

THE CHRISTMAS FOG MIRACLE OF 1897 [or] THE FOGGY MIRACLE OF CHRISTMAS
1897

Another Lem Edgar Tall Tale
By William McCollum

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Lem Edgar of Espy, Columbia County, called on the writer during the week. Lem had come up with a load of poultry and having disposed of his stock to good advantage, was filled by the Christmas spirit. During our conversation Lem compared the Christmas celebrations of the present with those of the days when he was a young man, and in the course of his reminiscences, he said:

“Coming up here the other morning it was kind of foggy between Shickshinny and Hunlock Creek, and then when I got to Nanticoke I began to see Christmas trees for sale on nearly every empty lot that I passed and it made me think back to the Christmas of 1897 when a heavy fog and Christmas trees were the chief figures in a Christmas miracle.

“It was this way,” Lem continued. “Work was slack in the Espy boat yard after the canal zone froze up, and Bill Trembly, Isaac Heckman, Ralph Aul and myself got jobs on a lumbering operation of a fellow named Redline up on Knob mountain in near Orangeville. We were cutting off a fine stand of pine, hemlock, and some spruce, and along about the latter end of November, Redline told the men he had no objections to their cutting out the tops of felled trees as Christmas decorations, if they did it on their own time. So, after that, us four fellows, from Espy, every time we saw a nice top, would cut it out for a Christmas tree. Others did the same and each crowd would cut its own mark on the tree butts.”

“Our mark was an X, a cross.”

“Christmas fell on a Thursday that year, and on the Saturday before, Redline shut down for a week so we could enjoy the holiday season. We’d been having fine sledding for two or three weeks, but on Sunday night a December thaw set in and on Monday the snow began to melt fast. About noon Bill Trembly came up to my house and he says: ‘Lem, I was thinking we’d better go after them Christmas trees before the snow is all gone.’”

THE JOURNEY STARTS

“So, we rounded up Ralph Aul and Isaac Heckman and hired a team of mules and a bob-sled from Charles Bomboy to haul the trees home. We left about three o’clock in the afternoon with Charles Bomboy driving the mules. When we were going over the Light Street hill, the road was bare in spots, and all the way up the mountain where the trees were, the road was getting in bad shape. When we reached the logging camp, it was getting dark fast and we found that we’d forgot to bring any lanterns along. But we found our pile of trees and hustled and loaded them, there being just fifty-two in all.”

“When we started on the road back to Espy, it was so dark you couldn’t see your hand before your face. But them mules seemed to know what they was about and kept going at a brisk gait. But finally Ralph up and says: ‘There’s something funny about this, we should be going downhill on this mountain and we’ve been traveling on the same level for the past half hour.’”

“Well sir, that struck us all singular, but them mules kept going along, and we concluded it’s being so dark just made it seem we’d been going on the same level. It must have been nearly an hour after that when Bill Trembly spoke up and says: ‘We must be lost or something like that. We should have passed through Orangeville some time ago and I didn’t see no lights or houses.’”

MYSTERY ENTERS

“That sort of made us all a little leary. But Charley Bomboy spoke up and says: ‘I don’t know where we are but I know these here mules. They’re going right along and you can bet your bottom dollar they know what they’re about.’”

“That kind of cooled us down and then a little later the hind bob of the sled gave a lurch, and for a second or so it looked as if we were going to upset. The mules stretched into their collars and straightened us out and kept right on going. Charles Bomboy says: ‘Well, I guess we come near to going into a ditch back there. Guess them mules have us on the road alright.’”

“That seemed reasonable and nothing more was said about it. Then about forty minutes later the sled struck a bare place in the road and the mules stopped. We got off the sled and looked around, and there we was right on top of Light Street hill and the stars was shining over us.”

‘I don’t recollect any hill climbing,’ Bill Trembly says, ‘but here we are. It’s funny to me.’

“It was to the rest of us too, so we walked back a ways and finally came to the slope of the hill, and all we could see was a bank of heavy fog that filled the whole Fishing Creek Valley, and the fog was even with the top of the hill. The fog bank was as even and level as a floor and you couldn’t see Light Street at all. Then we began to feel our way out and found mule prints and tracks of the runners of the sled right on top of the fog. Then it became clear. That fog was so dense and thick that when the mules struck it coming down Knob Mountain above Orangeville it held up their weight and the load of the sled and they made a bee-line right over the top of that fog for home.”

“We climbed on the top of the sled and thirty minutes later we were safe in Espy.”

A MIRACLE

“Where did the miracle come in?” we asked.

“Well, I was going to tell you about that,” said Lem.

“The next day when we unloaded, there was fifty-one trees instead of fifty-two and we finally concluded we lost one when we slipped that time I told you about. But the day after New Year’s I went down to Shuman’s hardware store in Bloom to get a new axe, and when I entered the store, I met Mrs. Joe Smith, whose husband ran a farm near Heacock’s grist mill a mile above Light Street. Just as I closed the door, I heard Harry Shuman say: ‘I suppose you had a merry Christmas, Mrs. Smith?’”

‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘it was the most wonderful day. It had looked like a failure, but then the most wonderful thing happened, a miracle had happened. You know our two children are four and six years old, and I had promised them a Christmas tree, and I had all the ornaments to trim it with. Joe promised me he would cut a nice tree up in the wood lot, but you know two weeks before, he

fell from the hayloft and broke his legs. So Joe told me where the tree stood that he had picked out to cut, and I was going to do it myself a day before Christmas.'

'But when I woke up Tuesday morning the fog was so thick you couldn't see anything before you. Why, if you opened the door, it was like a great wall. The only way I could get out to milk the cows and feed, and do the barn work, etcetera, was to hold fast to the grape arbor and grope my way in the fog. Oh, I never felt so disappointed in all my life. The children wanted a tree so bad, and I knew just how they would feel about it. About ten o'clock I started to pray for a way to get a Christmas tree.'

HAPPY ENDING

'Then all of a sudden, a shaft of sunlight pierced that fog bank and it seemed to melt right away. I suddenly heard a thud, and there before my astonished eyes lay a tree on the lawn. It was the most beautiful silver spruce you ever laid eyes on. Oh, I was so delighted and grateful I just dropped on my knees and offered thanks to the almighty. Then I carried the tree into the house, and what do you suppose? It was marked with a cross on the butt. Wasn't that a miracle, Mr. Shuman?' And he agreed with her.

"What did you say?" the writer asked Lem.

"I didn't say anything," Lem answered. "I didn't have the heart to destroy the faith that shone on that women's face. I just couldn't tell her that the tree she believed came to her from heaven had fell off our sled and was laid up there on that fog bank for two days."

"That was the miracle," concluded Lem. "And if you want to see the miracle worker, look at me."

[A native of Espy, William McCollum (1865 – 1936), was a well-known sports reporter for several Wilkes-Barre area newspapers. During the 1920s and 30s, he was celebrity both upriver and here. He wrote a popular sports/humor column entitled "Diamond Dust" for the *Wilkes-Barre Record* but was most famous for his baseball coverage over many years. In this piece for *The Morning Press*, McCollum used Espy's Lemuel Edgar as his narrator/mouthpiece. It's difficult to determine how much of McCollum's stories are fact versus fiction and how much truly came from the mouth of Edgar versus the brain of McCollum. This piece comes from a collection of humor articles called *Snake Stories*, which Mark Fritz found in our extensive Work Progress Administration (WPA) files. It was apparently produced under the auspices of that Roosevelt era program. Special thanks to Nick Arnold for his help getting the manuscript ready for publication.]



William L. McCollum (left) and Lem Edgar, of Espy.