

GENERAL SCIENCE

Christmas Is Tradition

Trees, toys and tradition mean Christmas. Many of the customs we practice today have their roots deep in the history of man. America's favorite Christmas tree is the spruce.

See Front Cover

► THIS YEAR, as for centuries past, eager and wide-eyed children will hurry downstairs in the wee hours of Christmas morning to rip open packages of toys that have been nestled under decorated evergreens.

In so doing, these youngsters will be partaking in a holiday that, with time, has become a warm mixture of pre-Christian customs, religious rites and modern invention.

For, whether it was to pay homage to pagan gods or to drive away evil spirits, man practiced many of the customs that we now associate with this holiday more than 5,000 years before the birth of Christ. And to these he has added ritual and, much later, new innovations born of his contemporary world.

From the dark woods of north Europe to the hot lands of India, early worshippers decorated evergreen trees, hung boughs of holly and mistletoe and burned logs to celebrate the first day of winter, which they called Yuletide. This was the time when the sun seemingly stood still, and the light of day was shortest.

Christmas Tree Origin

However, if we can trace back the history of evergreen boughs and holly and mistletoe, the custom of the Christmas tree as we know it today remains a mystery. Many peoples in many lands have claimed they originated the Christmas tree custom.

The English credit St. Boniface, an eighth century missionary as the first designator of the fir as the Christmas symbol.

The Vikings stated that the Lord's emissaries, Faith, Hope and Charity, were responsible for making the balsam fir the Christmas tree, because it bears crosses on every branch, while the Germans and the French credit Bonchevalier as the discoverer of the Christmas tree. Scandinavians, on the other hand, erected grain-supporting poles as a Christmas gift to birds, and some authorities attribute this as the Christmas tree origin.

In any event, trees were always a vital part of nearly all the pagan Northland's festivals, and they were to be found in the huts of the Northlanders at New Year's to drive away evil spirits and bring good luck.

Most scholars, however, although in disagreement as to the origin of the Christmas tree, are in agreement about the fact that Christmas trees were not generally accepted as such until the 17th century in Germany, from where the custom spread to France and England and Scandinavia.

Even the knowledge of just how the Christmas tree crossed the Atlantic to the New World is obscure, but there is evidence to indicate that the first Christmas trees were brought to the United States by the Hessians, German mercenaries hired by the British to fight in the American Revolution. One story relates the account of a spruce tree that was cut for the Christmas celebration at Chicago's Fort Dearborn in 1804.

The lack of historical fact to establish the time elements involved has not deterred the custom from becoming widely accepted in North America, where more than 30,000,000 evergreens are harvested each year for the holiday.

The fir has often been considered the real Christmas tree, but Americans prefer the spruce, with its short, sharp needles and down-hanging cones. A close cousin of the spruce and another favorite is the fir, which has softer needles, usually curved, and cones that stand straight up.

Pine trees are often used here, and they can be distinguished from the spruce and fir by the fact that the pine's needles come in bunches or pairs rather than singly. Still another Christmas tree used by Americans is the red cedar, which has very fine, feathery branches of small pointed leaves.

Plants other than evergreens are sometimes used in the United States. In the Southwest, for example, some of the tree-like cacti are decorated and lighted up, and in New Orleans, it is customary to hang lights on the branches of the hackberry or sugartree.

History of Holly

The history of holly and mistletoe in pre-Christian time is much better documented. Their use is traced back to the "festivals of the sun," or Yuletide. Historians tell us that holly, mistletoe and ivy were used in the rites of fire-worshippers as long ago as 2,000 B.C. in Persia and India.

Shown on the cover of this week's SCIENCE NEWS LETTER is some holly in bloom. It flowers in the late spring.

At the yuletide time of year, Egyptians were hanging palm sprays and the Romans, in their feasts to Saturn, used evergreen



CHRISTMAS BOUGHS—This youngster sits amid freshly cut pine boughs, which will soon be transformed into bright Christmas decorations that will symbolize centuries of tradition and holiday spirit. Evergreen boughs, like holly and mistletoe, have been used to trim for this season for more than 5,000 years before the birth of Christ.

and laurel. Both the Greeks and Scandinavians made the evergreen fir a part of their winter rites, while life eternal was symbolized by mistletoe and green boughs in Druid lore.

Certainly not all the present day Christmas customs are direct descendants of pagan rites, and one of the most widely accepted and practiced, the exchange of gifts and the jolly old man who brings them, can be traced to a Christian origin.

The original St. Nicholas was a third century bishop, who lived at Myra in Asia Minor and traveled about, distributing gifts to the poor and sweets to the children.

Santa Has Many Names

In the United States, St. Nicholas became Santa Claus, who arrives from his North Pole workshop each Christmas Eve with his reindeer and sleigh to fill the stockings of good little boys and girls. In Europe, Saint Nick arrives on his faithful white horse, and in France, Bonhomme Noel puts the children's gifts in their wooden shoes. Kris Kringle performs similar miracles for Scandinavian children.

And so, trees, toys and tradition mean Christmas.

However, Christmas also means cards and carols and gaily colored red and green decorations.

Carols, although a part of the singing and dancing of ancient pagan rites, slowly found their way into the form in which we rejoice in their singing today when St. Francis of Assisi encouraged the writing of carols in native language during the 13th century. From Italy, we are told, the custom of caroling spread to France, Germany and later to England.

Christmas cards are relative newcomers to the holiday scene. Not commonly sold until 1862, the credit for the first card is shared by J. C. Horsley, the English artist, and William Maw Egley, an obscure engraver's apprentice.

Horsley is credited with designing his card in 1845 as an apology to his friends for not writing the customary holiday letters. Egley, on the other hand, is said to have engraved his card in 1842. Both cards

bore the same inscription, "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You."

Burning the Yule log has all but disappeared with the introduction of modern heating and lighting. The Druids made the burning of the Yule log a ceremony, appropriated from the Vikings. The custom spread rapidly in medieval England and was widely practiced in America before useful fireplaces in our houses went out of fashion.

Modernization has all but snuffed out the Christmas candle, once used to light the trees and homes and hearts of men. Possibly partly because this holiday was close to the shortest day of the year, when light was not as plentiful, the candle helped to brighten the darkness.

For safety reasons and reasons of progress, however, the candle has been replaced with elaborate electrical systems, and the natural decorations have given way to plastic balls, artificial snow and brightly shining tinsel.

There can be little doubt that Christmas day, as we have come to know it, celebrated at a point in the year's time when the weather seems coldest, has evolved through the ages as a warm and joyous occasion.

Science News Letter, December 11, 1954

INVENTION

Yellow Nectarine Receives Plant Patent

➤ A DISTINCT variety of yellow-fleshed nectarine has been patented.

The inventor of the nectarine tree, Frederic W. Anderson of Merced, Calif., states that his invention is characterized by free-stone fruit, which is yellow instead of white-fleshed, approximately 50% larger in size than the Stanwick nectarine that is currently marketed, and will keep better during shipping.

Mr. Anderson was awarded plant patent No. 1,324.

Science News Letter, December 11, 1954

MEDICINE

Thirst Believed Cause Of Child Poison Deaths

➤ POISON DEATHS of many young children have been ascribed to hot weather and consequent thirst.

"Although there may be more kerosene in the child's environment in the winter, it is during the summer that he will be more likely to drink it due to thirst," Dr. Hugh A. Carithers, chief of pediatrics at St. Vincent's Hospital, Jacksonville, Fla., told the meeting of the American Medical Association in Miami, Fla.

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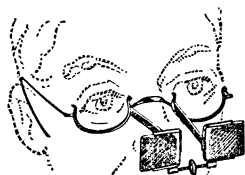
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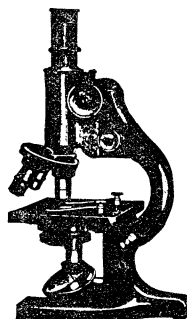


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