Christmas at St. John’s
93.07.00 05-017 slide 1 Great Hall exterior with tree
1949: Bennies Present Christmas Carols

http://cdm.csbsju.edu/u/?CSBArchNews,30216 The Record  Dec. 15, 1949, p. 2
1952 Christmas letter from Chaplain Fr. Virgil O’Neill

152:4

I. A most blessed and joyful Christmas to all and to each of you! It will be this for you if you keep Christ in your souls and try to avoid much of the pagan atmosphere and excessive commercialism which has come to inject itself into the Christmas holiday season. Liturgically speaking, Christ has not yet been born. This is only December 19th. There are ten days of yealming and preparation left. The Church forces a little preparation on the part of all; hence, the Ember Days this week on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. Those over seven years of age may eat meat only once on Wednesday and on Saturday. Those over twenty-one are obliged to fast. Here is the new rule put in force last spring: “On days of fast only one full meal is allowed. Two other meatless meals, sufficient to maintain strength, may be taken according to each one’s needs; but together they should not equal another full meal.” No meat at all is allowed on the vigil of Christmas.

KEEP ON PREPARING. Many of you will be working, but there are early Masses too. Try to get to Mass and Communion as often as possible before Christmas. You are a Catholic College man. Your conduct in this matter, as in other ways, will be watched! WITNESS to Christ in this regard.

II. All of us were born to Mother Church in a particular parish. It is the Mystical Body in Miniature. Take an interest in your local parish affairs — in so far as time and talent permits (decorating the church for Christmas, baskets for the poor, joining the choir, etc.)
Christmas At The Abbey

By Tom McGraw

"We found a home at St. John’s." This might be the reason some twenty fellows would give for their otherwise unaccountable action during the Christmas vacation.

The real cause for the failure of these twenty to migrate from St. John’s, comes Dec. 15, is that they all come from "Far Away Place"—China, Germany and the Bahamas, among others. Approximately this many Johnnies every year spend their Christmas vacation on campus, or at least in an area within a radius of 16 miles, using the campus as their home base.

Their day is something like a college man’s dream—during school days. "We get up any time we feel like it, and go to bed any time we get ready to," Lou Adderley, one of the veteran inmates, said. However, they do put in some work hours, mainly at the Liturgical Press. A few of the vacationers also clean out the rooms.

On Christmas Eve last year, the Brothers and the Clerics put on a program for the diminished community and the more diminished student body. The Brothers sang a group of Christmas Carols while the Clerics put on a Nativity play, featuring the byline hands of Father Alois O'Conner, O.C.S.B.

Fong Ben, Anselm Hall soph, commented, "We had everything—no prefects were around." He didn’t mention what everything was.

At midnight the students attended the community midnight Mass, celebrated by Father Abbot. Then to bed.

The Sisters turn Santa Claus every year and provide each of the on-campus men with a sack of candy and nuts on Christmas. On Christmas day, the Sisters produces a special meal with a surplus of everything but bicarbonate of soda.

There wasn’t much to be discovered about New Year’s Eve, on campus, at least. The place seemed to contain even a smaller student population that night than during the rest of the vacation.

Following the program there was "a real party up on fourth floor Benet...no prefects were around."

The Sisters turn Santa Claus every year and... produce a special meal with a surplus of everything but bicarbonate of soda.

1954: Some students spend Christmas at the Abbey

“One of the highlights of the Christmas morn is carolling. First, the clerics sing for the Sisters in front of the convent, then it's off to Flynntown where the local people listen to the carols.

It's almost traditional now that after singing a carol for George Dureenberger and family the clerics break out with a rousing Johnny Fight Song.

Finally, the tired carollers are trucked down to the Gerhard Track house for singing...”

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1960: Caroling in Flynntown

http://cdm.csbsju.edu/u/?/CSBArchNews,31810 The Record Dec. 9, 1960 p. 4
CHRISTMAS AT SAINT JOHN'S

December 3, 1967

Concert of Christmas music in the Abbey and University Church

Featuring:
Saint John's University Men's Chorus
Saint Paul Cathedral Boy's Choir
Saint John's Abbey Schola
Saint John's Seminary Choir
Saint John's Prep School Choir
Saint John's University Orchestra
Gerhard Track conducting

1967: Christmas concert line-up
Box 2017:1
1975: *Torch* article gives some history

http://cdm.csbsju.edu/u/?CSBArchNews,2181 *The Torch* Dec. 12, 1975, p. 8
CHRISTMAS 1975

ELVES WORK SCHEDULE

Tuesday 12/2

1) Get Scaffolding from Chicken Koop
   Staff:
   Steve P. (in charge)
   Allan K.
   Joel H.
   Report time 4:00 PM
2) Make garlands for Food Service
3) Make Wreaths for Food Service
4) Tie and Glitter tree for Beger Room

Wednesday 12/3

Decorate Food Service
1) Garlands in Main Dining Room
2) Wreaths on walls (6) Main Dining Room
3) Large wreath in Faculty Dining Room
4) Gingerbread Tree in Richards Room

1975: Elves Work Schedule
105:4
Christmas Tree Blessing/Lighting Ceremony
Schedule

8:00 P.M. Fanfare
Brass Group or Recorder Group (2 min.)

8:02 P.M. Opening Choral Piece
O Magnum Mysterium (2 min.)
(Men’s Chorus)

Light is a symbol of Life
These dark days show how precious
Darkness of Death. As we light
this Christmas tree may we
** Remaining time slots depend on the length of each presenter’s remarks.

work to be a pledge of working
happiness, Light and Life to our world

1976 Schedule with scribbled prayer
Box 594:5 (reportedly in Michael Blecker’s handwriting)
December 1, 1977

Memo

To: Br. David Erceg, Fire Chief

From: Br. Leonard

As you may or may not know, the Christmas Tree Blessing is scheduled for Wednesday, December 7th. A schedule is enclosed.

I'm not sure that I am asking you to do, other than pray and also to inform you where fire will be used. Hopefully, the tree will not go up in a puff of smoke when Michael throws the switch.

The two serving tables will have the brass candelabras on them with live candles. The hot cider will be kept hot via sterno. Other than that no open flame will be used.

Thank You.
Blessing and Lighting of St. John's Christmas tree opens the Christmas season for the campus. At the recent ceremony were more than 1,000 students, staff and friends; St. John's Men's Chorus (front, right); and (front, left) Br. Leonard Chmelik, OSB, University President Michael Blecker, OSB, Abbot John Eldenschink, OSB, and Santa Claus. The decorations on the tree were designed and executed by Br. Andrew Goltz, OSB. Photo by Woodard.

1977: Community tree photo and caption
1) 
THIS CHRISTMAS TREE IS A SYMBOL OF HOPE; 
OUR HOPE FOR PEACE; OUR HOPE THAT 
BEAUTY WILL GRACE THE EARTH; OUR HOPE 
THAT TRUTH WILL ILLUMINE MANKIND's WAY; 
OUR HOPE THAT THIS CELEBRATION OF THE 
FIRST COMING OF CHRIST WILL BRING ALL 
OUR HOPES CLOSER TO REALIZATION. 
MAY (over) 

1977 prayer - 594:6
1977: *St. Cloud Times* article
DATE: 4 December 1978

MEMO TO: Father J.P. Earls, O.S.B.
        Judy Karasch
        Father Roman Pour, O.S.B.

FROM: Father Daniel J. Ward, O.S.B.

RE: Christmas Trees, Fire Regulations

The State of Minnesota fire regulation regarding Christmas is as follows:

A. Natural trees are prohibited in hospitals and nursing homes.

B. Natural trees without open flames and without any lights are permissible in schools, churches, etc. (i.e., public buildings). They may not, however, be near heating units or electrical units. They may not block exit ways.

C. Artificial trees with approved UL lights are always permitted.

1978 The Abbey lawyer, Fr. Dan, bears the bad news: fire regulations mean that the real tree in the Great Hall can't have lights on it any more

1978: Fire Regulations mean no lights on an indoor tree

594:7
1978: Br. Linus notes a one-year reprieve
Dec. 5 1978 memo 594:7
1978: Last Great Hall tree with lights
PC07 16-31
December 29, 1978

A committee is formed in December

Memo


From: Shirley Zipoy

Re: Great Hall Christmas Tree

A proposal has been made that initative be taken by some of the people that are familiar with the Tree Lighting Ceremony Event to discuss the future of the Event.

It is felt that it is important that this discussion take place before the current tree is taken down. We should review the topic while it is still fresh in our minds.

The purpose would be to discuss other options of lighting, location, etc. It would be a benfit to have varied opinions that are strong in nature so that many ideas may be discussed.

(One suggestion that was apparently not acted upon: )

A tree of sufficient size should be planted anticipating that in 5 years it will be tall enough to be used as the outdoor tree.

1978: Changes to be discussed
81:17
January 8, 1979

Minutes of the "Christmas Tree Committee" held on January 4th, 1979.

We all thank Br. Andrew and Br. Leonard for the beautiful result of all their work this year.

There were many comments and various alternatives discussed for the future arrangements of the Event.

Br. Erceg said that fire code laws prohibit lights on an indoor tree that is chemically fire resistant and that the same is true for all of the decorations used on the tree. The subject of an artificial tree was discussed but not generally agreed as acceptable. The question of cost of such a large artificial tree is a deterrent. There was a general feeling that future discussion approach having a large tree outside. Location places mentioned were outside the Great Hall on the left side of the doors, the Quad Courtyard or the center of the Mall.

The possibility of having the lighting ceremony outside, perhaps with Mr. Theimer's Choir, was one suggestion. Another suggestion was to have either a smaller tree or a crib scene in the Great Hall along with the large tree outside. It was stressed that the Great Hall speaks for the Community for the entire Christmas Season and not just the night of the Tree Blessing Ceremony. It is because of this that the Great Hall should be in some manner continue to tell the Christmas Story even if a large tree is used outside as part of the Event.
Events Coordinator

September 21, 1979

To the Christmas Tree ad hoc Committee:

There is a meeting scheduled at 10:00 AM, in the President’s Conference Room on Wednesday, Sept. 26th.

Time is slipping by and we must again address ourselves to the issue of forming a new format for the Christmas Tree Blessing and Lighting.

The date of the event is December 3rd, 1979.

Br. Leonard Chmelik, Br. Andrew Goltz and I have a proposal to present to the rest of the committee. This will be a beginning point and hopefully save time for all of us.

Your attendance will be appreciated.

[Signature]

Sept. 1979: “Christmas Tree Committee” needs to make decisions
818:17
1979: “Christmas Tree Committee” Proposal

818:17

Christmas Tree 1979
Exhibit #1
Decoration Proposal

To bring our Christmas decorations into compliance with the State Fire Code the following proposal is made. The concept is to provide for a lighted tree on the Church Mall, with a decorated tree in the Great Hall. The Great Hall tree would be lighted with exterior flood lights.

Blessing/Lighting Proposal

The following program is a composit of the ideas generated at the committee's initial meeting. It is hoped that it will solve the problem of overcrowding the Great Hall, while still providing for a convivial Community evening opening the Christmas season.

1. 8:00 p.m. Musical Program in Abbey Church
   a. program would be 45 minutes of music.
   b. program composition by Mr. Theimer.

2. 8:45 p.m. Blessing/Lighting segment.
   a. comments by Abbot Jerome and Fr. Michael in Abbey Church.
   b. guests go out on Mall.
   c. Abbot Jerome blesses tree (brief comment).
   d. Fr. Michael lights tree (brief comment).

3. 9:00 p.m.
   a. refreshments served on Mall Ring Road (hot chocolate, hot cider, christmas cookies).
1979: A tree is lit outside; the music moves to the Abbey Church
1979 Dec. 4 St. Cloud Times, p. 21  106:14
DATE: 26 November 1980

MEMO TO: ABBOT JEROME THEISEN, O.S.B., FR ALBERIC CULHANE, O.S.B., BR. LINUS ASCHEMAN, O.S.B., AXEL THEIMER, MICHAEL PAPESH, BR. PAUL RICHARDS, O.S.B., BR. LEONARD CHMELIK, O.S.B.

FROM: MICHAEL NAUGHTON, O.S.B.

RE: CHRISTMAS TREE BLESSING, DECEMBER 8, 1980

This is a final draft, to be revised as needed.

This is the general outline of the service:

1. 7:50 pm - Carols by the assembling congregation
2. Circa 8:10-10:00 pm - The monastic schola will sing a motet, marking the entrance of Abbot, President, Headmaster, and Chaplain, vested in cucullas.

11. Chaplain invites all to follow the ministers outside
12. Once people are assembled outside, President makes brief remarks
13. Abbot blesses tree; tree is lighted
14. A prearranged group breaks into a “spontaneous” carol

k. An invitation to go out to the tree. Abbot, President and Chaplain would lead the way out, hopefully, not being swept away by the marauding hoards as they fight to get out.

1980: Draft schedule includes a “prearranged,” “spontaneous” carol

819:1
Blessing of the Tree, December 8, 1981, 8:00 p.m.

in Upper Church

Organ Music from 7:30 -- medley of themes of Christmas music (Bre Bob Koopman)

Carol about 8:00p.m., led by All-College Choir, joined by audience

"Oh Come, All Ye Faithful"

Welcome and Introduction (Fr. Roger Botz)

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1981 plans are made

At the Tree (east of St. Mary's Hall)

Student Choir (under Tom Kanies) will be down at the site of the Tree, singing a carol as people come down from the Church. The group will continue to lead in the singing of carols until Frs. Hilary, Michael Blecker, and Roger are at the podium.

Introduction of Prior Hilary (Fr. Roger Botz)

Blessing of the Tree by Prior Hilary.

V. The Lord be with you.
R. And also with you.

Let us Pray.

---

Introduction of Fr. Michael Blecker, President (Fr. Roger Botz)

President speaks briefly, then lights the tree. (There will be a switch near the podium.

The switch has a delay of a few seconds -- don't panic.)

1981 Tree Blessing Schedule

751A:29
1981 Chaplain’s Letter

751A:29

WHY DIDN'T THE CHRISTMAS TREE light at the Tree Blessing last Tuesday night? We'd like to blame it on the Libyan Hit Squad or on a power shortage from a lack of garbage at the solid waste burner. Unfortunately, the tree didn't light because of a deliberate act of destruction and theft. Between 7:15 p.m. (when the lights were last tested) and the blessing ceremony, someone cut a line and disconnected and stole a special junction box, which were part of the tree-lighting apparatus. As a result, the tree would not light until an electrician crawled through the catacombs beneath Mary Hall to switch it on manually. Perhaps some might call this theft and destruction playful fun or a sense of humor that possibly went too far. We call it vandalism, and we call it a selfish disregard for the 2500 people who came to see the tree light-
1982 Tree
1984: The music moves back into the Great Hall

http://cdm.csbsju.edu/u/?/CSBArchNews,36022 Nov. 29, 1984 p. 9 – “Tis the Season” – Axel’s 1st concert (in Great Hall rather than the church, and tickets sold)
1985 Lighting
Following a service at the St. John’s Abbey Church (background), people gathered outside to sing carols after the Rev. Mary Theriault, OSB, lit the Christmas tree Thursday night at St. John’s University.

Photo by Mike Frisch
1986 photo and “An Ode for Seniors”


AN ODE FOR SENIORS

Listen dear seniors and you shall hear
An ode for us folks in our last year.

Seems but yesterday we made our first fuss
About who to sit with on the Bennie bus…

That over three years have gone by
Shows just how quickly time can fly…

Watching the Christmas tree lighting, singing away,
Or dumping beer on each other on St. Pat’s Day…

Let’s not stop now and call it done.
Let’s make these last months the most fun…

It’s time now to share with our friends,
and create more memories before college ends.

So that when graduation comes and it’s time for goodbyes,
It will be with a smile on our lips and tears in our eyes.

--Chuck Johnson SJU Senior

The Record gives an historical review; the 1989 crowd started a countdown
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/u/?/CSBArchNews,37320 December 14, 1989 The Record Page 5
1990: Great Hall concert: standing room only!
76/4 binder 10/57
Tree outside Sexton, ca. early 1990s
76/4 8-029
1998: Tree *inside* Sexton

10 great places to ... reflect on Christmas Eve

December 18, 1998, Friday, FINAL EDITION. SECTION: LIFE; Pg. 3D.

By Cathy Lynn Grossman, USA TODAY

10 USA Churches “that offer a God-glorifying setting or stirring music or a commitment to service.”

St. John’s Abbey Church, Collegeville, Minn.

“This Benedictine Monastery church, designed by Marcel Breuer, may be the greatest church of the 20th century. When midnight comes and the lights are out and the monks are all singing in this great earthy concrete church, you’ll remember this Christmas forever.”
Colleges to present annual Christmas concerts at Saint John’s

The College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University will welcome and celebrate the holiday season at 8 p.m. on Friday, Dec. 3, and 2 p.m. on Saturday, Dec. 4 with their traditional “Christmas at Saint John’s” concerts in the Great Hall on the campus of SJU.

The annual event, now in its 21st season, will feature over 200 musicians in concert in the beautifully decorated Great Hall. The program traditionally includes a diverse selection of seasonal music, from classical works to Gregorian chant. This year the program will include W.A. Mozart’s Te Deum, many movements of G.F. Handel’s Messiah and music for the seasons of Advent and Christmas from many centuries. There will also be the premiere performance of Tota pulchra est, a Christmas motet dedicated to and written for the SJU Men’s Chorus by Minnesota composer Anne Kilstofte. Christmas carols, sung by the choirs and the audience, are part of the tradition.

Groups scheduled to appear include the CSB Campus Singers, the SJU Men’s Chorus, the Saint John’s Boys’ Choir, the CSB/SJU Chamber Choir, CSB/SJU Brass Choir and members of the Amadeus Chamber Symphony. Performing for the first time this year is the newly formed Saint John’s Gregorian Chant Schola in solo and combined performances.

1999: 
No mention of a tree lighting...then, or since.

The tradition has ended.

http://cdm.csbsju.edu/u/?/CSBArchNews,39918 Dec. 12, 1999 The Record p. 2
For years, the Christmas tree blessing & lighting tradition is a favorite undertaking of Br. Leonard Chmielek

MEMO: 30 August 1976
TO: Fr. Michael Blecker, President
FROM: Br. Leonard
RE: Christmas Tree - Great Hall

Although addressing oneself to Christmas when the school year has hardly begun may seem a bit absurd, nevertheless we should get it on the calendar. In the past, planning for this item along with the tree lighting ceremony, usually began in late September. The date for the lighting ceremony was set at the beginning of September. If we are not going to discard this tradition, I would like to suggest Monday, 6 December, for the tree lighting.

Although no longer connected with the SJU Center (Special Events Coordinator), I would like to offer my services for this item and event. It always was my favorite and I would like to do it again.

Br. Leonard’s favorite event
106:4 1975-79 photo of tree
CHRISTMAS COOKIES

Unknown even to most of the occupants of the Abbey is the Christmas cookie kitchen on the fourth floor of the monastery. Here Br. Leonard Chemla bakes and patiently decorates about 2000 cookies—gingerbread men and women, birds, wreathes, snowflakes, cinnamon bears, and even pink elephants—in delicious profusion. Each is baked with a metal hook embedded in it, then packed in a box and frozen to keep it fresh until Christmas. It is the Christmas present to the community from Brother Leonard.

Among the many Christmas trees in the house, the most popular is that in the basement recreation room. Aside from the lights, this tree’s sole decorations are the cookies. Hence, the hooks. This tree, beautiful as it is, is not merely a feast for the eyes. Throughout the Christmas season, the members of the community contentedly help themselves to Christmas cookies, while Brother Leonard dutifully replenishes them as they are consumed. Hence, the large number.

(Details for the above story were stolen from STAIFA, a publication of the Priory in Tokyo, and the article was written by Prior James Zarr, who had a hand in the baking often enough to be sure of the facts.)

Br. Leonard’s love of Christmas is also manifested inside the Monastery

Abbey Quarterly v.3 n.1 p.9 1986

Abbey Quarterly v.3 n.1 p.9 1986 – cookies on tree
2003: Br. Leonard loved Christmas!

*Abbey Banner* vo. 3 no. 1 Spring 2003 p. 26 – Leonard baked 1400 cookies to decorate tree

Photo of Br. Leonard from 2003 Fall *Abbey Banner* p. 21 – Leonard’s obituary
The tree in the Great Hall is a tradition, as is the concert, but the blessing/lighting ceremony is a story of “Christmas Past.”

1990s Trees
76/4 08-025 (left) and 1990s 76/4 07-011 (right)
Merry Christmas!

Compiled in December 2011 from resources in the SJU Archives by Peggy Landwehr Roske, CSB/SJU Archivist.

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2011 Great Hall tree photo & credits
Photo Dec. 14, 2011 by PLR
Summary Timeline:

1971  1st tree lighting event (inside Great Hall)
1978  Last real tree with lights inside
1979  1st tree lighting outside, preceded by songs in Abbey Church
1981  Lights failed
1984  1st Great Hall concert (paid admission)
1998  Tree lighting inside Sexton Commons
1999  No tree lighting

Summary Timeline of changes, 1971-1999