

CHRISTMAS and NEW YEAR'S GREETINGS FROM WEST PRINCE

Cherished Christmas Customs Antedate Christian Times

(By Mary Ann Fitzgerald)

Christmas is here and everyone is busy putting up the Christmas tree, hanging the holly and mistletoe and generally preparing for the festivities which time has made inseparable from Christmas.

Curiously enough, many customs we observe on the anniversary of the birth of the Christ child are not of Christian origin. Most are relics of pagan rites and ceremonies which in the early days of Christianity church fathers submitted to as inevitable and so allowed many of the festive practices of earlier belief to filter into the celebration of Christmas.

In our land the Christmas tree, decked with colored lights and ornaments and dripping with stalactites, is the centre of decoration in the home.

In Latin lands, centuries ago, the evergreen was the central figure in the pagan celebration of the Roman Saturnalia, which was held during the winter solstice, the week before our Christmas.

Actually the Christmas tree came to England and this country from Germany where the "weihnachtsbaum" was held as a symbol of the tree of lifeless life. The custom passed to England after 1840, when Queen Victoria had a tree, and came to America at the time of the German immigration.

Tree Decorations

According to the old German tradition late on the first Christmas Eve when the wise men were hurrying to Bethlehem they saw the lights of the village in the distance. In observance of the Jewish feast, Chanukah (Feast of Lights), every house had a flame burning in honor of the day. To the wise men lights appeared as a symbol of the birth of Christ as did the star, and thus they came to be used on the tree.

Other tree decorations seem to date back to the 10th century when an Arabian geographer declared that all trees in the forest blossomed and bore fruit on the night of the nativity, and so today we hang fruit and ornaments on the branches as a symbol.

The custom of decking the halls with holly also had its origin in the pagan festival of Saturnalia. At that time, branches of holly were believed to be an antidote for poison and a protection against lightning, were exchanged as good-will offerings between barbarous European tribes who had little in common except their allegiance to the Roman Empire.

The word holly derived from the ancient custom of using sprigs to decorate churches at Christmas, thus giving it the name holly tree, which later changed to holly tree.

Under The Mistletoe

The most popular spot in any fun-loving home during the season is "neath the mistletoe bough. In the days of the Druids, mistletoe was held sacred and at the festival of the winter solstice it was cut with a golden knife, gathered with great ceremony and distributed so that everyone could hang it over the door to seek favor with the wood nymphs who might take shelter from the cold.

The custom of kissing under the mistletoe seems to have originated from a Scandinavian myth which said that the lad must remove the berries one by one and give them to the maid, each time giving her a kiss. When all the berries were gone, the bough lost its spell.

In line with the belief, it was said that the maid who received no kisses would not marry that year.

The idea of giving gifts at Christmas seems once again to turn to the Romans for its origin. During their festivals they hung earthen boxes to receive contributions. Later, priests placed alms boxes aboard ships to be opened at Christmas Mass said for contributors, and so it became known as a "Christmas Box". Gifts were also exchanged in remembrance of the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh which the wise men bore to the infant Jesus.

Old St. Nick

Actually a mistake was responsible for the custom of hanging the stockings at the fire place on Christmas Eve. The story is told that good old Bishop Nicholas, who lived in Asia Minor, wished to assist a poor nobleman, who was too

A Joy No Earthly Wealth Can Give

There is an old tale which becomes apropos chiefly at the Christmas time.

An agnostic—a disbeliever in God—made this offer to a nine-year-old:

"I will give you an orange if you will tell me where God is. The youngster was equal to the challenge. 'I will give you two oranges,' he said, 'if you will tell me where He is not.'"

Many great men have always felt the spirituality of Christmas, and some have managed to put it into words. For instance, when Woodrow Wilson was asked to prove the greatness of Christianity, whose founder was the Christ-child, he said simply, "Try it."

Cardinal Spellman had a Christmas gift for the mind when he said: "The joy of Christmas is a joy that war cannot kill, for it is a joy of the soul, and the soul cannot die. Poverty cannot prevent the joy of Christmas, for it is a joy no earthly wealth can give. Time cannot wither Christmas, for it belongs to eternity. The world cannot shatter it, for it is a union with Him who has overcome the world."

The late Franklin D. Roosevelt once illustrated the spirit of Christmas with this story:

"A thief broke into the home of a priest and stole his purse. That night the priest wrote in his diary: 'Let me be thankful. First because I was never robbed before. Second because although he took my purse, he never took my life. Third because although he took all I had it was not much. And fourth because it was he who stole, and not I.'"

proud to ask for help.

While the nobleman was asleep, St. Nicholas dropped a purse of money down the chimney intending it to land on the hearth. However, it landed in a stocking which was hung by the fire to dry. Upon discovering it the next day, the nobleman used it as a marriage portion for his daughter. Afterwards, when the nobleman's daughters were of marriageable age, he hung a stocking by the chimney and the girl was provided for. The name St. Nicholas later became known as St. Nicholas which years corrupted into Santa Claus.

While the yule log is not so much a part of our Christmas tradition, it was the centre of celebration in Medieval England and is still a well-worn custom of Ireland, Southern France, northern Italy and Yugoslavia.

There seems to be some discrepancy of opinion about the origin of the custom. Some say that it passed down from the Scandinavian pagan festival Jule, celebrated in the winter solstice in honor of Thor, while others agree that it may have had origin with the Druids when the ancient priest chose a log, blessed it with great ceremony and proclaimed that it should be kept burning. Each year a brand was saved to rekindle a new fire.

In medieval England the yule log symbolized the centre of the family, while the Irish superstitiously held it bad luck for someone to leave the house without taking refreshments while the log was burning.

Traditional Feast

No Christmas Day is complete without turkeys and mince pies. Centuries before Christianity, roast duck and goose were considered a special delicacy to be served at festivals. Actually in the ancient days of Christianity the peacock

a symbol of immortality and a rarely, was served at Christmas.

Originally a native of American continent, the turkey was so scarce in Europe even in the 16th century that Archbishop Crammer prohibited the appearance of more than one dish of turkey cocks at state festivals. It wasn't until a quarter of a century later that it became a Christmas dish for the farmer.

Mince pie was supposed to commemorate in its ingredients of oriental mixture offerings made by the wise men.

Perhaps one of the most recent of our Christmas customs is the exchange of Christmas card greetings. The predecessor of the first cards were Christmas pieces written by school children on gaily decorated paper to show parents that school fees were not being spent in vain. Another ancestor was the Valentine.

In 1840 designs were made and verses written in a revival of Christmas festivities once forbidden by Puritan laws, but it wasn't until 1871 that the habit was firmly adopted in England.

THE MISTLETOE

Did you know that when enemies meet under the mistletoe bough they are supposed to lay down their arms for at least a 24-hour truce? That is why a hostess tries to hang some mistletoe near the doorway of her home, thus assuring perfect harmony while her guests are under her roof. The Druids of old held the mistletoe bough sacred. It was also considered symbolic and an invitation to the spirits of the forest to come in and bring good cheer. The custom of kissing under the mistletoe dates back to ancient Britain. To bring the best type of luck to the one kissed, it is claimed the bough must be cut with a golden knife.

"LET EVERY HEART"

By Vera Tarpley

"But they don't believe in Christmas, Jim—you know that." Laura wished she hadn't spoken quite so loudly; her remark had stopped in midstream three rapid-running conversations. Her guests studied the rug pattern. Jim merely looked at his wife in silence.

"I mean, after all," she went on, "it's not their religion . . . so I assumed it would be embarrassing—to them—to invite them to our Christmas party." She swallowed uncomfortably. "And I assumed that this party was for all the fellows in our office, including Ben." He smiled then, but didn't soften the accusation. Everyone in the room knew of the close friendship between Jim and Ben—they only guessed at his wife's resentment of the friendship.

Mr. Adams, office manager, broke the silence next. "I wouldn't worry about it too much, Jim. After all, Christmas is . . . He emptied his glass and returned it to the coffee-table. "And we all feel a little differently about the holidays than they do."

About nine o'clock carolers came to the door, singing lustily and slightly off-key. "Let every heart prepare him room . . ." The oldest caroler was scarcely twelve. He rattled a box full of coins. Mr. Adams snatched the donation box from him, ceremoniously deposited nine pennies, and passed from guest to guest, bowing after each donation. Everyone put in a five-dollar bill and everyone shouted "Show-off!"

Laura was annoyed but kept still. Laura and Jim's little girl, Bonny, was out caroling too, but her group covered a different neighborhood.

No one noticed much when the telephone rang later in the evening and Jim went to answer it. But they noticed Jim's face when he returned to the living-room—it was white and twitched unpleasantly. Laura walked over to him. "Who was it, dear?"

"It was Ben—he called to apologize for not coming tonight."

"His daughter's been in Children's Hospital for the past month, you know."

Adams broke in. "Say, that's right—Ben said she was pulling out of it—that was last week, I believe. How's she doing, did he say?"

"She died this afternoon."

Nobody seemed to have anything to say after that. The party

And then she started crying again and we left. Wasn't that funny?"

Mr. Adams cleared his throat. "By the way, Bonny, just what were those donations for anyway? I forgot to notice when they came around here."

"Why, for the Children's Hospital fund—or something like that it was all printed on the box."



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