

The origins of holiday customs

Why do we send cards at Christmas time or put up a tree? There are many traditions we take for granted during the holiday season, and it is interesting to learn how some of these customs originated.

The ancient Druids can be thanked for the custom of hanging mistletoe at Christmas. In the rituals of the Druids, mistletoe was cut down with a golden sickle in November. The mistletoe would be divided up among the people, who took the plant home to hang over their doors. The Druids believed that the plant could work miracles of healing, protect against witchcraft, and make the land fertile. The origin of the custom of kissing under the mistletoe is not known, but it may have been inspired by the plant's supposed powers of fertility.

The Germans originated the custom of placing a tree in the home at Christmas time. There are several legends to explain the custom. One credits St. Boniface, a missionary to Germany during the eighth century. According to the legend, one Christmas Eve the saint chopped down a sacred oak which had been used as a site for human sacrifices. As the oak fell, a fir tree miraculously appeared in its place. Another legend says that on the night Christ was born, all the trees in the forest bloomed and bore fruit, even though it was the middle of winter.

Martin Luther, a German, is thought to have first decorated the Christmas tree. The story goes that Luther, walking under the stars one night, was inspired to bring home an uprooted fir tree and place candles on its branches as a reminder of the heavens.

The nativity scenes that are so beloved at Christmas time are a tradition given to us by St. Francis of Assisi. On Christmas Eve in 1223, Francis was inspired to reenact the nativity for the people of the town of Greccio in Italy. St. Bonaventure described the event in his writings: "... they made ready a manger, and bade hay, together with an ox and an ass, be brought unto the place... The man of God, filled with tender love, stood before the manger, bathed in tears, and overflowing joy."

It was claimed that the hay used in the crib had remedied sick beasts afterward, and many other wonders were attributed to this first manger scene. The idea quickly caught the fancy of the faithful and before a century had passed, carvings of the nativity scene, or creches, were used throughout Europe during the holiday season.

The custom of sending Christmas cards probably originated with an Englishman, Sir Henry Cole, who commissioned John Horsely to design a card in 1843. The card featured a family celebrating the season, with two smaller motifs depicting charitable acts: "Clothing the Naked" and "Feeding the Hungry." The card was lithographed and sold in 1846, and thus the Christmas card was born.

Whether originating in legend or real life, the customs of Christmas enrich the season for us all.

Holiday Hints

Before you deck the halls with boughs of holly be sure there's sufficient safety sense in your holiday decorating schemes.



Holiday trees and other decorative greenery will last longer and be safer if they're sprayed with a special, easy-to-use solution that helps retard water loss. Called Envy™ Holiday Foliage Preservative, from Safer Inc., it extends the life of evergreen trees, holly and wreaths; retards needle drop; and protects live trees and bushes against indoor drought and the dryness that might lead to fires, especially if candles or heating appliances are close by. The spray is nontoxic and safe for use around people, animals and the environment.

The Christmas tree probably developed in medieval Germany from the "Paradise Tree," a type of evergreen. The tree, decorated with red apples, was used in a popular Christmas play about Adam and Eve.



Feverfew is a low, hardy plant with white daisy-like flowers. People once believed that it could drive away fever. Its name means to put fever to flight. It doesn't work.

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