

'Deck the halls with boughs of holly...'

"The Glory of Lebanon shall come unto thee, the fir tree, the pine tree and the box together, to beautify the place of thy sanctuary."
—Isaiah 60:13

From the earliest time evergreens have signified eternal life and their use is one of the most beautiful Christmas traditions. The art of using evergreens, cones and fragrant herbs dates back to the Egyptians, thousand of years before the birth of Christ. References to the use of wreaths and garlands of leaves are found in Oriental literature, in the traditions of the Druids, and in the records of the ancient Hebrews.

The decorative use of flowers and fruits was continued by the Greeks and Romans during the early part of the Christian era but the church leaders decreed that this "pagan" practice must cease. However, the usage was too deeply rooted in custom and in the 7th century the Pope decided not only to allow but to encourage the popular use of greens and flowers.

the crown of thorns placed on Christ's head at the Crucifixion. An old German legend says the holly berries were originally yellow but were turned red by the blood of Christ. To the Pennsylvania Dutch the red berries signified the blood of Christ and the white flowers the purity of his conception.

Mistletoe

Mistletoe, which is a parasitic plant growing on trees, is steeped with legend. Scandinavian legends say the mistle-toe must always be suspended to serve as an instrument of good to counterbalance its earlier destruction.

In ancient Britain the Druids made a stately procession into the woods to procure mistletoe, with that found in the oak tree considered especially sacred. When the chosen oak was found the leader cut the sacred plant, which fell into a cloth held by a group of maidens. Sacrifices and incantations followed and when the crowd dispersed each was given a small piece to place over their doorway.

Early Christians called the mistletoe "all-heal" and it was considered to be a symbol of the healing powers of Christ and used to decorate churches at Christmas time. It was considered so sacred that enemies made a truce when they met under its branches. The early Christians in England gave each other a sacred kiss of peace and goodwill before receiving mass. "Salute on another with a holy kiss." (Romans 16:16)

As a decoration in homes, mistletoe, along with holly and other greens, has long brought good fortune. Lovers through the ages have sealed vows with a kiss under the mistletoe, which brings happiness, good fortune, long life and fertility.

Yule log

The worship of trees had a significant place in the history of man. Back in the ancient days when a place was cleared in the forest for a new village, a group of trees was left in the center of the clearing. One of these was designated as the "mother tree"—the source of life and religious activity. As settlements grew, pioneers set forth to new areas, taking with them their household gods and customs.

From this ancient tree worship came the Christmas observance of the Yule Log.

In France the Yule Log was called "La Tronche"—the trunk—and was lit for a few minutes on Christmas Eve. Then the fire was put out and the log covered with a cloth. The children beat the cloth with sticks to see if they could bring the log to life again, but their efforts were of course fruitless. The children were then sent away to ask forgiveness for their sins and while they were gone their parents hid presents under the cloth. So when they returned to try again, they found their presents.

The Yule Log might have originated in the Greek ceremony celebrating the birth of Apollo and Artemis. This comes from the tradition



An old tale tells how, when Mary and Joseph were on their way to Bethlehem they saw a cherry tree. Because they could not reach the fruit, Mary asked God's help and the tree held its limbs down to her.

of the Mother Leto worshipped in the form of a tree trunk or log.

The Yule Log was also considered to be the fire mother of the Sun God. The log was half-burned on Christmas Eve after a gift ceremony, then stored as protection against lightning. The ashes were buried by fruit trees to insure greater productivity during the following year.

Christmas tree

Although the German people are usually credited with originating the Christmas Tree, the idea began much earlier.

The Egyptians took date palms—signifying the triumph of life over death—into their houses during winter solstice. The Romans trimmed trees with trinkets and small masks of Bacchus. Virgil wrote about decorating trees with toys. In northern Europe the Druids tied apples and cakes to tree branches to honor Odin and candles to honor their own god, Balder.

In his story, "The First Christmas Tree," Henry Van Dyke said Winifred, a missionary, went from England to take Christianity to the Druids. He begged them not to worship their gods and make sacrifices to them, but to take a small fir tree into their homes to celebrate the birthday of Christ.

Martin Luther is said to have been walking home through the forest on Christmas Eve. He tried to tell his family about the beauty of the stars and the trees but words failed him. So he brought in a small fir tree and

decorated it with candles.

In Lithuania trees were decorated with small windmills or birdcages made of straw; in Norway with fishnets; in Sweden with strings of flags; in Poland with feathers and ribbons.

The Christmas Tree did not arrive in England until 1829 when a German living in London decorated a tree for his children. The first decorated tree in the U.S. was supposed to have been set up during the Revolutionary War by homesick Hessian soldiers.

A myth explains why Christmas Trees are decorated with tinsel. A poor woman trimmed her tree carefully but during the night spiders covered it with their webs. When the Christ Child saw this he turned the webs to silver.

Under the mistletoe

I did not know she'd take it so,
Or else I'd never dared:
Although the bliss was worth the blow,
I did not know she'd take it so.
She stood beneath the mistletoe
So long I thought she cared;
I did not know she'd take it so,
Or else I'd never dared.

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Holly

The holly holds special significance for Christmas. The name "holly" is believed to be derived from the word "holy." Holly was used in ceremonies long before the Christian era; the Druids considered it to be holy and used it to cure the sick. It also was believed to keep evil spirits from the houses and to protect the house from lightning. Branches hung around the house and stable were a good omen and it was believed that cattle would thrive if holly were placed where they could see it.

In England and Scotland the holly leaves with heavy spines were called "he" and those that were smooth referred to as "she," and the leaves were believed to determine who would be the head of the household the following year.

The Scotch-Irish who settled in Pennsylvania continued this custom and believed if holly were brought indoors during good weather the wife would rule the home, but, if brought in during bad weather, the man would be master.

The ceremony, "Burning of the Greens" comes from the notion that if holly were left in the home after Twelfth Night it would bring bad luck. Another belief was that if holly were left inside too long spirits would disturb the maidens of the household.

One custom said holly must be burned, not thrown away, let bad luck come to the household; another custom said holly must be kept until the following year to protect the house from lightning.

Holly is a popular symbol of Christmas throughout the world. In Italy sprigs are used to decorate the manger at Christmas. In Germany it is called "Christdorn," signifying



Bringing home the Yule Log.

Thank you for your patronage during the past year.

We wish you a Happy Holiday Season.

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