

Today we are going to consider the explanation and history of some of our various Christmas customs. This Christmas potpourri has been gathered from centuries of folklore and legend around the world.

The Christmas tree originally symbolized the Garden of Eden to Germans. The "Paradeisbaum", tree of paradise, was a central theme of their medieval mystery play. When these plays were suppressed, the tree, usually a fir tree, was brought into the home, and gradually it became the custom to decorate it with cookies and fruit at Christmas time.

Many believe that it was Martin Luther who first put candles on the Christmas tree. Supposedly, while walking through the countryside one Christmas Eve, Luther was awed by the sight of the snow-tipped evergreens sparkling in the moonlight. At home he tried to recreate this effect for his family by placing candles on their Christmas tree.

Mistletoe is another symbol of Christmas from the annals of legend. The ancient Druids thought it was sacred. Forests in which this precious plant grew were dedicated to their gods. Legend has it that Druids cut mistletoe sprigs with a golden knife and hung them over their doors. They believed this pacified the woodland spirits and that only happiness could enter while the mistletoe was in place. Mythology reveals that Scandinavians also hung mistletoe over their doorways on the first day of winter to ward off the evil spirits. To the Romans, mistletoe was a symbol of peace, and when enemies met under the "supernatural" sprigs, they discarded arms and declared a truce. From all these myths and customs, mistletoe became a symbol of love, and gradually, perhaps inevitably, the custom evolved of kissing under the mistletoe.

British Saxons were the first to gather 'round the wassail bowl to toast a joyous season and a fruitful new year. As early as the fifth century, they passed a golden cup of mead wine around the feast table with the salutation "Waes Hael!" meaning "Be whole!" Wassail came to signify the special mixture of wine and other magical ingredients that every Christmas village was-ailers carried to an immense bowl around town toasting the season with their neighbors. The idea, though not the same practice, spread and the Christmas punch bowl today embodies the wassail spirit.

There are many different versions of the story of the Christmas stocking. Research in the Esquire Socks Library of Footlore reveals that the only fact which can clearly be established is that the first Christmas stocking was really hung up by the chimney to dry, and St. Nick making his round of chimneys on Christmas Eve dropped a bag of gold into the stocking by accident. Another tale holds that the children of Amsterdam set their wooden shoes in the chimney corners because they believed St. Nicholas would drop goodies down the chimney only if he saw shoes there. Later, the children hung up stockings by the chimney reasoning that shoes couldn't stretch and that stockings could hold more gifts.

Burning the yule log is an ancient pre-Christian custom originating with the Scandinavians. At their feast of Juul--from which we get our "yuletide"--on the first day of winter, they kindled huge bonfires in honor of the god Thor. This occasion was a rollicking and happy one for the people, and remained when Scandinavia became Christian. In feudal times, the bringing in of the great yule log to wide hearth in the baronial hall was one of the most joyous ceremonies connected with the Christmas celebration. The men hewed down the greatest log they could find, singing merry yule songs while they dragged it to the waiting hearth. According to custom the yule log was lighted with a brand of the previous year's log. Burning the yule log is still a beloved and picturesque custom in many rural districts of the world.

However they began, many of our most cherished Christmas Carols have been sung

for hundreds of Christmasses. One story claims that St. Francis of Assisi introduced the custom of community carol singing. St. Francis stage managed a manger scene one Christmas with real people and animals. The onlookers were so delighted with this pageant that they burst into joyous song. Those first carolers became as important to St. Francis' Christmas celebrations as modern carolers are to ours.

Christmas presents, according to many authorities, took the place of the pagan custom of exchanging gifts at the new year. Early priests suggested Christmas gifts because goodwill, generosity, and kindness are part of the Christmas spirit. The first such gifts were called "priests' boxes," since the priests collected money and jewelry in them to distribute among the poor at Christmas time. The gift-giving tradition grew, and when the Christmas tree was born, it was only natural to put the presents under the tree.

The Christmas card is probably the most recent of our cherished and established customs. In 1846 Joseph Cundall, a London artist, claims to have sent the first Christmas card. It was printed in lithography, and colored by hand. Not until 1862, however, did the custom obtain a foothold. Cards then were inscribed only with a simple message. After that robins, holly branches, embossed figures and landscapes were added. During a typical Christmas season these days, about two billion greeting cards are sent in the United States alone.

The custom of saying "Merry Christmas" to one's friends and neighbors originated with the English long ago. They shouted this greeting from the window on Christmas morning. In a way, every age-old symbol of Christmas we use during the holiday season has the same jolly ring to it.

Christmas stands eternally as the symbol of love, a time when currents of love flow from heart to heart, when the mystical power of the "only begotten Son" transforms the world into a place of joy, harmony, and peace. "It is Christmas," says one Truth writer, "whenever and wherever the human heart, touched by him whose ever-living spirit is the evergiving spirit, is moved to the expression of unselfish love." This means that we can live every day of the year rejoicing in the presence and power of the God-love we feel at Christmas time.

Remember this, the true spirit of Christmas stems from the loving heart. Love enhances the smallest gift you give or receive with a spiritual value far greater than the substance of the gift. Christmas stands eternally as the symbol of love, a time when currents of love flow from heart to heart. Let us remember this always, and if we feel that Christmas is becoming too commercialized, as we sometimes express it, let us make sure that you--you and I--do all we can to keep the true spirit of Christmas alive--the true spirit of love for our fellowmen.