

## Christmas at the Hot Springs

Years ago, my husband, Dan, and I often visited a remote hot spring in the high desert northwest of Death Valley. Saline Valley is about a hundred miles long and thirty wide, with no paved roads, no permanent settlements, and only a few semi-permanent residents. A ragtag group of hot springs enthusiasts liked to camp there, and at that time, I knew — and loved — most of the regulars.

Dan and I spent Christmas at the Springs a few times, and I found those holidays to be both unusual and delightful. Because there's no electricity in any part of the valley, and no radio reception, and there weren't any cell phones in those days, the place was completely isolated from the noisy commerce of our usual observances of the holidays. To get there you have to endure many jarring hours of travel over rutted, rocky dirt roads, which makes it seem even farther from the rest of California than it actually is if measured by straight lines on a map. In fact, the valley is shaped like a giant oblong cup, walled in by steep mountains, so in December our horizon was defined by that perimeter of snowy peaks, and it seemed as if the outside world no longer existed when we were there.



*A much younger Jill enjoying a peaceful moment in Saline Valley*

On the occasion I remember best, I think there were about 25 people at the Springs. On Christmas Day, the men dug a big pit in the ground, loaded it up with fire-heated rocks, put in a couple of turkeys, and let them cook all day before digging them up again in time for dinner. Everyone brought numerous side dishes and we all shared a great communal feast. The next day, I borrowed the biggest cooking pot I could find and set it up on my camp stove. I collected the turkey bones and scraps and started cooking them up, and people brought me whatever soup ingredients they had on hand — a bunch of carrots, some potatoes, parsley and other herbs, rice, beans, noodles. We dined on that soup and other leftovers for another day or two.



After Christmas dinner, guitars appeared and we gathered around the campfire for singing and drinking. Our German friend Werner produced a cauldron and collected contributions of red wine (as well as some vodka, and who knows what else), then added cranberry and other kinds of fruit juice, sliced oranges, and spices. Next he heated up the fire poker until it was red hot and used it to stir and heat the mulled wine mixture, which he called “glogg.” As I recall, it was pretty good, but my memory may be a bit fuzzy. What I do remember with clarity is that we all drank a lot of it!

Our South African friend Johan presided over a gift exchange called a Yankee Grab — whereby participants contribute to a big pile of wrapped gifts, generally of small value, and then take turns selecting and opening them, the gimmick being that instead of choosing and opening something new, you also have the option of grabbing someone else’s item and letting him take a new one in your place. There were certain rules, of course, but I won’t go into it. The trick was to choose something that was desirable but not too desirable, because the best item would likely be grabbed away from you by the next participant. In other words, we figured out that suppressing *excessive* greed was actually the best strategy!



For me, one of our most enjoyable communal activities was decorating our tree. Lizard Lee cut a pine tree in the high mountains surrounding the valley and brought it down to camp. Johnny Tequila had a gasoline generator, many yards of extension cords, and some electric Christmas tree lights; the generator was set up some distance from camp, behind a hill and out of earshot, to muffle its intrusive sound. Next we all made ornaments for the tree. We used



pine cones scavenged from the mountains; sprigs of desert holly that grew on the desert floor; and the seed pods of the mesquite that grew all around camp, called screwbeans. We tied all these with ribbons and hung them on the tree. I collected scraps of wrapping paper and made colorful origami cranes. Major Tom had some pipe cleaners and made stick figures — some of which were anatomically correct, complete with naughty bits. Chili Bob cut open some beer cans to make candle holders. We made popcorn and cranberry garlands, which the birds also enjoyed.



*Desert holly*



*Screwbeans*

The beauty of our improvised Christmas celebration at the Springs was the complete absence of commercial intrusion. We made everything ourselves, and shared everything we had. In so doing, we avoided what can make the Christmas season so stressful — the relentless pressure to *buy stuff*. Instead, our holiday was a simple, original expression of loving community.

After our Christmas feast, and the campfire songs, and the gift exchanges, and the wine, and a final relaxing soak in the steamy hot pools, we all slipped into our tents and campers to sleep in heavenly peace beneath the blazing infinity of stars visible only in the dry, cold, dark night of the high desert in winter.

