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EC58-510 Christmas Traditions we Cherish in Nebraska

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Christmas Traditions

**we
cherish
in**

NEBRASKA

EXTENSION SERVICE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE
AND U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
COOPERATING
W. V. LAMBERT, DIRECTOR

Fathers say to sons and daughters - "When I was a boy we did ____." Mothers say, "I remember so well the time we ____." So do the parents of the world fondly recall the magic moments of their happiest days of childhood.

What is there about these events that give them choice spots in our memory, that make us want to re-live in "telling"?

What is there about the events of Christmas that make us want to repeat them year after year until they become a part of our family life?

As you enjoy this collection of Christmas traditions dear to the hearts of Nebraskans try to discover for yourself the special qualities that build happy memories.

"Happy memories help to make generous and outgoing personalities, and the adult without them is suspended in a stratosphere of loneliness outside the warm circle of love and security" E. Ardis Whitman, in Better Homes and Gardens, Dec. 1950.

gathering of Greens



About the first enjoyment of the Christmas season comes with the selection of a Christmas tree or, as some say, the "gathering of the greens." Here are ways in which some families begin the Christmas season.

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The first Saturday of December the family picks out a tree - celebrates by eating out, then everybody helps trim the tree.

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This conversation was overheard at the market: "Let's get a big tree Mommy." "But sister, we have only a small table to hold it, why do you want so big a tree?" "Because we're all so happy - and a little tree can't hold it all."

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"The last item to go on the tree is always a big solid silver finished ball of Grandfather's--it'll be 90 years old this year and it's hung near the top of the main branch for safety.

"Oh yes, we make huge gingerbread men and each child decorates his own. We bake them with the hanging-cord in them. Each is hung on the tree. The night the tree is taken down the gingerbread men are eaten."

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"At our house the tree can't go up until the week before Christmas."

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"We make a door swag of holly and evergreen to welcome people."

"We trim separate tiny trees (usually a branch in a holder) for various rooms of the house. The decoration depends upon whose room the tree is in or who trims the tree. One year the blue room had only blue trims on its tree, the gold room only metallic trims, etc. This assures us a tree to enjoy, no matter where we are in the house."

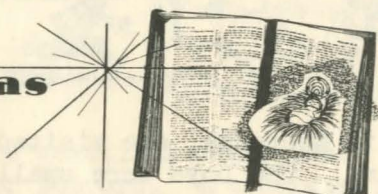
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"Our village scene and creche is usually beneath the Christmas tree, which is of moderate size and placed upon a low table. Children of the neighborhood are invited in to see the miniature figures. They delight in changing them, so that everyone goes toward the church on Sunday morning and from the church after Sunday service."

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Relatives of one family live in the Northwestern states. Each year the Nebraskans look forward to the big package of fresh-cut greenery from Oregon and Washington. They give sprigs to their close friends and decorate their own home, enjoying the close-to-kin feeling that comes with the holly and evergreen.

the Christmas Story



Christmastime is a holy season. At least once a year commercialism is pushed aside for a brief time, and in many homes the birth of Christ is emphasized.

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"Our manger scene is placed on a small table under the tree."

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"We use the Advent calendar. In the manger scene Mary and Joseph are placed at one end, shepherds and wise men at the other. Each day of the month a different family member moves shepherds and wisemen one step nearer to Baby Jesus. They arrive on Christmas Eve."

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"Origin of Advent rites is obscure. This one is probably based on a custom started centuries ago in the Thuringian forests of Europe.

"On the first Sunday in Advent, which according to the church calendar follows on the Sunday nearest November 30, be it before or after that date, fir and spruce boughs are gathered and arranged in a heavy jar containing water. (If they are laid in water and thoroughly saturated they retain their freshness longer.) Then one tall white candle and four gaily colored smaller candles are placed on the table, well in front of the jar of greens. At dusk the Gospel candle (white one) is lighted by the parent. Then the first small candle is lighted by the youngest child present. Then the story of the first Christmas as told in one of the Gospels, is read, followed by poems, stories, carols and hymns, each person selecting a favorite in turn.

"This simple ceremony is repeated each Sunday evening, one more candle being lighted each week, until on the last and fourth Sunday all the candles are burning at once. Christmas Day this centerpiece of boughs, enlivened with flowers and lighted candles, is used on the table during the family dinner.

"The family decides what to do following lighting of candles but we read the Christmas stories from each of the four chapters in the Bible; one each Sunday; plus whatever else we want."

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"Just before bed time we all gather at the tree--Father reads the Christmas story from Matthew. Then the mood changes--he reads the Night Before Christmas--everyone hangs his own stocking and off to bed."

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"The Light of the World" pageant at Minden, Nebraska, has become a beloved tradition of the people in the community. This beautiful production is staged at 7:00 on the second and third Sunday evenings of each December."

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"Our family listens to the Christmas story on record, with music - and the family sings with the record."

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"When my Aunt lived in Nebraska, she visited us at Christmas time during her vacation from school teaching. The boys were small, and she let them take turns choosing Christmas stories for bedtimes. The stories taught them a lot about the world, for they included tales of Christmas in other lands and in other nations as well as the Bible stories. The special books containing those stories are carefully cared for, awaiting the time my grandbabies are old enough to enjoy them."

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The Christmas Carol by Dickens is read on Christmas Eve in one family. Then the gospel story of the birth of Christ is read on Christmas Day.

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"Lights in the window" all night Christmas Eve, was a special way our family showed our appreciation for the light Christ brought into the world."



Music is an important part of Christmas. The holy Christmas music is in itself a ministry. Carols arouse in us a feeling of unity and belonging that cannot be equaled.

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At five o'clock in the morning one church group of young people go caroling, then have breakfast at the church.

Carols and the Bible story on Christmas Eve are enjoyed by another family.

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A mother reports that carols for the aged and infirm, and for children's hospitals, is a regular part of their church activities at Christmastime.

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"Christmas programs at church and school are as definite a part of our lives as the seasons of the year. All the family are interested either by actual participation in the programs or by being spectators. We feel that local talent may not be as good as that on T.V. productions, but it is more heart warming, sincere, and appreciated."

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"We learn the words and tune to a different hymn each Christmastime."

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"We entertain foreign students in our home every Christmas season. Since many of them have a different way of celebrating during their holy seasons, we enjoy exchanging explanations of our various customs."

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Decorations for Christmas



Christmas decorations become more beautiful every year, but nothing can be prettier to many of us than the strings of popcorn, cranberries, and looped paper of our childhood.

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"We try to follow a theme in decorating our home each year. Sometimes it's gay, sometimes dignified, but it must contain something of the real Christmas spirit and not be an entirely Santa Claus affair."

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"Our big window becomes a 'stained glass' Bible scene each Christmas. Our whole family helps plan and paint."

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Simple decorations of original, hand-made nature are enjoyed much more than extravagant purchased ones, and one family does theirs separately and surprises the rest of the family at tree trimming time.

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"You know how impatient youngsters are before Christmas and how many times they say 'How Many Days Until Christmas?' About six weeks before Christmas my wife had our little girl make a paper chain, with alternate links from green and red construction paper. The chain was attached to a Christmas Card of a train loaded with gifts (the card could be a Santa Claus, Christmas Tree, etc.). The chain had the exact number of links as the number of days to Christmas, and was hung on the wall. Each evening our daughter cut one link from the chain, the last link to be cut off on Christmas Eve."

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"Every year a new miniature is purchased by the family for our village scene. Sometimes we find a 'just right' figure during our summer trip, and if so, we keep it carefully until Christmas time when it is brought out and added to the collection."

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"Making tree trims - everybody helps. No trims purchased, all original."

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Gathering pine cones and treating them chemically to produce a multicolored glow in the fireplace is a yearly activity for one group.

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Foods for Christmas



Christmas without food? ---- Unthinkable! However, many people feel that early church service and Christmas fast is more meaningful than a Christmas feast. These feelings have traditional beginnings. It's fun to see in these quotations how food is a part of many family celebrations.

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"Coffee, sugar cookies and fruit cake are always served at our house on Christmas Eve."

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"Breakfast table set night before - Santa's gifts left by plate."

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"Christmas Eve supper included Lutefisk, Fruit Soup, Swedish rye bread, Swedish rice pudding. Lunch is beverage and Swedish rusk."

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"We decorate cookies as a family."

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"Apple cookies and coffee for relatives at open house."

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"Cookies, cookies, cookies - Made for weeks ahead. Used for snacks and as dessert after oyster stew on Christmas Eve."

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"Entertain friends and families at an open house, with special attention to the children."

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"Christmas Eve supper is a soup, so we'll be real hungry for Christmas dinner."

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"We always make Christmas taffy to eat during our family gift exchange."

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"On Christmas Eve we eat as close to the lighted tree as possible. In fact, the baby would like to touch it. We use an heirloom chaffing dish, and have Welsh rabbit on toast, fruit salad and Christmas cookies for this supper."

"Christmas morning there is breakfast with Jule Kaka (Christmas cake) before anyone peeks to see what Santa left. Family gifts are opened last."

"For dinner 'spoon bread' made by my Grandmother's recipe is served. Dessert is cranberry pudding with a burning candle in the center of each individual serving as it is taken to the table."

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"Boxes and boxes of cookies were sent overseas during wartime. By popular demand, the same gift is prepared for the boys and their families, now living in the neighborhood. Each boxful is topped with a decorated Santa, tree, star, and reindeer."

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"Open house for teachers used to be a speciality before vacation time at Christmas. It was usually an afternoon sandwich, cookie and tea affair, and helped Mom and Dad meet the teachers outside of P.T.A."

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"Oyster stew and raisin bread are 'musts' at our house Christmas Eve."

and now the GIFTS



Gifts at Christmastime! So did the wise men bring gifts to the cradle of Jesus. And from that fact has grown the traditional gift exchange so familiar to us. Many of us have found ways of preserving the true spirit of Christmas in our gift-giving during this blessed season.

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"We draw names in our immediate family."

"Besides other gifts, each of us expects a blown glass bubble with a 'special' gift from the person who drew his name. These are 'love gifts' and may be folding money to buy a longed-for item, or a gift of service, such as 'I give you, lovingly, a month of bed-making' or 'Here are 5 baby-sittings, with love.' Each one tries to get the note or money without breaking the ball, which is then hung on the tree."

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Socks of red velvet or felt with owner's name, hold gifts at the family gathering.

Gifts are unwrapped in individual homes, before family gathering. "Thank you" is said at family dinner next day.

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Gifts are opened on Christmas Eve - followed by singing of carols.

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"At our house gifts are made for each other. No purchase is allowed except for raw materials, such as yarns, paints, lumber. Believe me there are lots of secretive bangs, clicks, and paint daubs come Christmastime."

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"Our family writes a group letter to each service man we know, who isn't getting home for Christmas."

And Santa is a part of Christmas too. He's a hard guy to explain to people of other lands, for generosity and gift-giving to one another do not seem to them to signify real love of the Holy One. A great sacrifice of service, or gift to the Church or to the Glory of God would seem to them more fitting!

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"Kriss Kringle appears daily, leaving an apple or needed article if the child has been good, a suggestion for improvement if he hasn't. Gifts left in shoes placed in window. (German custom)."

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Some of the menfolks dress up in a rented Santa suit and distribute the children's toys on Christmas Eve.

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"We always take the children downtown to see Santa. Now its getting confusing and we may stop it--too many Santas!"

Now that you've enjoyed these interesting ideas for sharing Christmas joy, perhaps you are reminded or others you sould like to share with your friends.

It is hoped that some of the suggestions will appeal to you so that you may adapt, adopt, or invent similar activities for your family. By sharing experiences year by year, you will be building a pattern of traditions meaningful and blessed. Such memories will weld the members of your family together as nothing else can do, and give them, later, a chance to say - - "I remember at Christmas time _____."
