

Christmas Traditions Come Down Through Ages

By LOIS STEWART

There is a garland woven of Christmas legends, as sweetly fragrant and nostalgic as the earliest remembered Christmas mornings of childhood. Did you ever stop to think that almost every single Christmas tradition has behind it a beautiful story, tinted by time and re-telling as only such a story can be?

Why do we deck our Christmas trees with tinsel?
And why do we put up a Christmas tree, anyway?
Why do we place a lighted candle in the window, albeit it is an electric one these days? Here are a few answers on why we do what we do at Christmastime.

An old Christmas tale tells how tinsel came to be used in decorating the tree. A very neat housewife, one Christmas Eve long ago, put up a little tree for her children with simple gifts upon it. During the night a spider came and wove his web from branch to branch all over the tree. The Christ Child, greatly distressed because of the unhappiness this would cause the neat housewife, turned the cobwebs into silver and ever since, tinsel has been a favorite adornment for a Christmas tree.

Candle Significance

Candles have long been significant in Christmas decorations. In the Latin church Christmas was called "The Feast of Lights." Candle lighting naturally followed the Yule-log light. Lighting candles is a custom common in many countries, but traditionally it is associated especially with Ireland. Much of Ireland is desolate country with few towns and the Irish have long had the custom of placing lighted candles in their windows on Christmas Eve, as a guide and an invitation to all who, like Mary and Joseph, are seeking lodgings for the night.

The modern use of Christmas trees is said to have come either from Germany or from the Low Countries. They sprang into popularity in England after Queen Victoria and Prince Albert used one in 1840. The idea, however, is of ancient origin, having its foundation in the Bible. In Isaiah are the words, "The glory of Lebanon shall come unto thee, the fir tree, the pine tree and the box together, to beautify the place of My Sanctuary!"

There is also a story that a piece of living greenery brought good luck, and visitors stepping into homes of their friends would always present them with a branch of evergreen.

No Christmas traditions are complete without mention of certain animals. In art, we find representations of the ox and the ass. Sufficient warrant for their inclusion is found by putting together two passages from the Old Testament. Isaiah has said, "The ox knoweth his owner and the ass his Master's crib." Habakkuk added, "In the midst of two beasts shalt Thou be found."

Old Legend Told

There is a little legend of the glow worm or firefly. This insect was resting on the boards above the manger and when he saw that a divine child had been born, he was so happy that he wanted to go out and tell all the animals, but it was dark and he could not see. The angels, seeing the worthiness of his desire, placed a little lantern between his wings, so he went out and flew from tree to tree and brush to brush telling the glad story.

Some folklorists associate the Christmas tree with St. Boniface, an English missionary in Germany during the eighth century. On Christmas Eve he is said to have cut down a sacred oak beneath which human sacrifices had been offered. As it fell, a fir tree miraculously appeared beyond it and this, unstained with blood, the saint proposed as an emblem of the new faith. Others associate the Christmas tree with an old legend that a marvelous transformation of nature occurred at the time of Christ's birth and the trees blossomed in the midst of snow and ice.

Holly And Christmas

Many legends are connected with the familiar holly which from ancient times has been a symbol of immortality because it bears fruit in the winter. One belief holds that holly symbolizes the Saviour's crown of thorns, and another, that because the holly kept secret the Saviour's hiding place when His enemies were seeking Him, it was rewarded by the privilege of keeping its leaves green all winter. It is also said that from a holly bush God spoke to Moses in the wilderness.

According to another legend, on the first Christmas night a little lamb following the shepherds was caught by a holly thorn, and the red berries are the frozen drops of blood.

The use of mistletoe is similarly rooted in superstition. This parasite plant was sacred to the Druid priests of ancient England who cut it from the boughs where it grew with a golden sickle never used for any other purpose. The twigs were presented to people who were duty bound to accept them and to show appreciation by bestowing gifts. The mistletoe was then hung over their doors and it was believed that only happiness could pass underneath.

Mistletoe Kiss

That is said to be the origin of the mistletoe kiss tradition. Another explanation is that the mistletoe with its pearl-like berries was a symbol of purity to the Druids and associated with the rites of marriage; hence came the tradition of the kiss beneath its mystic bough during the Christmas season.

In some churches the mistletoe is considered a pagan symbol and may not be used in Christmas decorations. There is an ancient belief that the Holy Cross was made from the mistletoe and after this the plant withered.

Santa Claus, the American counterpart of St. Nicholas, who is honored in different lands under various names and guises, was introduced to this country by the Dutch settlers. St. Nicholas, who was bishop of Myra in the time of Constantine the Great, is said to have supplied three destitute maidens with dowries by secretly leaving a marriage portion for each at her window. In time, the popular fiction arose that he was the bringer of gifts for children on Christmas. The distribution of presents originally took place on St. Nicholas Eve, December 5, but was transferred to December 24, to invest the festival with added importance in the eyes of children.

Stocking Hanging

St. Nicholas used to be represented as a venerable old man dressed as a bishop, riding a white horse or donkey and carrying a basket.

The hanging of stockings is sometimes accounted for by a story that St. Nicholas on one of his midnight expeditions climbed a roof and dropped a purse down a chimney where it chanced to fall into a stocking that had been hung up to dry.

It is not known just how St. Nicholas' horse or donkey came to be transformed into the legend of Santa's reindeer. According to a children's story, the Lord asked St. Nicholas to take gifts to all good children and told him to carry the gifts in a sleigh and to choose whatever animals he wished to draw it. But St. Nicholas was unable to decide and finally an angel appeared who told him to let a little child help him. So St. Nicholas and the child visited the animal kingdom but the lion roared, the elephant swung his trunk menacingly, and all seemed unsuitable except the little reindeer who laid their heads on the ground and looked lovingly up at the child. "These," St. Nicholas said, "shall be my choice."

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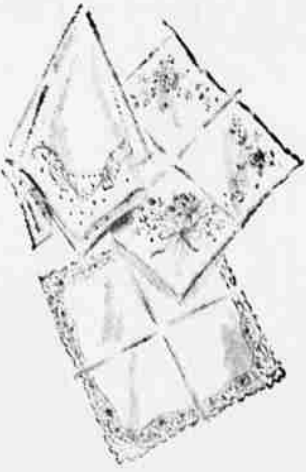
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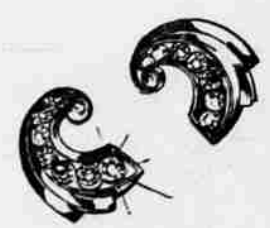
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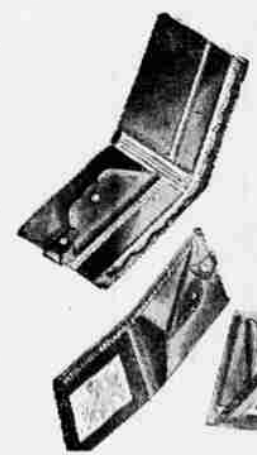
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