



..... STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSES MOUTH

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As I write this, Christmas is just around the corner. It seems to be such a blur this time of year with all of the Christmas based parties, school programs, family gatherings, and Church activities to name just a few. It seems, as I get older, time flies by faster. Didn't we just do Christmas? I think most of us know why we celebrate Christmas, and I know I have talked about Santa and his reindeer in previous columns, but have you ever thought of some of the other Christmas traditions?

There has always been in the past an unwritten law in this country of seemingly uniform celebration of the Christmas traditions of USA. This is responsible for the world wide acceptance of a universal Christmas image which they get from the various forms of media. I do believe that the world of "political correctness" has however intruded into our traditions. I will let each of you decide for yourself what means the most to you. To me it will be Christmas! The tree will be a "Christmas Tree" – not a "Holiday Tree". I will most likely use the phrase "Merry Christmas" over "Happy Holidays". I will also celebrate the birth of Jesus with traditions that I grew up with. It is after all something that we all look forward to.

One thing is certain, in today's world of TV, internet, social media and global connections there are variations of traditions that are carried out all across the world and of course right here in the good old USA. I do know that the Christmas time celebrations are peculiar to each region and have different meanings. You will also find that the variations of the Christmas traditions of the USA pretty much equals the number of active cultures that have settled in the land. We are, after all, the melting pot of the world and past cultures usually dictate present traditions. I would like to use today's talk about some of those traditions that I am used to, and how they came to be. Let's look beyond Christ's birth and Santa Claus bringing presents and at some other traditions. How about we start with the "Christmas Tree"?

I, like many Nebraskans, have a German background --and we all know about Tannenbaum, and in fact I am humming the song right now – and it won't go away. History says the Christmas tree got its start in 16th-century Germany when fir trees were decorated, both indoors and out, with apples, roses, gilded candies, and colored paper. A fir tree hung with apples was used to symbolize the Paradise Tree in the Garden of Eden and was decorated during Advent season. It is held that Protestant reformer Martin Luther first adorned trees with light. While coming home one December evening, the beauty of the stars shining through the branches of a fir inspired him to recreate the effect by placing candles on the branches of a small fir tree inside his home. Evergreens seemed to be a theme in ancient traditions, let's explore those traditions.

I have often heard that some Christmas traditions actually date back to ancient Druid rites. Well, this may be part of the reason that comes up. It seems that mistletoe was used by Druid priests 200 years before the birth of Christ in their winter celebrations. They revered the plant since it had no roots yet remained green during the cold months of winter. The ancient Celts believed mistletoe to have magical healing powers and used it as an antidote for poison, infertility, and to ward off evil spirits. The plant was also seen as a symbol of peace, and it is said that among Romans, enemies who met under mistletoe would lay down their weapons and embrace. Scandinavians associated the plant with Frigga, their goddess of love, and it may be from this that we derive the custom of kissing under the mistletoe. Those who kissed under the mistletoe had the promise of happiness and good luck in the following year. Incidentally, my wife won't let me hang up Mistletoe!

That leads me to holly, ivy and greenery. I understand that this got its start, again in Northern Europe. Of course, Christmas occurred during the middle of winter, and to early Europeans ghosts and demons could be heard howling in the winter winds. Boughs of holly, believed to have magical powers, since they remained green through the harsh winter, were often placed over the doors of homes to drive evil away. Greenery was also brought indoors to freshen up the air and brighten the mood during the long, dreary winter. That is something that is still a benefit of that particular tradition. Legend also has it that holly sprang from the footsteps of Christ as he walked the earth. The pointed leaves were said to represent the crown of thorns Christ wore while on the cross and the red berries symbolized the blood he shed.

We can't forget about the stockings on the fireplace. According to legend, a kindly nobleman grew despondent over the death of his beloved wife and foolishly squandered his fortune. This left his three young daughters without dowries and thus facing a life of spinsterhood. The generous St. Nicholas, hearing of the girls' plight, set forth to help. Wishing to remain anonymous, he rode his white horse by the nobleman's house and threw three small pouches of gold coins down the chimney where they were fortuitously captured by the stockings the young women had hung by the fireplace to dry.

Last but not least the candy cane. It was not long after Europeans began using Christmas trees that special decorations were used to adorn them. Legend has it in the 17th century, white sticks of candy were made in the shape of a shepherd's crook, or some say "J" for Jesus. The red-and-white stripes represented Christ's blood and purity. The three red stripes symbolized the Holy Trinity. The hardness of the candy represented the Church's foundation on solid rock and the peppermint flavor represented the use of hyssop, an herb referred to in the Old Testament.

There you have it! You will find me under the Mistletoe by the Christmas tree, over by the holly and ivy draped fireplace mantle, looking in my stocking for candy canes, waiting for Santa! Here's wishing everyone a Merry Christmas!

The preceding information comes from the research and personal observations of the writer which may or may not reflect the views of UNL or Nebraska Extension. For more further information on these or other topics contact D. A. Lienemann, Nebraska Extension Educator for Webster County in Red Cloud, (402) 746-3417 or email to: dlienemann2@unl.edu or go to the website at: <http://www.webster.unl.edu>