

The Legends of The First Christmas Trees



Many folk legends have grown around the Christmas tree. Christ's blessing and gift to mankind in the form of a decorated tree remains the central theme of most. Across Europe, people used tree-based folk tales to teach children about the celebration of Christ's birth.

Stories about first Christmas trees

One story tells that when Christianity first came to Northern Europe, three virtues: Faith, Hope and Charity were sent from Heaven to find a tree that was as high as hope; as great as love; as sweet as charity; and one that had the sign of the cross on every bough. Their search ended in the forests of the North where they found the Fir. Lighted from the radiance of the stars, it was the first Christmas tree.

Another typical tale tells about a woodcutter who helps a small hungry child. The next morning, the child appears to the woodcutter and his wife, and is none other than the Christchild. The child breaks a branch from a fir tree and tells the couple that it will be a tree that, at Christmas time, will bear fruit. As foretold the tree is laden with apples of gold and nuts of silver.

Various Conifers — such as spruce, balsam, eastern hemlock and the scotch pine are used as Christmas trees but the scotch pine has surpassed the Douglas Fir as the nations most popular Christmas tree. But in the Holy Land conifers are mostly small and insignificant and forests few apart from Lebanon with its magnificent cedars (Psalm 104:16). Even in ancient times forested areas were small. How did the evergreen tree come to become associated with Christmas? Is it an appropriate symbol in Christian homes? Is it rooted in paganism or Christian symbolism? Is there a significance to it's decorations?

Sacred trees in Europe

Evergreens were a symbol of rebirth from ancient times. Egyptians brought green palm branches into their homes on the winter solstice as a symbol of life's triumph over death. The Romans decorated with evergreens during Saturnalia, a winter festival in honor of their god of agriculture. In Northern Europe the pagans observed the Soltice festival of Jul — a two month feast beginning in November with prickly pine branches hung around doorways and windows to keep away demonic spirits. But the sacred trees of the druids and norsemen were deciduous oaks, not evergreen conifers.

The Upside Down Fir Tree

During the 7th century, a monk from Devonshire spent time there preaching the word of God. Like any good instructor, he used props. The story goes that he used the triangular shape of the Fir tree to describe the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that makes up the Holy Trinity. By the 12th century, the Fir tree was being hung upside down from ceilings in Central Europe as a symbol of christianity at Christmas time.



Boniface and Thor's Oak

Legend has it that the missionary to the Germans, St. Boniface, in order to stop sacrifices at their sacred Donar Oak near Geismar, chopped the tree down in 725 A.D. Supposably with one mighty blow, Saint Boniface felled the massive oak and as the tree split, a beautiful young fir tree sprang from its center. Saint Boniface told the people that this lovely evergreen, with its branches pointing to heaven, was indeed a holy tree, the tree of the Christ Child, a symbol of His promise of eternal life. He instructed them henceforth to carry the evergreen from the wilderness into their homes and to surround it with gifts, symbols of love and kindness.

The Paradise Tree

From the eleventh Century, religious plays called "Mystery Plays" including the popular Paradise Play depicting the story of the creation of Adam and Eve, their sin and banishment from Eden. An evergreen tree was the logical choice for a lush garden tree on this winter festival, and it was decorated with apples symbolizing the forbidden fruit. It ended with the promise of the coming Savior and his incarnation, so gradually flat wafers symbolizing the forgiveness of sins in communion were added to the paradise tree, making it now not just the tree of knowledge but also the tree of life. This resulted in a very old European custom of decorating a fir tree in the home with apples and small white wafers representing the Holy Eucharist at Christmas time. These wafers were later replaced by little pieces of pastry cut in the shapes of stars, angels, hearts, flowers, and bells. In some areas the custom was still to hang the tree upside down.



In addition to the paradise tree, many German Christians set up a Christmas Pyramid called a Lichstock — a open wooden frame with shelves for figurines of the Nativity covered with evergreen branches and decorated with candy, pastry, candles, and a star. The star of course was the star of Bethlehem, the candles represented the light of Christ coming into the world, the evergreens were the symbol of eternal life, and the candy, fruits, and pastries, the goodness of our life in Christ, the fruits of the spirit, etc. By the seventeenth century the Lichstock and the "Paradise Tree" became merged into the modern Christmas tree.

Luther's Christmas Tree

The story of Luther's creation of a Christmas tree lit with candles is pure legend — with nothing in the intensive Luther Scholarship to support the tale. It was said that he was walking on a bright snow-covered, star-lit night pondering the birth of Christ. Enthralled by the evergreen trees, the stars and the landscape, he took a tree inside and put candles on it to represent the majesty he felt about Christ's birth as Jesus came down from the stars to bring us eternal life. The first known decorated Christmas Tree however was at Riga in Latvia, in 1510. Tannenbaum songs date back to the late 1500's



Christmas Wreaths

The Advent Wreath is a Lutheran custom that originated in Eastern Germany. They are round as a symbol of God's eternity and mercy, and of evergreens as symbols of God's "everlastingness" and our immortality. Green is also the Church's color of hope and new life. Four candles, three purple or violet that represent penance, sorrow, and

longing expectation and one rose or pink that represents the hope and coming joy are placed within to represent the four weeks of Advent. Wreaths are an ancient symbol of victory and symbolize the "fulfillment of time" in the coming of Christ and the glory of His birth.

The Christmas Market Trees

By the early 1600's many German towns were celebrating Christmas with elaborately decorated trees. Christmas markets were set up to provide everything from gifts, food and more practical things such as a knife grinder to sharpen the knife to carve the Christmas Goose! Gingerbreads and wax ornaments bought as souvenirs were taken home to hang on Christmas Trees. A visitor to Strasbourg in 1601 records a tree decorated with "wafers and golden sugar-twists (Barleysugar) and paper flowers of all colours". The early trees were biblically symbolic of the Paradise Tree in the Garden of Eden. Decorations first used were paper flowers, fruits, nuts, gold foil, cakes, small gifts, and candies. So popular had this custom become that by the end of the sixteenth century many communities in Alsace limited or prohibited the use of evergreens for the holidays, in part, to protect the forests from the over-cutting of young trees. Christmas trees continued to grow in popularity during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries particularly among Lutherans and they brought the custom to England and the Americas.



Modern Christmas Trees

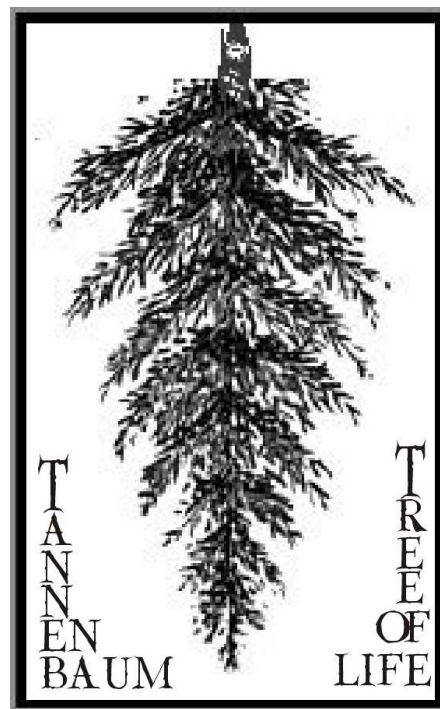
Christmas trees became fashionable in the mid 1800's. In 1846, the popular Royals, Queen Victoria and her German Prince, Albert, were illustrated in the London News with their children around a Christmas Tree. In America, the White House led the way to trees for the holidays beginning with President Franklin Pierce. Despite some congregation's concerns about bringing trees into their religious traditions, trees quickly were adopted as symbols of Christ's Advent.

Special Trees in the Bible

Trees are not especially significant as symbols in the Bible, though used as metaphors (Psalm 1:3, Prov 11:30; Psalm 104:16, Dan 4). Several trees, however, are key symbols: **The Tree of Knowing Good and Evil** in the garden of Eden symbolizes the temptation and fall of man (Genesis 3) – it was a fruit tree obviously. Mankind sinned by eating its fruit, though commanded not to by God. **The Tree of Life** appears at both the beginning and end of the Bible. Genesis 2:9; 3:22 and Rev 22:2. **The Branch** is one of the titles given to the Messiah in Isa 4:2, 11:1, Jer 23:5, Zech 3:8, 6:12. **The Cross** is spoken of as a tree in Gal 3:13 and 1 Peter 2:24. It is the most significant "tree" in the Bible – a symbol representing the Savior's giving himself as the sacrifice for the sins of men.



Christmas Trees are neither significant pagan nor biblical symbols. But various Christian traditions have evolved that use the evergreen and its decorations to symbolize and teach the wonderful truths of Advent – God sending His Son to bring eternal life to a fallen world. Though abused by popular culture, Christmas Trees may still point to that true Light of the World.



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Told by Eldrbarry

Germany's Tannenbaum (Christmas Tree)

The German religious reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) is often credited with starting the Christmas tree custom,

but the first appearance of a Tannenbaum was recorded in Germany many years after Luther's death. It was in 1605

in Strasbourg in Alsace, then in Germany, that a chronicler wrote (in old German): "Auff Weihenachten richtett man

Dahnnenbäum zu Strasburg in den Stuben auff..." ("At Christmas they set up Christmas trees in their rooms...").

But it is likely that the custom dates back to at least around 1550, since the first of

several "Tannenbaum" ballads was circulating in print at that time. By the 19th century

this custom had spread across most of Germany and beyond. Several royal Germans

are credited with helping extend the tree decorating custom beyond Germany's

borders. The Duchess of Orleans (from Mecklenburg) brought it to Paris, while other

Germanic royals brought the Christmas tree to England and other European countries.

But it was commoners—emigrants from Germany—who brought the Weihnachtsbaum to

America.

The Austrians, Germans, and Swiss are slowly using more "electric candles" for tree

decoration, but many a Germanic Christbaum continues to glow with the warm light

of real wax candles. (Germans use special candle holders and have learned how to do

this safely; the candles are not left to burn for a long time or without someone in the room.)

The use of evergreens as a Christmas symbol of everlasting life goes back much further than even 1550s, but still

with a Germanic connection. St. Boniface is said to have introduced the use of evergreens in connection with his

efforts to Christianize the Germanic tribes in the 8th century. He dedicated the fir tree (Tannenbaum) to the Christ

Child, displacing the pagan oak tree of Odin.

A more recent "old" Bavarian tradition is the so-called "Bride's Tree," upon which a dozen special ornaments are hung

to help ensure a better life for a married couple. The 12 ornaments and their symbolic significance are: angel (God's

guidance), bird (joy), fish (Christ's blessing), flower basket (good wishes), fruit basket (generosity), heart (true love),

house (protection), pine cone (fruitfulness), rabbit (hope), rose (affection), Santa (goodwill), and teapot

(hospitality). Special hand-blown glass ornaments in these forms are still produced in Bavaria.

For more about the Christmas tree, see our Christmas Tree Links.