70 years of Sioux Falls Christmas memories

Baumgartner Family Christmas Trees, born in a North End backyard in 1955,

endures with quality and service and tradition.

By Patrick Lalley

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The memories are like an old Christmas movie.

A winter evening in a Midwestern neighborhood, where the streets run absolutely parallel and perfectly perpendicular, with alleys bisecting rows of square box houses and garages built in backyards because there wasn't room for a driveway to the street.

Gray chain-link fences and amber-tinted streetlights.

The alley fills with long American-made sedans and old pickups, trunk-to-grill. Engines rumble low against the chill while clouds of exhaust vapors rise into a windless darkness.

Lights festoon the backyard — muted red and green and blue and yellow — a primary-color reflection of community and commerce.

Bare Christmas trees line the edges and lean against each other in the middle, their boughs still pointing skyward from the just-removed twine binding, like hopeful angels awaiting souls.

Snow and fallen pine needles crunch underfoot, packed into an outdoor shag of winter wonder.

People meander through the trees, imagining one in the living room window, debating whether this one is too much or that one too little.

The garage door is open but it's warm inside. Conversation and cash exchange in equal proportion.

Small candy canes for the children and a big percolator of coffee for the adults.

Out in the alley, family trees are strapped to the tops of cars, or suspended in half-closed trunks.

There is laughter and shouting, instructions and requests.

It smells of pine and petroleum and Marlboro Reds.

It feels like Christmas in 1975.

The memory is mine, formed at the home of Jerry and Luella Baumgartner on North Walts Avenue in Sioux Falls.

Before they were available at every box store in the metro, that's where you bought your Christmas trees in the North End. You went to the alley behind the Baumgartner's house and picked one out.

Best not to dawdle, though.

They won't be there for long. Miss the chance and you'll be putting together the plastic one that Mom kept in the attic with twisted color-coded wires dictating which branch to put in which hole in the pole that was the spine of the thing.

By the time I showed up as a boy, Jerry Baumgartner and his family had already been selling Christmas trees for 20 years.

The Saturday before Thanksgiving 2025, when they opened the doors for the season, marked the 70th anniversary of Baumgartner's Christmas tree venture.

Jerry, now 93, still works alongside his children and grandchildren nearly every day. The three generations of Baumgartners are assisted by about 30 part-time helpers, including long-term friends who come out every year.

The lead salesman is Kerwin Nieman. He started when he was teenager, coming in with a group of farmers from around Lennox and Parker.

Kerwin is 67.

Jerry was a 23-year-old electrician at John Morrell when he got the idea, inspired by his brother-in-law in Albert Lea, to drive up to another brother-in-law's place in northern Minnesota and bring back some trees to sell as a side gig.

"He got it started the first year and I thought, well, if he can do it, I can, too," Jerry said during a break on Monday at Baumgartner Family Christmas Trees.

That first year, they loaded up 99 trees on a trailer and headed back to Sioux Falls.

"I was scared to put the hundredth one on because I would have lost it. If you had seen that load I had, there wasn't room for one more."

The 99 trees sold in three days at $3 each.

In 1956, Jerry doubled the load.

They sold in four days.

The seasonal business grew from there. Jerry used his vacation time from Morrell's, where he worked for 34 years, to sell Christmas trees every year.

They outgrew the backyard by 1990, so the Baumgartners moved to the current location at 1701 W. Madison St., less than a mile from their home.

That first year in the new place they sold nearly 8,000 trees, sourced from Minnesota, Wisconsin and North Carolina.

Jerry still lives in that house on North Walts that he built by hand.

He and Luella raised four kids and created a tradition that has lasted 70 years.

How, in an age of so much price-point consumerism, does a business like Baumgartner Family Christmas Trees survive?

"We go out and we buy the best of the best to start with," Jerry told me.

There's more to it than that, of course.

From the beginning, customers came back to Baumgartner's year after year.

They brought their kids, who brought their kids, who are bringing their kids, and on and on.

The experience germinates memories.

Every customer is welcomed into the yard as friends. The staff learn preferences, hopes and situations through conversation to match the tree to that customer's needs.

That requires sincerity and service.

"Every tree is shaken out, so there ain't no needles left to drop," Jerry said. "These trees, the inner needles shed every year. Most people don't know that. And you shake them real good, and so when you pick them up and take them in the house, you ain't got a mess going in.

"And then, every customer, we cut the trees off for them, but we don't do it if they aren't going to put them up right away. See, a tree, in this kind of weather, the sap flows down and it seals. So if they aren't going to put it up right away, we don't cut it. We tell them to

cut it."

And finally, they find a way to get that tree inside or on whatever the customer drove in.

“They know that when they come here, we help them to the end. We help them pick it out, we put it on their vehicle, we tie it down, and we cut off the bottom. Now, who does that? See? That’s why they come back.”

These days, Jerry’s son Kevin and his wife Suzanne take care of most of the business operations with their son, Brandon.

But there’s plenty of work to go around.

Another son, Brian, does all the tree flocking, and his wife, Sherrie, prepares all the food for the staff.

Daughter Connie Hirsch holds down the office, and her husband, Russ, manages the wholesale and is a salesman. Their two kids have their own duties. Collin Hirsch does day-to-day sales management, daughter Cayla Larson is a wreath decorator.

No one believes that something they create will be around for 70 years. That was the case for Jerry.

“I just kept up with it, you know. And then I turned it over to my kids. I figured I couldn’t do it anymore. But now I’m working harder than ever.”

It’s a tradition in our house that on the day after Thanksgiving, we quickly convert to Christmas.

When I say “we,” I mean the women with whom I share a home, but I have my role.

It started one year when our now 15-year-old daughter was little.

We’d been lax in our holiday preparations, busy with all the life things, and didn’t yet have a tree as the holiday week approached.

“We have to get a Christmas tree,” she told her mother and me.

Even at a young age, this little girl had a certainty about her that has only grown since then.

Her mother turned to me with that look that says, “This one’s on you, big boy.”

So the little girl and I headed out in search of a tree. The obvious spots close to our house did not yield a tree that suited her high standards.

The disappointment in her eyes.

The resignation in her voice.

The fading holiday spirit.

There is a lot of distance between nostalgia and the current version of my adulthood, decades when Christmas wasn't a top priority.

But in that moment, sitting in an overly warm Nissan SUV in a massive box-store parking lot, a suitable Christmas tree was all that mattered.

"I've got an idea."

"What is it?"

"You just wait."

We drove north and west and pulled in at 1701 W. Madison St., in the shadow of the Premier Center, of Terrace Park and all things North End.

"Where are we?"

"Baumgartner's. When I was a kid, people bought trees from their back yard."

"Is this another one of those stories?"

"It is, but trust me, we'll find you a tree."

We've been back every Friday after Thanksgiving since.

I don't know what memories that little girl will have about it all. I

hope they're nice, full of lights, the subtle smell of pine, maybe a candy cane or two.

Conversation … and laughter.