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EC62-521 Christmas Customs : Make them Yours

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Christmas Customs

MAKE THEM YOURS

EXTENSION SERVICE
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Where people have freedom of worship, bells ring at Christmas time from great cathedral towers and from belfries of small country churches. Their song, a carol tune, rings loud and clear — "Christ is born!"

Christmas, which is so dear to us, is a Christian holy day. Each year as we see non-Christian influences creeping over the world, we should be thankful that we live in the United States where we can observe Christmas in our homes, with lighted windows and joyous singing. There is no need here to pull the shades and whisper the story of the little Baby who was born in a manger to become the Savior of the world.

If you feel that the materialism of gift giving and Christmas shopping tend to turn this holy day into a pagan holiday, then it is time for you and your family to build traditions that will make this festival truly Christian, with spiritual lights that shine as clearly and colorfully as the lights on your Christmas Tree.

Christmas in the United States is not like Christmas in any other land, for it is like Christmas in many lands. Christmas legends from everywhere and religious services right out of the Bible are woven into a pattern that is now America's Christmas.

Families who live next door to each other may celebrate Christmas very differently. As the children of other counties became the parents of children in America, they keep in their new homes rich treasures of custom and tradition. As the children of Americans intermarry, their family traditions take on bits of color of Christmas from everywhere.

Still, the wonder in the eyes of little children; gayly wrapped gifts; the soft glow of candles; bright holly; poinsettia and mistletoe in pine scented rooms; families reunited; the hushed expectancy of religious services; and joyous carols, have become Christmas in America.

Family traditions are dear. They satisfy our longings for the past. Sometimes, though, a family may experiment and find new Christmas customs rich and rewarding. A young family may want to build family traditions that have special significance to them and so lay a happy foundation for the memories their children will have. This is especially true if they live far from their parent's home, or if their own Christmas celebration loses color because it is overwhelmed by Christmas with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

You may want to try some of the age old Christmas traditions described in the following pages and make them yours. If they draw your family closer together it will be worthwhile.
The Advent Season

The Advent season is a preparation for the feast of the Nativity. It begins four Sundays before Christmas. A family can have a very special time with the Advent season.

1. Make yourself an Advent calendar. Start Christmas by singing a different Christmas carol every day. Take the hymn book from your church and turn to the section marked "Advent and Nativity." On your calendar write down the songs you plan to sing, finishing with "Silent Night" on Christmas Eve and "Joy to the World" on Christmas morning. You might enjoy singing at meal time.

2. Some people have an Advent candle. You may make it or buy it. Mark it for each day it will burn starting with the first of the four Sundays before Christmas. Make a special ceremony of lighting the candle each day. Maybe you will have it on your dining table and light it at dinner or perhaps place it in a Christmasy setting. On Christmas Eve or Christmas morning or whenever you give your gifts you can light other Christmas candles from The Advent Candle.

3. Advent wreaths. Let your children help you make an Advent wreath. Use winter greens which you have in the plantings about your home, such as pine, cedar, spruce, juniper, etc. Add decorations such as pinecones, bright berries or special ornaments.

To keep the wreath fresh during the Advent season, put vermiculite, spaghnum moss, or other planting mixtures which hold water, in a ring mold and wet well with water. Place your evergreen branches in this moist material so that they will not dry out in your warm rooms. Place four candles in the arrangement and light a different one each Sunday before Christmas. Burn all four on Christmas Eve. Make up your own ceremony for lighting and have a different family member light the candle each time. Choose a Christmas carol to sing each time you light a candle.
From Bavaria comes a custom of burning candles at evening meals during Advent. One rose and three purple candles are set in a wreath placed on the table or suspended from the ceiling. Starting four weeks before Christmas, one candle is lighted each week until all are burning on the last Sunday. Since rose symbolizes joy, this candle is lit on the last Sunday. A white candle in the center is added on Christmas Eve.

**Yule Log**

Not every home has a fireplace. If you do, make Christmas merry by having your own family ceremony for lighting the yule log. Read in Christmas magazines about the customs of lighting the yule log in England, France and other countries. Choose your log with care. If you have had a family vacation in some forest country, you might pick it out at that time and bring it home with you. Maybe you will have done some tree trimming on your place during the year and can select one that will do. Maybe it's a choice bit of drift wood you have picked up. This preparation needs to be done long before Christmas.

The bringing in of the yule log was a joyous occasion. Have the family join in singing such songs as "Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly" or some of the other Christmas fun songs. According to tradition either cut off a portion of the log or save an unburnt portion from it. This is carefully put away until the next year "to shield the home from evil" and to light the new log.

Light the yule log on Christmas Eve. Use some of the chemicals that are available to add color to your fire. As the fire burns and flames flicker family members can draw close to it and dream of the radiance, light and warmth that came into the world when Christ was born. This will make a lovely setting for your family Christmas Eve for reading from the Bible the story of Jesus' birth and singing together the lovely Christmas carols. Why not learn one called "Love Came Down at Christmas" to sing at your fireside.
Christmas Trees

There are many legends about the origin of Christmas trees, which can be traced back to the fifteenth century. One legend, makes St. Winfrid the inventor of the idea. "In the midst of a crowd of converts he hewed down a giant oak which had formerly been the object of their Druidic worship. As it fell backward like a tower, groaning as it split asunder in four pieces, there stood just behind it, unharmed by the ruin, a young fir tree, pointing a green spire toward the stars.

"Winfrid let the axe drop, and turned to speak to the people 'This little tree, a young child of the forest, shall by your holy tree tonight. It is the sign of an endless life, for its leaves are ever green. See how it points upward to heaven! Let this be called the tree of the Christ-child; gather about it, not in the wild-wood, but in your own homes; there it will shelter no deeds of blood, but loving gifts, and rites of kindness.'"

Another legend suggests the use of Christmas trees among European peoples was begun by Martin Luther in Saxony. One Christmas Eve, it is said, he became entranced with the beauty of the starry sky. He brought into his home a tree for his children. Illumined with numerous candles, it represented the gracious heavens that had sent forth the Christ Child.

In nearby Bavaria, when father and son began their search for a Christmas tree, they always looked for a pine. Only a pine was thought worthy of being decorated at Christmas. It received this honor, so legend has it, because the branches of a pine tree concealed Joseph, Mary, and Jesus from the soldiers of Herod. Strangely enough, in many countries pine has not been favored as a Christmas tree because of it's informal growth and needle-like leaves.

The Christmas tree was introduced into the court of St. James about 1840 by Prince Consort Albert of Saxe-Coburg. The custom spread rapidly among the aristocratic families of London and was almost immediately adopted by all classes throughout England.

It was introduced in the United States by a young German immigrant, August Imgard, in 1847. He came to Wooster, Ohio, to join other members of his family who preceded him to America.

As the Christmas season drew near, he was sad to think that his young niece and nephew would miss the fun of a Christmas tree. So he chopped down a young spruce tree. The village tin smith made a bright star for it's top. The tree was decorated with paper cut outs and chains.

News of the beautiful tree spread rapidly and soon children and grownups had gathered at the Imgard home to see the beautiful tree. The next year every home in Wooster had a tree. The people added strings of cranberries and popcorn to the ornaments.
The tomb of August Imgard is in Wooster and every year a lighted tree stands at its
door, a tribute to the man who brought to America the idea of a decorated Christmas
tree. As the tradition spread, pioneer families used the trees they had at hand and
whatever decorations they could find that had significance and beauty.

Of late, this tradition has been lost in sophisticated versions of feather, metallic
and crinoline trees. Although they may be beautiful and artistic, these do not tug at
the heart strings. Many parts of Nebraska have native evergreen trees suitable for
Christmas trees just for the cutting. The family might enjoy a trip to a wooded part
of your farm to select and cut a tree. Planting Christmas trees in your windbreak may
give you pleasure through the years as you select one each year to cut for your family's
Christmas.

Although having a Christmas tree may already be one of your family traditions, why
not do a little more about the family's pleasure in it. At the time you usually set up your
tree, set a date with the members of your household and have a tree trimming party.
Everyone has a hand in the decoration from littlest to eldest. Year by year, new orna­
ments (homemade or especially purchased) can be added which tell a story to family
members as they are handled each year.

Strings of cranberries, popcorn and paper chains are still fun for little folks to make.
Large glass Christmas balls can have names printed on them in clear fingernail polish
with glitter shaken on the writing. These balls take on new meaning each year espe­
cially as the family circle grows larger.

As you trim the tree, sing the carol, "Tannebaum" ("Christmas Tree, O Christmas
Tree").

For the family, the Christmas season begins when the tree is trimmed and the Christ­
mas tree lights are turned on. A Christmas tree trimming party can become one of your
wonderful family traditions.

Creche

Many countries build their Christmas observance about the creche. In Czecho­
slovakia in the old days, children would build a creche and carry it through the
streets singing Christmas carols. In Italy, every family has a manger scene. The man­
ger is empty until Christmas eve, when the baby Jesus is placed in it with reverent
ceremony. In France, the creche is arranged by the children with appropriate lighting.
Around it hymns are sung and bells rung. In South America, the creche is the central
part of the Christmas celebration.

Since Christmas is to celebrate the birthday of the Christ Child, nothing can be
sweeter to a little child than to dramatize the beautiful story. This, too, is something
in which children can take part. The Christmas season can be ushered in by setting up
the manger scene where it can be seen and handled everyday. It's such a good chance
to tell the story over and over so that the legends of Santa Claus are not confused in
the mind of a child with the religious observance of Jesus' birthday.
If the family is interested in owning and collecting some of the beautifully carved pieces or figurines which belong to the manger scene, begin your collection with the Christ Child since it is His birthday we celebrate. Year by year add a piece. The pleasure of selection and adding a piece year by year may mean more to the family than buying it all at once.

Some families try their hand at a soap carving for the figures in the manger scene. These figures may seem crude to anyone else but are rich in meaning in that family.

Some families are interested in outside Christmas scenes. Here the nativity scene with proper lighting, is something the family may share with the community. Near life size figures can be cut out of plywood and painted. In this project also, start with the central figure of the Christ Child and add to it year by year. After a time, you will find that your neighbors are looking forward to the additions. This, too, becomes a family project in planning, cutting out, painting and lighting.

There are many other ways that families secure the pieces to their creche. However they are chosen, they are dearly loved by adults and children alike because of their association with the true meaning of Christmas. Little children love to sing "Away in a Manger" and "Silent Night" as they stand before the nativity scene their hands have built.

**Exchange Your Christmas**

If you have pen pals in other countries, why not ask them how they celebrate Christmas. Ask them for details of religious observance, food customs, and gift exchange. After you get this information from them, try out these customs with your family. To be sure, they will have an American flavor, but it ought to be fun. An account of what you did should make an amusing letter for your pen pal.

If this is to be an exchange, write out in detail for them what you do and why. Send them your recipes for favorite Christmas foods. Tell them how you trim your Christmas tree and whether or not you hang up stockings. Tell them the nice things your church does for the Christmas season. Above all, try to avoid giving the impression of the pessimism and weariness which sometimes comes from trying to do too much in too short a time and which we refer to as "the Christmas rush."
The Bird's Christmas Tree

From Norway comes a custom of a Christmas feast for animals and birds, since they alone were present at the birth of Jesus. This must be planned far ahead of Christmas.

At harvest time make a special sheaf of wheat which has been carefully selected and tied in a bundle. Other grains can also be saved at harvest. At Christmas time place this sheaf on top of a tall pole in the yard, on the barn door or on the gate so that birds may feed from it.

On the day before Christmas have the children tie bits of suet or pieces of apple on the trees and bushes near the house. Bird feeders may be placed near and feed placed in them. The birds will have a fine Christmas dinner indeed and will get the habit of coming close to the house to feed. This will be fun to watch for the rest of the winter.

True Christmas

True Christmas is not chiming bells,  
However sweet their sound,  
Nor even joyous carols, sung  
By choirs the earth around.
It's not the fragrant evergreen,  
Nor candle's wavering gleam,  
Nor yet the wealth of Christmas gifts  
Of which the children dream.

We love the carols and the bells,  
We love a Christmas tree,  
And greetings from the distant friends  
We long so much to see.
But all these joys too quickly pass,  
And memories grow dim.
True Christmas is to find the Child,  
And give ourselves to Him.

Mary H. Beam