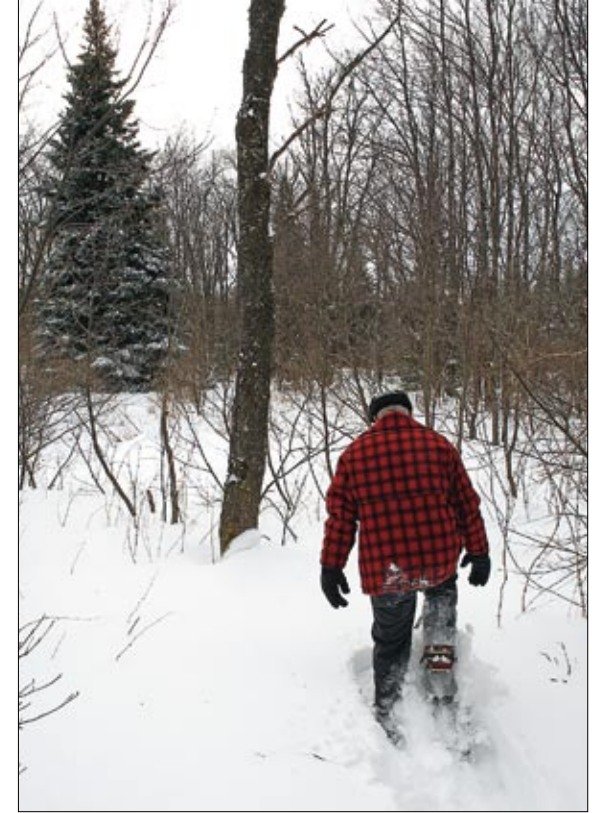


Deck the Halls... of Power

Bennington
gives a big gift
to the nation:
a \$125,000
Christmas tree

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Photos by KEVIN BUBRISKI

Coast to coast: Last year,
this tree came all the way
from Washington state.



Way back in 1980, former Bennington County Forester Jim White (above) chose the tree that will make its way to the Capitol. Since then, he has often hiked into the Somerset forest to clear away brush to allow for the tree's optimal growth.

IT'S A SHARED EXPERIENCE THAT dates back to Victorian times, a Currier & Ives scene updated, with SUVs replacing sleighs and chainsaws taking the place of axes, but fundamentally unchanged over the years.

Bundled against the cold, they head off to the woods to cut down their prize. Trudging through deep snow isn't essential, but it adds to the sense of adventure. They proudly set it up in their living room, only to be told by the resident arbiter of holiday rituals — most families have one — that it's a little bit short and maybe a little too scrawny; that it has an unsightly crook in its spine and that a blue spruce would have been better than a white pine to begin with. This sometimes

Bennington tree committee members David Dsido, Joann Erenhouse and Jim White visit the chosen tree before its trip to Washington.



has led to another holiday tradition involving eggnog, hot mulled wine, or even straight vodka. But while it's a scene likely to be repeated in many homes this December, it won't be the case with the U.S. Capitol Christmas Tree, which is Vermont's holiday present to the rest of the nation.

About 60 years old and 60 feet tall, silvery green and nicely symmetrical, the Balsam fir (*Abies balsamea*) is handsome by any standard, and it didn't get that way just by accident. Ever since it was picked as a candidate by former Bennington County Forester Jim White back in 1980, it has been as pampered as a hemophiliac prince, its trip from the Green Mountain National Forest to the west lawn of the Capitol as carefully planned and choreographed as a debutante's ball. Other trees were cut away from its base to allow full sunlight and unobstructed growth. It was injected with imidacloprid to protect it from an invasion of balsam woolly adelgids in 2003. It was fed organic fertilizers

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to offset a yellow discoloring caused by a production of too many fir cones. When a beaver colony began building a dam near the tree, U.S. Forest Service workers inserted baffles in the dam to keep the water from flooding it.

By the time it would be cut with the help of heavy equipment donated by the Central Vermont Public Service Corporation, hauled south on antique trucks along with a large backup tree and about 80 standard-size "companion trees" for government offices and veterans' hospitals, decorated with 3,000 ornaments made by Vermont artists working through the Vermont Arts Council, and toasted at a large cocktail party timed to coincide with the lighting ceremony,

it would have become a \$125,000 tree, more or less, with about half the cost provided by the legislature.

This is considered frugal by Joann Erenhouse, the executive director of the Bennington Chamber of Commerce, who noted that Virginia spent about \$647,000 in connection with the 2004 tree, and that Michigan had spent about \$1.1 million in 2001. "It's our gift to the country," she said. "A lot of the money was raised privately and a lot of the work was done by volunteers."

A small army of people was involved in the project. The New Hampshire-Vermont Christmas Tree Association, for example, provided the smaller trees, all of them from Vermont. The "Green Mountain Bull Dawgs," a group of antique truck owners, volunteered their time and their trucks for the convoy to Washington. The 4,000 or so ornaments for the "companion trees" were made by school children in a statewide program coordinated by the education department and, like the 3,000 for the Capitol Christmas Tree itself, were donated. Funds were raised from individuals and corporations, and also from the sale of commemorative baseball caps, T-shirts, tree ornaments, jewelry and coffee mugs.

Most of the organizing of the festivities has been based in Bennington County, where there's been much local talk about the Capitol getting "a Bennington tree." In fact, it grew near the Deerfield River in Somerset, which is in Windham County, not that most people care much one way or the other. Any long-lived tree is at risk from fungi, pests, lightning strikes, heavy winds and other falling trees, and, in this case, ice backups from the Deerfield. So in picking possible trees back in 1980, Jim White thought it was prudent to find six of them, all of them likely to grow to impressive heights, and several of them, as a practical matter, close to a road.

Yes, Virginia, there is a cheaper way

A price tag of \$125,000 might seem exorbitant for a Christmas tree, but consider what these high rollers spent on their Capitol evergreen:

- \$647,000 by Virginia in 2004.
- \$1.1 million by Michigan in 2001.

Bennington trimmed costs the Vermont way, using partnerships, volunteers, fundraising and private donations.

Vermont had provided the very first National Christmas Tree (a 48-foot balsam fir) for the White House in 1923, when Calvin Coolidge was president, and another one (a 65-foot balsam fir) in 1967. Both were selected by Riley Bostwick, a Rochester tree farmer. It also provided a 48-foot white spruce from Windhall in 1980 for the Capitol grounds, and two other official Capitol Christmas Trees, once in 1982 (a 50-foot balsam fir from Rochester that then-governor Richard Snelling helped cut with a cross-cut saw) and another in 1994 (a 58-foot balsam fir from Somerset). Five years ago Vermont was told it could provide the 2007 tree, in part

to mark the 75th anniversary of the Green Mountain National Forest.

White accompanied the 1980 tree to Washington and decided then and there that he wanted to be involved in picking future ones. And every winter since 1981, he and two friends — Frank Thompson, of the U.S. Forest Service, and Jennifer Kimberly of the Natural Resource Conservation Service — have hiked into the Somerset forest to clear brush and smaller trees away from their candidate trees and to have a winter picnic of hot chocolate and hot dogs roasted over a wood fire.

White, who recently retired after 42 years in a job he enjoyed so much that "If I didn't need the money, I would have done it for free," thinks the tree Vermont sent to the White House in 1967 was "the prettiest tree there ever was," but that this year's National Capitol Christmas Tree is impressive as well. It spent 60 years in the quiet serenity of Somerset getting ready for its moment at center stage, which will be dramatic but short. For a few weeks it will be one of the most photographed trees in the world, tall and stately and set against the domed backdrop of the Capitol itself. But come January it will end up just like most of the other trees that will have brightened Vermont homes all through the holidays, taken down without ceremony or fanfare, stripped of its lights and its ornaments, and then ground into mulch. ❁