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South Carolina
Consumer Affairs **Report**

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SOUTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS, P. O. BOX 5757, COLUMBIA, S. C. 29250 1-800-922-1594

Volume 4, Number 6

November/December 1979

DEPUTY ADMINISTRATOR ELECTED
TO CODE POST

Roy C. Harms, Deputy Administrator of the S. C. Department of Consumer Affairs has been elected president of the American Conference of Uniform Consumer Credit Code States (ACUCCCS) for a one-year term. ACUCCCS is an organization of 11 states in the U. S. which has a version of the Consumer Credit Code.

HOLIDAY SHOPPING

Before you leave for the stores, make a list with notes on pertinent information such as specific gift possibilities for particular individuals on your list, sizes, style and color preferences. Decide on how much you can spend for individual items and the total list and stick to it. Don't be locked in to specific gifts for specific people in case you see the right gift for a sale price. Shop early in the day before the crowds arrive. Start shopping as early in the season as possible when there is a larger selection of merchandise. Compare the price and quality of different brands. Shop for gift items you need at a price level you can afford. Don't buy impulsively. The most highly advertised merchandise is not necessarily the best. If you use credit, don't let the excitement of the season make you forget that you may be paying for what you purchase for several months after Christmas. Don't be lulled by "easy terms" which may be less easy in February. Shop for the lowest interest rate and make sure you get the full disclosure of all credit terms to which you are entitled. If you buy on layaway, ask questions: How long will the merchandise be held for you? How much will you pay? Is there a penalty for not paying on time? Will you be able to get the merchandise before Christmas? When shopping for clothing, know

sizes, ask about special cleaning instructions and select styles and colors you feel recipients will prefer. Be practical. If jeans are the right gift, don't give a three-piece suit. Make sure toys are appropriate for the ages of the children on your list. Make sure the toys you select are safe. Check toys for durability. Will they last out the holiday season? Check on whether toys require extras such as batteries which add to total cost. Read warranties on gift items. Keep warranties, sales contracts and receipts. Inquire about store policy on exchanges, refunds, and returns before you purchase. And don't forget that December is the pickpocket's busy season. Open handbags or handbags that open at the top should not be used for shopping trips.

HOLIDAY GIFTS

If your family has a tradition - along with the standard ones - of still paying for holiday gifts in the Spring because you overspent in December and spiraling inflation is making it even worse, decide this year to do something about it. Draw names in your family instead of each family member giving every other family member a gift. Suggest the same thing for relatives. Make a list of your gift recipients and then write down items you can make and what must be purchased. Set yourself a gifts budget and make a firm resolution to stick to it. Share your plans - and the need because of inflation - with all members of the family. Stress practicality and meaningfulness of gifts and make suggestions to get family members into the spirit of it. Make lists of needed timely items for family members such as a guide to college for a high school senior or woolly shawls, sweaters, robes, warm-up suits or thermal underwear for these energy short days. Give gifts of home-made foods such as

cookies, cakes, steamed puddings, or canned goods such as jams, jellies, brandied fruit. Check with your local extension agent, evening school programs or other educational organizations about courses in such areas as home repairs, upholstery, plumbing, wood-working, sewing and auto repair. Pay the fee and sign up some family member to attend the course which might result in family savings later. Think about gifts you can give which might be more meaningful and personal such as an album of photographs with appropriate written commentary of family activities, i. e., vacation, graduations, birthday parties, etc., which makes a good grandparents gift and the entire family could put together. Consider other meaningful, useful and give-of-yourself gifts which mean more and yet are less of an out-of-pocket expenditure. A new home permanent - which giver buys and applies - for a favorite aunt might mean more than a new robe or plant. What mother wouldn't prefer "ten washings and waxings of the kitchen floor" from Junior than that bottle of cologne she will never use and he couldn't really afford? Other "give-of-yourself-gifts" might include promises to mow the lawn, rake the leaves, wash the car weekly or any other task which has to be done and saves on the family budget. But make a real gift out of it. Get a piece of cardboard and print on it in big letters "Presentation of this certificate will entitle Aunt Nina to have all her windows washed by her nephew Bobby Nolan when she does her Spring cleaning." Then sign the card, draw on a border and a seal, have it witnessed, insert in an envelope and present it on Christmas Day. There are thousands of examples of ways in which you can make holiday gift giving more meaningful, personal and less expensive.

HOLIDAY FOODS

Many families drastically overspend for food during the holidays and regret it in January. If inflation is pinching your budget, some planning and creative innovation may lessen this. Cut down on those expensive snack foods and drinks that have limited nutritional value. Make it a non-alcoholic holiday and serves less expensive hot or cold spiced fruit punches. Pop big bowls of popcorn and have bowls of fruit handy. Make your own holiday cookies, cakes, breads and pies instead of buying them. Although turkey is normally a good food buy throughout the year, turkey prices sometime rise as the holidays approach and demand presses supply. If there is room in your freezer and you plan

to have a holiday turkey, watch the prices and buy when a special is on. The same is true of other holiday items such as popcorn, cranberries, cranberry sauce, yams, etc. Go creative with your holiday foods. Most public libraries have shelves of cookbooks from other countries. Browse through them concentrating on countries which have historically been relatively poor such as China, Italy or Provincial France. These areas have established through the centuries how to make delicious meals for relatively little expense. Choose a menu based on dishes which have inexpensive ingredients. Announce to your family that you are having a Mexican or Italian holiday dinner and ask each person in the family to help prepare the unusual dishes. Inform youngsters that it's part of everyone's education to know the foods of other lands. Or choose a cookbook of early American dishes. The Puritans and Pilgrims created many delicious dishes with limited varieties of foods and so can your family. Whatever you choose for your holiday foods, make out a holiday foods budget, stick to it, use unit labeling and comparison shop for price per ounce.

HOLIDAY TREES

If you are planning to buy a natural tree, the most important safety factor is its freshness. The higher the moisture content of the tree, the less likely it is to dry out and become a serious fire hazard. One way to insure that a tree is fresh is to cut it yourself. Check out tree farms within a short driving distance from your home. Before you buy a cut tree, check it for freshness. There are several things you can look for. Brittle branches and shedding needles are a sign for dryness; fresh needles bent between the fingers won't break. Tap the tree lightly on the ground -- if many needles fall off, the tree is too dry. Don't depend on a nice green color -- trees may be sprayed green to improve their appearance. The limbs should be strong enough to hold ornaments and strings of electric lights and have a strong fragrance and good color. An alternative to buying a cut natural tree is to select a growing tree in a pot -- such as a Balsam Fir, Douglas Fir, Eastern Red Cedar, Scotch or White Pine -- and use it as a holiday tree and then plant it in your yard. Your Holiday tree doesn't even have to be a fir, cedar or pine. Many people are now buying other decorative or evergreen trees such as a holly or even a magnolia tree in a pot and using as a Christmas tree. It's not

only economical but wise from a conservation point of view.

CHRISTMAS TREE CARE

When you bring a tree home, keep it outside until you're ready to decorate it. Cut the butt of the tree at a diagonal about one inch above the original cut --- this opens the pores and aids in the absorption of water. Place the butt end in a container of water. When the tree is brought indoors, cut off the butt end one or two inches above the original cut, squaring off the diagonal. This facilitates placing the tree in a stand as well as aiding absorption. Keep the butt end of the tree in a container of water the entire time it is in the house. Refill the container daily as the tree requires a lot of water, and make sure the cut butt of the tree is always covered with water. Make sure you utilize a sturdy, stable tree stand with a wide base. For additional stability for a large tree, fasten it to the wall or ceiling with thin wire. Sprinkling water on the branches and needles before you decorate the tree will help retain freshness. Don't rely on any do-it-yourself external flameproofing treatments since they are virtually impossible to apply correctly at home. Be sure that the tree is placed well away from fireplaces, radiators, electric heaters, television or any other source of heat. Open flames, such as lighted candles, should never be used on or near the tree. In addition, never leave your home with the Christmas tree lights still on. The longer the tree is indoors, the more combustible it will become.

ARTIFICIAL CHRISTMAS TREES

Metal trees present no fire hazard in themselves. However, they can be the source of a serious shock hazard if electric lights are attached to the tree. Sharp metal edges may cut the cord insulation or the metal needles might touch an electrically charged component. Either way, the whole tree can become electrically charged and anyone touching the tree and a grounded object at the same time could receive a severe shock. The only way to illuminate a metal tree safely is to use colored floodlights placed in different areas of the room. Since the floodlights can become quite hot, they should be positioned where children can't come in contact with them. If you purchase a plastic tree, it should be made of fire-resistant material.

This does not mean that the tree will not burn, but only that it will not catch fire easily. As with natural trees, keep away from heat sources. Always check labels when buying any kind of artificial tree and follow instructions for assembly, set-up and maintenance.

HOLIDAY LIGHTING

Purchase holiday lights that have been checked for safety. Look for the UL label of Underwriters' Laboratories. Check your indoor tree lights and all outdoor lights each year before you use them. Look for frayed wires, loose connections, broken or cracked sockets and spots where bare wire is exposed. Any set that is damaged should be thrown out or repaired. Careful handling of these products during unpacking, decorating and repacking will lessen the chance of hazardous damage. All lights should be fastened securely to the tree. No light bulbs should come into direct contact with the needles or branches. Curtains and other flammable materials should also be kept away from bulbs. Don't overload extension cords. Don't put more than three sets of lights on any extension cord. Keep the connection joints away from the water supply of a natural tree. Any outdoor lights should be weatherproof and clearly identified as designed for outdoor lighting. Remove outside lighting as soon as the season is over. Even holiday lighting designed for outdoor use is not designed to withstand prolonged exposure to the elements. When you leave the house or retire for the evening, be sure that all lights are turned off by unplugging them from the wall outlet. Always disconnect holiday lighting by grasping the plug, not by pulling on the cord. Although they may provide a sense of nostalgia, never use wax candles on or near a tree. This is a very serious fire hazard. Any decorative candles should always be kept well away from children and any flammable material.

HOLIDAY ORNAMENTS AND TRIMMINGS

Avoid placing breakable ornaments or ornaments with small detachable parts on lower branches where small children or pets can reach them and knock them off. Every year many children are treated for cuts from broken ornaments or for swallowing ornaments parts. Trimmings used on trees or around the home should be non-combustible or flame resistant. An often unrecognized hazard

exists in the use of spun glass "angel hair" and spray-on artificial snow, both non-flammable if used alone. When the snow is sprayed on angel hair, however, the dried combination burns rapidly if accidentally ignited. Some traditional holiday decorations may be harmful if eaten and this poses a hazard for young children. Mistletoe and holly berries may be poisonous if more than a few are swallowed, and these plants should be kept out of the reach of children. Use only tinsel or artificial icicles that do not contain lead. Discard old tinsel if you aren't sure of its composition. Fire salts, which produce a multi-colored effect when thrown on a wood fire, contain heavy metal. Eating them can cause gastrointestinal problems and vomiting. If a child consumes any of these possibly hazardous substances, call your physician immediately.

ADDENDA

The holidays are a pleasant time of year. But they can also be a time of mental, physical and monetary overextension. Sales of tranquilizers and admissions to hospital emergency rooms and mental facilities rise sharply during the holiday months. Figures for January and February indicate an increase in personal bankruptcies, credit counseling, slow payment of bills and other symptoms of financial overextension. The holidays are also a period when safety precautions are especially important. Each year, thousands of consumers suffer needless injuries, loss of life and destruction of property due to accidents involving holiday decorations and travel. They range from the child taken to

the hospital after swallowing pieces of a broken ornament or a family burned to death in a home fire after a Christmas tree ignited or killed in an automobile accident on the way to visit friends and relatives. Try to do those things that will make the holiday happy for you and yours. But don't overdo. Limit your activities and expenditures. Don't use unsafe decorations. Avoid that conspicuous consumption that should run counter to the deeper feelings of the season and make your holidays filled with moderation, safety, happiness and love.

Irvin D. Parker

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Administrator

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