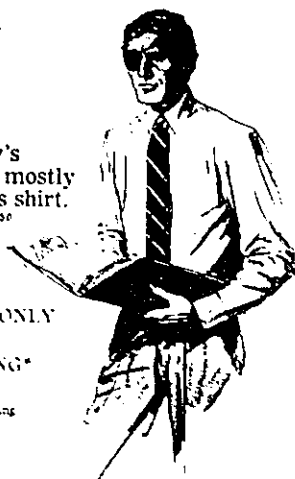


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Oh Tannenbaum: Your customs delight us

The custom of gathering the family around the Christmas tree for putting on lights, ornaments and strands of popcorn seems to be as American as the flag and apple pie.

Don't you believe it. Like most of our Christmas traditions, tree trimming came to this country along with the European immigrants.

It is difficult to trace the beginnings of the custom. Many myths and ancient stories surround it.

One of them is that Martin Luther started the tradition. The story goes that he was attempting to explain to his wife and children the beauty of the snow-covered forest under a glistening star-speckled sky.

According to the legend, he went into a garden, cut down a fir tree, dragged it into the nursery and put some candles onto the branches.

A picture of Martin Luther and his family surrounding "the first Christmas tree" has been prominently displayed in Protestant religious books throughout the years.

What is known is that in ancient times trees were worshipped by many people, and gifts were placed on the branches as sacrifices to the deities.

The practice of giving gifts to others was later introduced by the Christians, hence, gifts were hung on "Christian trees" or Christmas trees.

The earliest written record of Christmas trees is from 1521 in the province of Alsace in the upper Rhine in Germany.

Another reference is from Strasburg in 1605.

"At Christmas, fir trees are set up in the rooms and hung with roses cut from paper of many colors, apples, wafer, etc.," it is written.

Until the early 1800s, the use of Christmas trees was mainly a custom only in Germany. Historians cannot determine why in about 20 to 30 years, the practice spread throughout Europe. These Europeans later brought the tradition to the new land, the United States.

It is believed that tree trimming may have been an outgrowth of a practice adopted by early dwellers in the forest. They placed foodstuffs in trees during the night so they could be out of the reach of prowling animals.

Later pictures or replicas of foodstuffs such as ham and bacon were used as substitutes for the real items in order so they could be held by slender tree branches.

Cookies were soon added to the trees in the shape of flowers, bells, stars, angels, hearts and animals.

Then came the candles, ribbons, a star for the top, nuts, fruits covered with bright-color paper, dolls and glittering strings of beads, and other ornaments.

Before the introduction of electric lights, wax candles caused serious fire hazards in most homes. For this reason, candles were only placed on the Christmas tree for a few hours during the holiday season.

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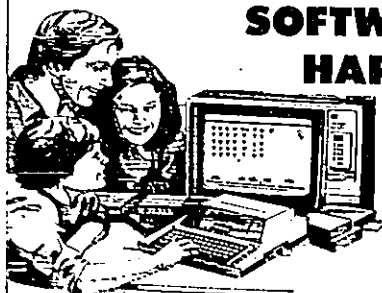
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