

is a plant parasite that lives from the substance of host trees, doing them great damage and eventually causing their deaths. In many regions, especially the South, it is plentiful; but as it grows in the tree tops, it is extremely hard to harvest. About the most effective way to gather mistletoe is to shoot it down with buckshot. This means, of course, that its price remains very high, and that not enough is harvested to deplete the supply.

Holly, on the other hand, is a harmless, beautiful tree that is very vulnerable to the depredations of hunters. Holly trees are either male or female, and only the female trees bear berries. Many once-large stands of holly have been stripped of all their bright berry-bearing trees, leaving only the male trees with no chance to reproduce themselves whatever. These stands are doomed. Holly is being raised commercially in great quantities now. You will do a lot to save our disappearing wild holly if you buy only the commercial variety this Christmas.

The old English custom of burning the Yule log at Christmas is another hold-over from pre-Christian days. Throughout North Europe a mid-winter festival, the Yule feast, was celebrated to mark when the low winter sun began to rise once more in the horizon. This Yule feast was one of the most important of the northland, and the Yule log comes directly from it, even carrying its name.

Late December Festivals

In the Near East, Greece and Rome, and other Mediterranean countries, the pre-Christian people celebrated similar mid-winter festivals, too. The Babylonian Zagmuk and the Greco-Roman Saturnalia were great festivals that fell near the end of December.

For this reason, many scholars think that early Christians, bent on converting the pagans, chose Dec. 25 as Christ's birth date to wean them from their old celebrations. Who can say for certain when Christ was born? There is no hint in either the Gospels or early tradition.

It is not unlikely that this was the case, as modern missionaries often supplant heathen traditions with Christian practices in their

work to win converts. The Christianizing of the Indians by the Spanish padres offers a good example of how this was done on a large scale. Many of the "saint's day" celebrations in Indian villages today really mark the dates of traditional Maya, Aztec or Inca fiestas.

Old Saint Nick has a touch of the pagan in his family tree, too. The North god, Woden, or Odin, dressed in a flapping hat and a fluttering mantle, and traveling constantly on a white horse to bestow gifts and punishments where they are called for, is seen reflected in the European idea of Saint Nicholas. On the continent, St. Nick wears a flapping hat, a fluttering mantle, and is mounted on his faithful white horse.

Hard Working Saint

The historical Saint Nicholas, by the way, lived in Asia Minor during the third century. In legend he is one of the hardest-working saints there can be. Besides his well-known Christmas duties, he is the patron of travelers, seamen and ships, and even thieves and pirates claim his protection. He watches over the small and humble, and keeps special care over unmarried girls.

Saint Nicholas was a traveler, and where he went he left small gifts for worthy folks. In the North, this tradition became blended into that of Woden; and soon there emerged old Santeklas who brings gifts to good children and switches for the bad.

The northern tradition of Christmas, then, represents the folk-way of the rude but joyous northmen before the tender story of the birth of their Christ-child. The merriment of the northern Christmas is their humble offering to the new-born King.

Science News Letter, December 13, 1952

MEDICINE

Heart Trouble May Be Disguised as a Cold

➤ ONE KIND of heart trouble may appear disguised as a seemingly unimportant cold, sore throat, or pneumonia or other infection. Drs. Mischa J. Lustok, Jules Chase and Joseph M. Lubitz of Marquette University School of Medicine, Milwaukee, warned at the meeting of the American Medical Association in Denver.

The heart trouble is called myocarditis, meaning inflammation of the heart muscle.

The Milwaukee doctors reported 45 such cases in a group of young men and women. Because these patients seemed sicker than they should with just a cold or sore throat, or did not get well as quickly as expected, or had unexplained heart findings, myocarditis was suspected.

When recognized early, much of the serious heart damage in such cases can be prevented, Dr. Lustok said.

Considering the great number of people who suffer from colds, sore throats and other infections, this complication is quite rare, Dr. Lustok pointed out.

Science News Letter, December 13, 1952

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