Twelfth Night – A Forgotten Ritual

Twelfth night is the last evening of the 12 days of Christmas and according to an old European custom it calls for one final burst of feasting and revelry to commemorate the close of the Christmas season.

Many years ago, in the Town of Greece and other communities, the twelfth night was celebrated with the ritual of a community Christmas tree bonfire. It was a yearly event anticipated by all.

In the Dewey-Stone neighborhood in the 1930s, Barnard School land was used. That event was eventually moved to St Joseph Villa’s lot next to the Barnard Fire House. Grandview Heights, the Legion Post on Dorsey Rd. and Holy Cross Church in Charlotte also had their twelfth night bonfires, as well as communities all around the Rochester area. For several days before the special night the neighbors would bring their trees to the designated empty lot. This was an era before artificial trees, so thousands of trees would make a huge pile. On January 6th, at the appointed hour, thousands of neighbors would gather. Here in Greece, Supervisor Gordon Howe, or some other official, might have said a few words, while a scout troop led the group singing. The fire was lit, and flames would ascend high into the sky. For the youngsters this was a really big deal, as it seemed like the entire town was there to see the huge fire. It was a lot of fun and a memory kept for a life time.

Due to a number of obvious reasons, the ritual was halted sometime in the early 1960s. Instead of burning our trees, we now send our “real” trees to recycling centers where they are turned into mulch for our gardens or other uses. Absolutely a much more environmentally correct thing to do, but not nearly as much fun!