The History of Christmas Trees

The custom of Christmas trees as they are known today can be traced backed to Germany hundreds of years ago. One legend credits Saint Boniface, an English missionary, with the creation of Christmas trees while spreading Christianity in Germany.

Surviving texts recount the story of St. Boniface felling a mighty oak dedicated to the pagan god Thor while in the village of Geismar, part of present-day Fritzlar, in 723 AD. Legend holds that St. Boniface felled the oak to prove the supremacy of the Christian God over Thor and local religion. In some tellings of Thor's Oak, the tree was brought down by St. Boniface's axe, and in others a strong gust of wind blows the enormous oak over. Regardless, when the tree lay on the ground and St. Boniface was not struck by Thor's lightning, those assembled who had witnessed the event agreed to be baptized. By some later accounts, a fir tree grew in the roots of the fallen oak and St. Boniface instructed those in attendance to use the humble fir as the symbol of their new-found Christianity.

A popular play in Medieval Germany, re-enacted the story of Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden. A fir tree hung with apples was used to symbolize the Garden of Eden and was known as the Paradise Tree. The play ended with the prophecy of a saviour coming, and was often performed during the Advent season. This too cemented the German custom of decorating trees during Christmas time. By the 1500's, Germans were decorating their fir trees both inside and out. Ornaments included apples, roses, gilded candies, and colored paper.

It was Protestant reformer Martin Luther who purportedly first adorned the trees with light sometime during the 16th century. While coming home one December evening, Luther was struck by the beauty of the stars shining through the branches of a fir. This inspired him to recreate the effect by placing candles on the branches of a small fir tree inside his home to share with his wife and children.

The Christmas Tree was brought to England by Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert from his native Germany. The famous *Illustrated News* etching in 1848, featuring the Royal Family of Victoria, Albert and their children gathered around a Christmas tree in Windsor Castle, popularized the tree throughout Victorian England.

The Christmas tree made its way to America thanks to the Pennsylvania Germans, where it was seen as an unusual tradition and was not fully embraced at first. Well into the first half of the 19th century, the Christmas tree was seen as a pagan symbol by many. But after the

publication of the *Illustrated News* woodcut of England's royal family around the tree, and with the arrival or more and more immigrants from Germany, the tradition of Christmas trees gained footing and grew in popularity. By the early 20th century, the Christmas tree had caught on and was well on its way to becoming the well-recognized symbol of the Christmas holidays that it is today.

© Deborah Whipp