

Marilyn Fitchett

Yule fallacies boggle the mind

The trouble with the holidays is: Artificial Christmas trees make the real ones look like they have terminal cowlick. Grownups won't admit they're really buying electric trains for themselves. Most family gatherings fall far short of Kodak standards. The commercialization of Christmas takes a bum rap. You can never count on Mother Nature for snow on Dec. 24. People feeling a deep loss feel it all the more this time of year. Nobody's come up with a cure for holiday depression. Going back to work the day after Christmas is depressing in itself. Newspapers and magazines are too fat before and too skinny after. There ARE too many football games on the tube — and that's coming from a football fan. People with birthdays around Dec. 25 lose out. The people who say they have everything under control are lying. The people who say they have nothing done are not lying. There's no time to see all the newly released movies. Most of the new television holiday specials are about as special as the rest of the year's programming. "The Little Drummer Boy" is played only in season. Taking down decorations is depressing. There are too many Scrooges of spirit. We tend to make it a season of great expectations.



'New rightist' trend calls up '50s fears

Some of the political "new rightists" are scaring me. I'm not much for rambling down memory lane. But suggestions that the House Un-American Activities Committee of Congress be reactivated takes me back to the 1950s — to McCarthyism. For younger folk, that word is now in the dictionary in distasteful memory of the late U.S. Sen. Joseph McCarthy. The political practice of publicizing accusations of disloyalty or subversion with insufficient regard to evidence in order to suppress opposition. Named after the late Sen. Joseph McCarthy, is how the American Heritage Dictionary defines McCarthyism. Now maybe it wouldn't scare me so much if I hadn't been peripherally affected. During the 1950s, I was casting director for the Jam Handy Organization, hiring actors and narrators for live and filmed industrial shows. The red-hunting hysteria got so out of hand, I was instructed by General Motors not to screen all talent for traces of Communism. At first we laughed over asking "See the USA in your Chevrolet" families — consisting of a local mother, father, boy and girl — if they were red, pink or whatever before casting them in parts that

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only called for their getting in and out of a new model car.

WE STOPPED LAUGHING when a book called "Red Channels" was published and widely circulated as a "Communist counterattack." Ronald Reagan, then Screen Actors Guild president, at first said he knew nothing of the blacklists. It turned out even Nancy Reagan (nee Davis) turned up on one such list. I was asked not to use Ben Grauer, the voice announcing the arrival of the "New Year in Times Square every year. Also on the "don't use" list was Edward R. Murrow, whose CBS news show was investigating McCarthy. Agents and casting directors knew the lists existed. What did "Red Channels" really reveal? Here are a few of the allegations: ● Stripper Gypsy Rose Lee "spoke" at an anti-Nazi meeting and was an "auctioneer" at a book benefit for the League of American Writers. I stalled. "Isn't that the new computer chain letter game? I've heard, confidentially, of course, that the Attorney General is going to issue an adverse opinion." That play didn't work. "No, no," he said nervously. "The State Police had an undercover unit for subversive surveillance in the '60s. Now, they have to let you look at your files, something to do with the Freedom of Information Act." A week attempt to recoup lost status follows: "Harump, I didn't even know they were mailing those letters yet. I suppose I did read something somewhere . . . been awfully busy lately."

● Writer-producer-director Garson Kanin "signed" a Civil Rights Congress document and was accused of being a "sponsor" of the American Committee for Protection of the Foreign Born. ● Burl Ives "entertained" for the American Friends of the Chinese People. ● Playwright Lillian Hellman "congratulated" the Moscow Arts Theater on its 50th anniversary. ● Ben Grauer went to a dinner for United Nations delegates. As soon as "Red Channels" was published, I began to get frantic calls from actors and agents. "Is my name in the book? Am I blacklisted?" Even minor name actors caught the understandable paranoia if work was not forthcoming. CAREERS WERE DESTROYED. More than one actor committed suicide. Finally, the Army-McCarthy hearings on television destroyed most of the credibility of the witch hunt. All this time, I never even met a Communist. (I still haven't, as far as I know.) I remember an actor friend calling from New York. "I went to a college campus meeting of Technocrats (whatever they were) years ago," he said. "I think I signed an attendance sheet. Does that put me on some list?" Remember loveable Grandpa Walton, Will Geer?

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He was in "Red Channels." So were Irwin Shaw, Howard K. Smith, Leonard Bernstein, Abe Burrows, Aaron Copland, Jose Ferrer, Lena Horne, Burl Ives, Burgess Meredith, William L. Shirer, Artie Shaw and Pete Seeger. Each was reported as belonging to, speaking at or attending something the anonymous authors said showed how the Communists had infiltrated radio and television. When the red scare smoke cleared, we thought it could not happen again. Now I think I could. My experience with talented people in the arts is that they are the most compassionate of people. They gave and continue to give benefits and money generously to causes. The possibility of reckless accusations from "new rightists" is what scares me now.

'Radical' reaps surprisingly barren harvest

You've probably heard the one about the guy who was so lonely he looked forward to mail addressed "Occupant." If it said "Resident," he was ecstatic. Well, I'm that guy. Some may mutter dark imprecations regarding computer-generated mail: "The machines are taking over." Not me. I am so pleased that all those nice direct mail companies have the benefit of modern technology. The time saved with computer assistance enables them to send me more, and better, personalized mass mailings. The other day I received one of them computer darlings addressed: "To the Greenberg Family . . . Dear Mr. Family . . ." I was in seventh heaven — well, fourth anyway. We all realize the importance of recognition. I know how to program our Call Director so that I consistently receive wrong numbers. Oh, such bliss. Everyone likes to be noticed although "Dear Piz-z-a Lover" and "Hello to our favorite ski buff at 123 Main" have limited value in ego expansion. But some days I wonder. The other day I met a quiet friend of mine, one not much given to braggadocio, in fact, a very private person. If you disliked him, you'd probably use

words like "recluse" or timorous." But, in reality, he is the quiet and self-confident type who consistently ignores junk mail. I HAVE ACTUALLY seen him throw whole sheafs of bulk mail in the wastebasket — unopened. This particular day, he seemed uneasy as he slid up to me with a nervous query. "Did you get your Red Squad letter?" "My what?" "Your Red Squad letter." I stalled. "Isn't that the new computer chain letter game? I've heard, confidentially, of course, that the Attorney General is going to issue an adverse opinion." That play didn't work. "No, no," he said nervously. "The State Police had an undercover unit for subversive surveillance in the '60s. Now, they have to let you look at your files, something to do with the Freedom of Information Act." A week attempt to recoup lost status follows: "Harump, I didn't even know they were mailing those letters yet. I suppose I did read something somewhere . . . been awfully busy lately."

"Yes," my quiet friend related, "I really didn't expect such a letter. I contacted them, and they're sending my file to the local police station for my inspection. I can't imagine why I was under surveillance." I responded limply. "OH, I DIDN'T get one. Mail's been a bit ragged in our area." I snuck away. Suddenly bureaucratic skulduggery had raised a local milquetoast to legendary heights. I could see this silent friend, stepping into a phone booth, messing his hair, donning dark glasses, slipping out of his three-piece suit and into dirty jeans and a sloppy sweatshirt reading, "Grass Needs Cutting." In a flash, all my personalized computer mailings were meaningless. I no longer seriously considered changing my name to Dan Family. I, who had marched the good march during the Vietnam era, who had written all the consumer and political letters those haleyon days demanded, I, who had brazenly and publically signed petitions during the Joe McCarthy era (Joe McWho?) — alas, alack.

It isn't widely known, but I started out one night to picket Kirsten Flagstad. Unfortunately, my mother wouldn't let me out of the house. Oh, what a blow this Red Squad thing. I, who contributed money to rebuild Hanoi hospitals, to aid Georgia woodcutters and other suspect causes. It only takes a few dollars to get on an incredible number of mailing lists. Oh, how my ego doth sit solitary, desolate amidst the piles of computer-generated junk mail. Oh, how the mighty have fallen. A quiet friend worthy of Red Squad attention, but I who had marched and petitioned and even written letters to the editors, I wasn't worthy of their attention. The Market reports: Oils up 3 1/2, ego off 17 in heavy trading. Maybe they'll call. (Editor's note: Dan Greenberg, Farmington Hills resident and cinematography instructor at the Orchard Ridge campus of Oakland Community College, is an observer of the American scene who occasionally graces the columns of this newspaper with his wit and wisdom.)