

## “Ode to a Christmas Tree Baler”

by Sara Spike, PhD

Originally published by NiCHE, the Network in Canadian History & Environment, December 2019.



This is my family’s Christmas tree baler. It is used to wrap our newly cut balsam fir Christmas trees in twine for transportation.

Even before they are brought indoors and decorated, Christmas trees, like all cultivated plants, are products of human intervention: artifacts situated at the intersection of nature and culture. But the tree baler is a more immediately recognizable technological intervention in the woods, a “machine in the garden”<sup>1</sup> that draws attention to the unnaturalness of the so-called natural world. Turning our attention briefly to the baler invites a story that goes beyond the Christmas tree as tradition and symbol to a more localized social and environmental history of small-scale rural industry.

Christmas trees have long been an important part of mixed rural economies in Nova Scotia and other parts of Eastern Canada, particularly in economically marginal regions. In Nova Scotia these farms make use of rocky lands and soils unsuitable for food agriculture, generating full-time and seasonal income for thousands of rural people. The export industry for uncultivated balsam fir Christmas trees flourished in Nova Scotia through the early twentieth century before transitioning in the second half, with government support, to emphasize cultivated, sheared trees.<sup>2</sup> Christmas trees are grown throughout the province and Lunenburg County claims the title of Balsam Fir Christmas Tree Capital of the World.



Like most Christmas tree growers in Nova Scotia, my family cultivates native balsam fir in a forested stand. The stand is selectively harvested and regenerates naturally, with new trees seeded by mature firs interspersed among them, so that all ages grow mixed together and in relationship with many other native plants and animals. Balsam fir thrives in the rocky, acid soils and foggy climate of Nova Scotia.



The stand is host to deer, hares, porcupines, foxes, coyotes, and lots of birds, from migrating songbirds to the goofy spruce grouse that gobble needles from large firs around the edge of the lot. We pick berries among the trees every summer and fall. And newly emerged fir seedlings, wherever they choose to take root, grow up in a mossy bunchberry nursery. Low-impact locally, the ecological footprint of the native-species Christmas tree industry is primarily in transportation, the same challenge for all commercial products and one we must confront seriously.

The Christmas tree baler marks the entry point of each tree into the marketplace as a standardized commodity. Bundled trees are transformed into predictable products that can be safely transported to destinations locally or internationally without incurring damage. The baler is red, cheery for Christmas even though it sees most use in late November when our trees are cut and shipped. It is about fifteen

feet long and fitted with tires and a trailer hitch so that it may be pulled behind a vehicle into position for work.



<https://www.youtube.com/embed/v3TqCRedbog>

As this video shows, a tree is fed butt-first into the wide mouth of the baler, where metal hooks attached to a chain pull it through a spinning coil of twine onto a long thin platform, wrapping the loose, fluffy tree tightly into a big green sausage. The video reveals our casual relationship to the baler, a machine we have known for years, and may make it seem as though it is a gentle thing, but it is not. High tension on the twine combined with high-velocity spinning creates enough force to tightly pack the tree into a compact bundle, and to seriously injure any human limbs caught in the process.

This machine facilitates one part of a mostly human-powered process, and other than the spinning twine, no part of this movement is automated. From their shearing and pruning each summer until the time they are cut, then dragged individually to the road and baled, until the moment they are loaded onto trucks for shipping, these trees are stroked, lifted, nudged, carried — touched— over and over again. The trees touch back, leaving us coated in sticky balsam.



Christmas tree season is a unique sensory experience. Balsam sap is famously fragrant and the scent of fir is pervasive throughout the weeks of the harvest, on our clothes and skin, in our homes. The air is also filled with the tell-tale whine of the chainsaw that fells the trees and later the croaking whir of the baler, while the quiet swish of a tree being pulled across a frozen field is unmistakable.

In the second half of the twentieth century the powered Christmas tree baler replaced a longer tradition of “tiers,”<sup>3</sup> whose job was to tie trees into bundles by hand, making off-season use of knowledge derived from mending fishing nets and tying knots aboard ships. From this perspective, the baler may be seen as a form of deskilling. In another light, a baler may be read as part of a longer tradition of portable machines for small-scale industry that Nova Scotians have brought into the woods with them for centuries. The portable saw mill is its most obvious point of comparison, with basic gasoline-powered engines eventually replacing the original steam power. Unpretentious, durable machines such as this, along with the knowledge to repair them on the spot, underscore the attitudes and practices of self-sufficiency that continue to be valued in many rural communities. These are also emotional, affective relationships: there is a long history to be told of swearing at machines in the woods.



The machines of rural industry, big and small, are largely unfamiliar to people outside those industries. But milkers, combines, and balers are all essential for transforming agricultural products into commodities that will find their way to homes around the world. This beat-up machine, built in the late twentieth century and still working today, invites us to reflect not only on the history of the Christmas tree, but also on the history and present of rural labour and small-scale industry in Nova Scotia in a way that foregrounds the active and interconnected relationships between humans, technology, and the natural world.



*All photographs by Sara Spike*

Sara Spike, PhD, is a university instructor and a cultural historian of rural communities and coastal environments in Atlantic Canada. She grew up hauling Christmas trees on the Eastern Shore of Nova Scotia, where her father Paul Spike has been growing balsam fir for forty years.

---

<sup>1</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> On various phases of the Christmas tree industry in Nova Scotia, see R. Blake Brown, "‘Oh Christmas Tree, Oh Christmas Tree’: The Boom Years of the Tree Trade in Lunenburg County," *Beaver* 77, no. 6 (1997): 33–39; Anders L. Sandberg and Peter Clancy, *Against the Grain: Foresters and Politics in Nova Scotia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> See Brown, "Oh Christmas Tree," 34–35.