

The Christmas Tree

by
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This year over 33 million American families will celebrate Christmas by erecting a tree in their house! Sounds pretty silly on the surface of it, but Man's reverence for the tree goes back at least 4,000 years—and probably long before that.

Long before there was a Christmas, trees already played a significant part in a number of religious myths and ceremonies. Ancient Egyptians brought green palm branches into their homes on the shortest day of the year in December as a symbol of life's triumph over death. Romans adorned their homes with evergreens during Saturnalia, a winter festival in honor of Saturnus, their god of agriculture. Druid priests decorated oak trees with golden apples for their winter solstice festivities.

In the Middle Ages, Charlemagne, intent on converting the Saxons to Christianity, had their sacred ash tree cut down. In Norse mythology, the universe was supported by the great ash tree, Yggdrasill, whose roots and branches extended into the heavens, underworld, and earth. The first man and woman were created from two trees. For Medieval Christians, the Paradise tree, an evergreen hung with red apples, was the symbol of the feast of Adam and Eve held on December 24th..

The first recorded reference to the Christmas tree dates back to the 16th century. In Strasbourg, Germany (now part of France), families both rich and poor decorated fir trees with colored paper, fruits, and sweets. Today's retail Christmas tree lot also dates back that far—in those times, older women would sell trees harvested from nearby forests.

The Christmas tree tradition spread from Germany to the rest of Europe. In England, Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband, is normally credited with being the first to bring in a Christmas tree and thereby begin the custom in Great Britain. And, from Europe, the custom immigrated to the United States via Germany settlers and Hessian mercenaries fighting in the American Revolution. In 1804, U.S. soldiers stationed at Fort Dearborn (now Chicago) hauled trees from surrounding woods to their barracks at Christmas.

The popularity of the Christmas tree spread rapidly. Charles Minnegrode introduced the custom of decorating trees in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1842. In 1851, Mark Carr hauled two ox sleds loaded with trees from the Catskills to the streets of New York and opened the first retail lot in the US.

President Pierce brought the tradition to the White House in 1923, and two years later President Coolidge started the National Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony now held every year on the White House lawn.

Surprisingly, though, if you look through your Christmas collection of covers, you'll actually notice a dearth of Christmas trees! — candles, sleighs, Santa Claus, etc., but not many Christmas trees at all.

Also, I couldn't find any current Christmas tree statistics, but it would be interesting to see if the actual use of Christmas trees is declining in light of artificial trees, the whole green movement, and so on. I'd hate to see the custom disappear, but in today's society, you never know.

