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Carols may be as old as Christmas

By Earl Wolslagel
Duke News Bureau

The Christmas carol, as much a part of the American heritage at this season as the Christmas tree, tinsel, holly, gift-giving and Santa Claus, has been with us for hundreds of years. In fact, singing at Yuletide goes back to the earliest centuries of Christianity.

Some people contend that the first carol was that of the choir of angels singing "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will," in the Biblical story of Christmas.

Perhaps the earliest of still-surviving folk customs, carol singing is practiced, with understandable differences, in some form or another by Christian peoples in nearly every land on earth, according to reference librarians at Perkins Library.

Many are overused

Many "traditional" carols sung and heard nowadays are overused and "in the process of popularization from cathedral to shopping center have become tired and worn out," according to Dr. Waldo Beach, a professor in the Divinity School.

Beach singles out such "hit" carols as "Silent Night," "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing."

An authority in the field of Christian ethics, Beach has made a study of the Christmas carol over a period of many years. His hobby is collecting rare and unusual carols.

Shares discoveries

Each year, Beach invites friends "with good voices and the genuine spirit of the season" to his home to sing each year's new finds — and some old favorites — a practice that has led to the publication of a whole new group of "beautiful and ecstatic new carols," he says.

Many of Beach's discoveries are

included in his anthology, "Christmas Wonder," published by Fortress Press.

Beach declares that the earliest Christmas music was not really the "carol," but the "plainsong" of about the 12th century. Unlike carols, plainsong more often follows the free rhythm of prose rather than verse.

Plainsong is still sung in Roman Catholic services, but it is sung in unison and without the harmonization of other voices.

Into the vernacular

At the time of the Reformation, when religious ideas were being translated away from the Latin and the formal setting of the church, the tradition of carol singing, most of it at Christmas — but also at Easter, Epiphany and on other holy days — grew strong.

"A nice myth," Beach says, is that Martin Luther, the great Reformation leader, was responsible for "Away in a Manger," one of the great carols sung widely in America and England.

There is no convincing evidence that Luther had anything to do with this particular carol, Beach said. Rather, there is strong belief that it originated among German Lutherans in Pennsylvania, perhaps in mid-19th century, and was later popularized in England.

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Intercom on holiday

Because of the holidays, *Intercom* will not be published next week. The next issue will be available Friday, Jan. 6.

A holiday edition of *Heartbeat* will be published Wednesday, Dec. 28.



'TIS THE SEASON—Speech and Hearing Center personnel put up a tree in the waiting room and decorated the walls to help spread a little

Christmas cheer. Patient Allen Whitehurst is caught taking a close look at the tree ornaments. (Photo by Parker Herring)