

Carrying the Trees to Clark Park

All December we glimpse our neighbors' holiday trees through windows. Grand or tiny, flashy or austere, these trees intimate at private, interior celebrations while imparting their cheer to the public life of the street. Come winter West Philadelphia's blocks of ample Victorian houses evoke nostalgic Hallmark-card images of Christmases past. At the neighborhood's heart, Clark Park, Charles Dickens himself presides, the only statue in America of the "Man Who Invented Christmas".

But Dickens could never have anticipated the 21st century ritual that occurs the weekend after New Year's, when neighbors, no matter their particular holiday observances, converge at Clark Park bearing desiccated Douglas firs, blue spruces, and Scotch pines. They come from every direction, some wheeling trees in red wagons or wheelbarrows, others hoisting them high over their shoulder like a portaged canoe, or dragging them on the sidewalks, shedding a fine-needled trail. In warmer seasons, the park showcases West Philly's motley quirkiness: LARPing kids dart around African drummers, slack-rope walkers, and intense tournaments of chess and petanque, bashing each other with giant foam swords. In January, though, neighbors gravitate with single purpose toward the red-headed young man we knew as a mischievous child, now grown burly, a certified arborist. He guides this annual ceremony, and volunteers serve hot cider and donuts. We sip and munch as the wood chipper whines.

Though the trees we carry are dead, the grinding releases their evergreen essence, the bright scent of resin, into the cold air. Later, pulverized to sawdust, indistinguishable one from the other, our trees will be spread on the roots of living trees, the youngest ones planted in Clark Park that fall, so that Christmas, now ground up and dispersed, casts a protective, aromatic blanket over slumbering new life, which will wake up come spring to blossoms and green.