

Christmas has international appeal

by Melissa Cloer

As Christmas comes around this year we will carry on many traditions as we have for years. We will have a Christmas tree, attend midnight mass, exchange gifts and enjoy a hearty Christmas meal.

Do you ever wonder where these traditions originated or how other countries celebrate Christmas? Christmas means "Christ's Mass" and has been celebrated in Rome since 336 A.D. Food, good fellowship, trees, gifts and greetings commemorate an aspect of celebration of longer days and how the sun climbs higher in the sky.

The ancient custom of using evergreen trees, wreaths and garland during Christmas represents eternal life to the Egyptians, Chinese and Hebrews.

Christmas trees were introduced to North America in the 17th century by German settlers. Christmas trees also became popular during the 19th century in Austria, Switzerland, Poland and Holland. United States missionaries introduced Christmas trees to Japan and China in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Christmas is regarded as festival of families and kids and presents are ex-

changed in many countries. For Christmas in Italy they set up 'presepios,' which are tiny versions of the Nativity story. 'Ceppos,' early Italian Christmas trees, shelf Nativity scenes and gifts. Most Italian children have their own 'ceppo.'

In Spain Christmas is one of the most elaborate and busiest "fiestas" of the year. After attending church Christmas morning, the rest of the day is spent at home with family. In the evening, everyone gathers in the village square for merry making. A tradition in Spain is that everyone's name in

the village is put into an Urn of Fate. Two names are drawn out at a time and fate decides who shall be friends for the year.

France concentrates on family unity, church attendance and worship on Christmas day. The Christmas celebration begins on Christmas Eve when children build a Nativity scene from the figures their mothers give

them. Church bells ding at midnight, and after mass each family has a traditional feast. Before going to bed, the children set their shoes in front of the fireplace hoping Pere Noel, the Christmas spirit, will fill them with nuts and sweets.



photo by Jan Seate/Laura Ross

Johnson Hall displays its Christmas finery to let the students know that administration is also looking forward to having a break over the holidays.

December 6 is Saint Nicholas Day in Belgium. Children set up trees and expect St. Nicholas to fill it with gifts and good things to eat. In Belgium it is believed that St. Nick rides a horse so children put out water, hay, carrots and potatoes for the horse to eat.

The Father of Christmas marches through the villages of Switzerland with his wife Lucy. He gives toys to the boys while his wife gives toys to all the girls. In French cantons of Switzerland the Christ child makes his rounds in a sleigh drawn by reindeer. Sound familiar?

In Denmark everyone attends church Christmas morning. Each house has decorative windows and garland. The houses are open to those who may come during the 12 days of Yuletide. It is said that when you attend someone's house you must drink and eat the food they have set out for you or else you will have bad luck.

Each child writes a letter telling what they want for Christmas, and it is placed in the window sill so the Wise Men can easily reach it in Poland. On Christmas Eve when the first star comes out families eat and afterwards gather around the tree and sing carols. At midnight they attend the Shepherd's mass. In Poland children do not receive gifts on Christmas because presents were given to them on

the Feast of St. Nicholas December 2.

In Romania they fast for two weeks before Christmas and eat their meal when the first star shines on Christmas Eve. On Christmas night boys sing carols and tell Christmas stories on the 25 of December.

On Christmas Eve in Hungary children recite verses of the Bible story of the Nativity before leaving school. When they get home their presents are unwrapped under the tree so they can see if St. Nick fulfilled his promise to bring what they wanted. On Christmas morning the Hungarians attend church and then return home to spend the day with only family and to enjoy a Christmas dinner. December 26th is called the second Christmas. This is the day to have parties and spend time with friends.

Christmas is celebrated across the world in many unique styles. There seems to be a single belief throughout and that is that there is a Santa Claus. Although many of us are old enough to know our parents are Santa, it is still nice to think that the idea of one has spread to many countries. We are not the only ones who were fooled when we were young.

When your family celebrates Christmas remember that these traditions have been around and that many other people who may not look the same as you are celebrating the same. Good will to all women!

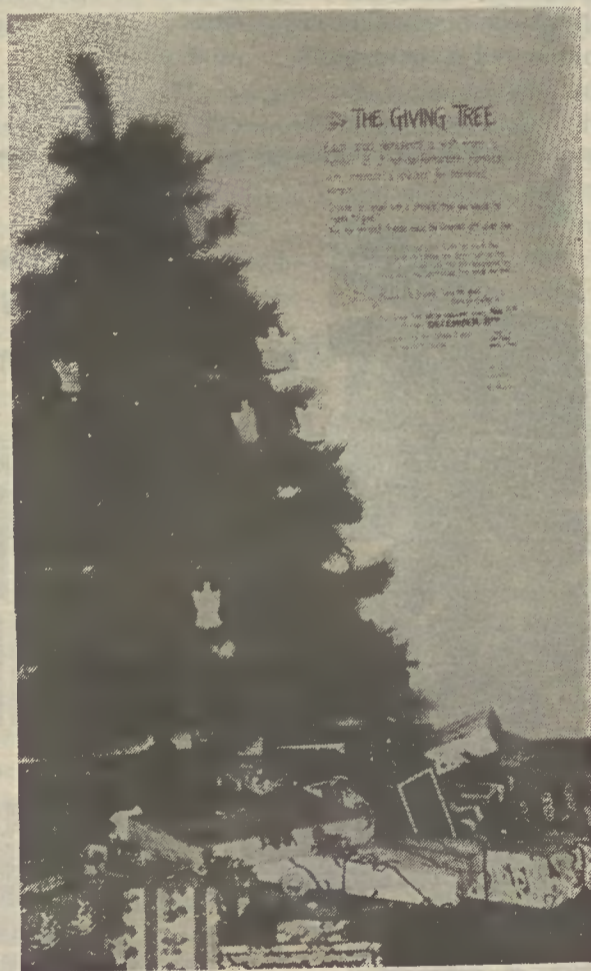


photo by Jan Seate/Laura Ross

The Giving Tree in Johnson Hall is a constant reminder of what the true meaning of Christmas is.