

## **Silverdale Christmas Tree History** **By Richard (Rich) Arper, Silverdale Rotary Club**

October 24, 2013 (updated Oct 2014, Nov 2016, Oct 2017, Oct 2018, Oct 2019, and Apr 2021)

**2013:** Here is a condensed story of the Silverdale Christmas Tree and Silverdale Rotary Club involvement.

The first lighting of the Silverdale Christmas Tree was in 1954. The businessmen in Silverdale and the fire department decided to light a Christmas Tree in Silverdale. I'm not sure if the Tracyton tree was lit at this point or not, but both were about the same vintage. There was always a fight between Silverdale and Tracyton about who had the largest tree.

The initial group was mainly a bunch of volunteers, and wiring by Jack Rhodes of Rhodes Electric. Most of those businessmen were the same people as the charter members of Silverdale Rotary Club. My father Robert "Bob" Arper was one of them, and I remember as a kid laying out strings of lights to put on the tree. That first tree was actually a different tree than the current tree, located further south on what was then Hedahl's property. That tree is now gone, and the current tree became the new tree.

In 1955 the Silverdale Rotary Club was formed, and since the members were essentially the same people who initiated the Christmas tree, Silverdale Rotary took on the responsibility of the tree. As far as I know, this is the oldest and most continuous project that Silverdale Rotary has in its history, taken on 6 months prior to our charter.

Silverdale Rotary and the fire department did the work on the tree, and Rotary did the funding and organized the lighting event. Silverdale Rotary used to place jars in businesses around town so that people could donate to help pay for the electricity. Somewhere around 1964-65, Bill Seelow moved to Silverdale from the Midwest, and he started working for Jack Rhodes at Rhodes Electric. (Jack Rhodes was also a charter member of Silverdale Rotary Club).

Being an electrician, Bill took an interest in the tree, and became heavily involved with maintaining it. Bill became a Dandy Lion, and the Dandy Lions took over the work responsibilities at some point in time, but Rotary still did the funding and helped out with work parties. Eventually Rotary abandoned the jars in the businesses for funding and added a placeholder in the Community Service Committee budget to fund the tree. For years Rotary paid for the electricity and paid for replacement light bulbs. At some point Hank Mann Sykes took on the organizing of the tree maintenance with the Lions, organizing the entire event for many years, including orchestrating the lighting ceremony. Harry Guay, then a Rotarian, was Santa Claus, and Hank Mann Sykes was the master of ceremonies for the lighting event. Harry, while no longer a Rotarian, is still Santa to this date.

Several years ago, the Dandy Lions were down to only a few members, and asked the Rotary if we could help out more with the labor, so we started doing that. The Lions recruit two tree climbers every year to climb the tree and allow the removal/replacement of the light strings and star. In addition to the winter light maintenance, in the summer we cut down the brush around the tree to allow space for taking down the light strings. In the past few years we have also been placing mulch around the tree to improve its health.

At about the same time, Hank became ill, and others in Rotary (me) became more involved with organization of the event and maintenance. Similar to the Duck Race that Hank had single-handedly handled for many years, we had a huge learning curve to pick up all the functions that Hank had taken care of for so many years.

A couple years ago the property that the tree sits on changed hands, and the new owner (Rick Leenstra) put in a new electrical service that serves the tree and also his parking lot. Rick offered to pay for the electricity with no reimbursement. So Rick started paying for the electricity, and we used Rotary Funds to buy replacement bulbs and miscellaneous electrical costs.

In 1997, someone stole all the wiring at the base of the tree, and Bill Seelow had a heart attack. We were in a real pinch to get the tree ready. Then Bill Carter of Olympic Wiring stepped forward and donated labor and materials to

re-wire the tree. Rotary continued to provide labor, and we used Rotary funds for maintenance and to purchase a new star.

Present day, the electricity is still paid by the tree owner, Lions and Rotary do the labor and organize the lighting event, and we provide funds for bulbs and miscellaneous items. In 2012 Olympic Wiring went out of business, but Bill Carter still helps out as a volunteer.

As of October 2013, the property that the tree sits on was sold to an investment group. Initial contact with the group is that they will continue to fund the electricity cost and allow the unrestricted use of the tree. Lions and Kiwanis all help out at the lighting event, providing hot cider and cookies and setting up a place for Santa to meet the kids. Normally the Salvation Army sets up a pot that evening as well.

Every year at least one elementary school has a choir group sing to the crowd prior to Santa's arrival. In 2013 we will have 2 schools participate. Lowes has provided a kids' activity center for the past couple years which has been a big hit. Lisa Stirrett opened her shop in 2012 for kids' activities as well. The fire department gives Santa a ride to the tree lighting on a fire truck, arriving with a huge fanfare every year. The Sheriff's Department has also normally provided an escort thru town for the fire truck. Santa and the kids shout out a countdown to the tree lighting, and miraculously the tree lights up. Afterwards Santa greets hundreds of kids on his lap, and pictures are taken.

The past couple years we have done some replacement maintenance, but a lot of the lighting is in very poor condition. We need to do some serious lighting upgrades in the future. It is imperative that we maintain some funding for the tree.

As far as any of us know, this is the world's largest and oldest living Christmas Tree, lit every year since 1954. Silverdale Rotary and the Silverdale Lions are still the main players, but we are involving more people every year.

**2014 Update:** In 2012 we approached the Silverdale Chamber of Commerce to become involved, to make the tree lighting a larger community event. In 2012 they helped to organize tractor hay rides to Old Town Silverdale to visit several businesses. They are hoping that it can become a larger community event. The Chamber has taken on the task of advertising the tree lighting and developing professionally designed flyers, and helping to organize the hay ride through town. The hay rides run in the afternoon prior to the lighting event.

#### **2014 Light Maintenance**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iY\\_vnKn7dLE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iY_vnKn7dLE)

**2016 Update:** The arborists' opinion on October 29 was that the tree is stressed and in failing condition. The only apparent cause is lack of water this summer, that the top of the tree has not been in good condition for several years, which is starting to affect the rest of the tree. Unfortunately, they don't think that there is much that we can do about it.

**2017 Update:** In October 2017, Arborist Dan Maple from ABC Consulting Arborists (who gives us a reduced rate for tree treatments) looked at the estimated 140-150 year old tree and said it was suffering from an insect infestation, the balsam wooly adelgid (pronounced *uh DEL jid*) that eats the needles. He gave the tree two treatments; one was a growth treatment to stimulate new growth, and the second was the wooly adelgid treatment. He predicted that the tree had a 50/50 chance of survival. He also suggested that the tree needs watering in the dry summers.

**2018 Update:** In September 2018 Arborist Dan Maple from ABC Consulting Arborists looked at the tree for the second year in a row. He was encouraged because he saw new growth. It is still suffering from the balsam wooly adelgid that eats the needles, so he gave the tree two insect treatments, one on the bark and one injected into the ground. He now estimates that the tree's chance of survival is 70%!

**2019 Update:** Dan Field visited the tree on Oct 14, 2019 and observed that the tree definitely looks better, with deeper green new growth. He believes that we are on the right track. No treatments this year, but he recommended some growth and insect treatments for next year.

**Tree watering.** Rotarian Rich Arper has been watering the drought stressed tree every summer since arborist Dan Field's first recommendation in 2017.

In 2019 Rotarians Scott Slocum and Rich Arper, Silverdale Dandy Lion Roland Arper, and volunteer PJ Zillinske buried a soaker hose around the tree. Rich runs a hose across the parking lot after hours to get the water to the tree at least twice a week in the hot weather, about 250 to 300 gallons at a time.

**2021 Update:** In **January** we discovered that someone had cut a hole in the fence around the Christmas tree, and we were concerned about them stealing the wiring. We contacted Viking Fence, and they came out and donated the repairs!

On **April 2021**, Dan Maple of ABC Consulting Arborists treated the tree with growth hormone and insect treatment injected into the ground around the tree. He also sprayed an insect treatment onto the trunk to combat the balsam wooly adelgid infestation.

His evaluation of the tree was that the top of the tree looked really good with new growth, that we have definitely turned the corner with the tree, and it is getting better. Due to the size and age of the tree, it will take a long time to see the total results. The upper middle third is still looking pretty bare, but he thinks that it just needs more time to recover. The top and bottom look good.

He felt that the tree normally would have resisted the infestation of the wooly adelgid, but since it was stressed from drought already, that probably weakened the tree. He thought that if he would have been able to treat the tree 1 or 2 years earlier than 2017, we would have seen better results. He believes that we should know in 4 years if it needs another treatment or if it will improve on its own. Beyond that he can't predict the long term health of the tree, but he thinks that for now we have it improving.

He stated that we were doing all the right things – getting arborist treatments, providing the annual mulch around the tree, and providing the water during the dry summer period.