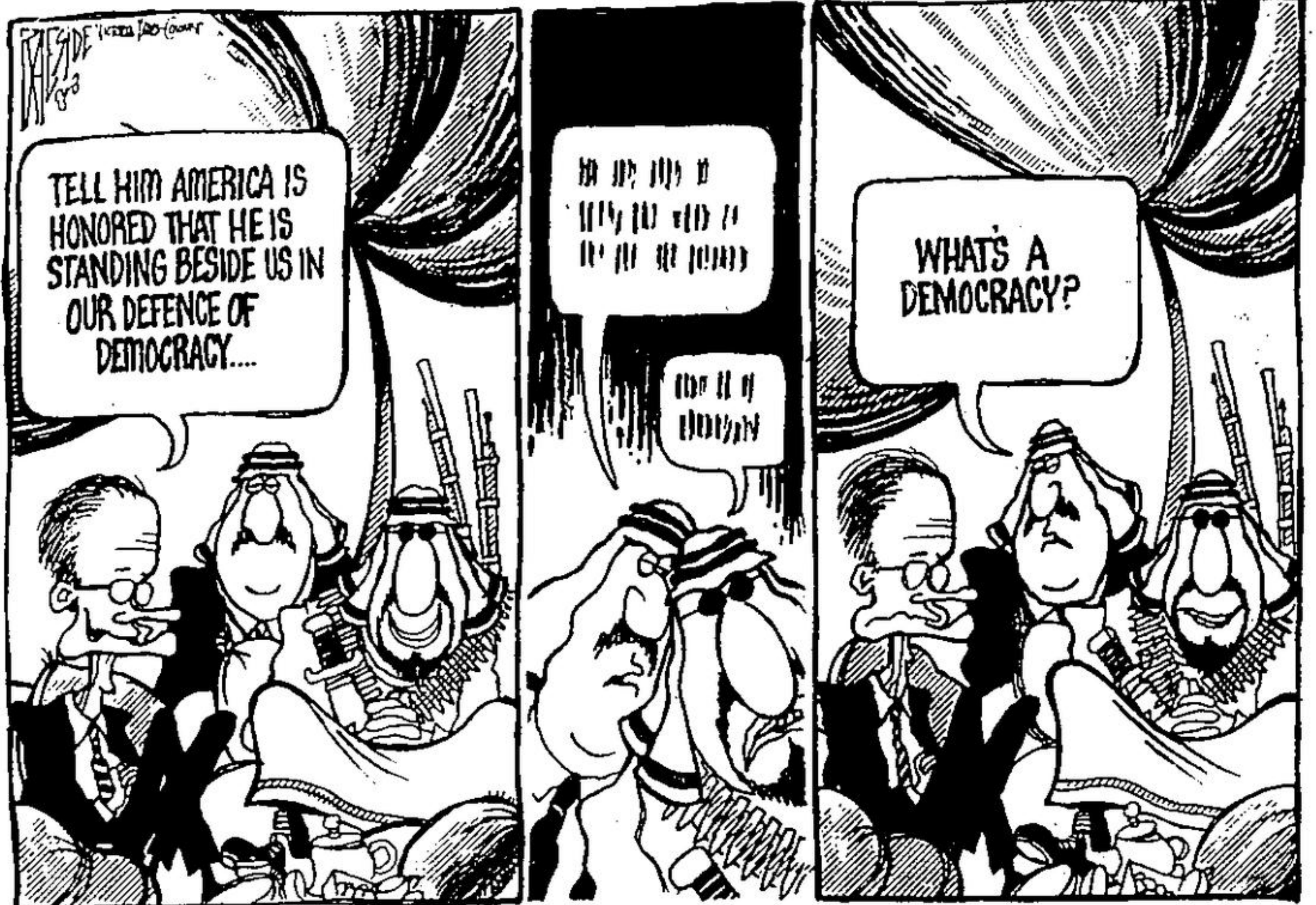
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The saga of Francis the Pig

In a country that's sadly lacking in heroes, there's something singularly poignant in the saga of Francis the Pig.

You all know about Francis, of course. Francis is the porker who escaped from a Red Deer slaughterhouse last month and resolutely foiled all attempts to capture him.

The media chronicled his exploits with increasing breathlessness, culminating in the report that he was utterly unfazed despite being shot with a tranquilizer dart containing a dosage which would, according to the chap who shot him, have "killed an ordinary guy."

Then he promptly dropped dead. Hmmm: There's something about this story that's as quintessentially Canadian as mountains, moose and CBC budget cutbacks.

At a time of such national soul-searching, I hesitate to pose a question that might cause still more angst. Still, it begs to be asked: what does it say about a nation that our foremost folk hero of the new decade is a renegade pig?

Let me hasten to say that I found Francis just as heroic as anyone else. Heck, it would be impossible not to feel a thrill of excitement while reading the Canadian Press description of Francis' flight from the slaughterhouse.

"After scrambling over a metre-high fence and tiptoeing through a sausage-making room, he nosed open a back door and turned his curly tail on local butcher Fred Huizing forever."



Ian Weir

Weir's View
Thomson News Service

Admit it. This is great stuff. Add a stirring soundtrack, and you've got all the ingredients of a thrilling suspense film - Where Piggies Dare, perhaps.

The unfolding saga grew all the more exciting as the paper chronicled Francis' single-handed struggle to remain free - if single-handed is a term that can be applied to a pig.

There were reports that he had been seen fighting off coyotes. And Doug Smith, a Red Deer rancher, who was trying to capture and tame Francis, reported that he had grown positively dangerous.

"He's like an alligator," Mr. Smith was quoted as saying. "If you walk past him, he'll tear your leg off."

(This, of course, cries out for a further allusion to movies. But don't worry - I won't stoop to making reference to Porky's Revenge. And no mention of The Scarlet Porkernell will pass my lips.)

Indeed, Francis surely attained legendary status when a civic official referred to Francis as "the first thing in Red Deer that's

caught the nation's attention for some time."

This speaks volumes about Francis' stature as a pig. It also says something about Red Deer. But we'll let that pass.

Still, there's something vaguely disquieting in the fact that Francis should emerge as a kind of national symbol.

Granted, he beats all heck out of the beaver. I've always had problems with our choice of the beaver as an image of the nation. In a country full of grizzly bears, mountain lions and Wolverines, we pick a woodland rodent.

But I digress. The fact is...well, let's draw a comparison with the U.S.

A couple of years ago, the Americans had a heroic animal saga of their own. As you'll recall, this involved a Montana moose who fell in love with a herd of cows, and belligerently resisted all attempts to drive him off.

I think you see what I'm getting at. This American hero was a mighty forest creature. And his saga was such boffo box-office material that it might as well have been scripted in Hollywood - a poignant love story liberally spiced with sex and violence.

And what do we get? A pig with an attitude. Who drops dead.

Rest in peace, Francis. You gave it a good try. You reminded us of some enduring Canadian virtues - you even inspired us - before keeling over unexpectedly in the middle of the night.

We should erect a plaque to this pig. On the shores of Meech Lake, perhaps.