

Christmas Expressions

By Trail End State Historic Site Curator Nancy McClure; from *Trail End Notes*, November 2000

On December 24, 1927, Rosa-Maye Kendrick wrote to her family from her home in London, England, where her husband, Army Major Hubert Reilly Harmon, was stationed at the American Embassy. Although it was her first Christmas Eve away from home, the traditions of the season eased Rosa-Maye's homesickness for her family. She wrote to her parents,

By going through the ancient ritual of wrapping gifts, decking our little tree, and by gathering about it our cousins [and a few close friends] ... we have brought you all quite close; all such simple expressions of the wonderful bonds of love!

Over seventy years after Rosa-Maye wrote that letter, the traditions of getting together with family members, decorating an "evergreen" tree (whether real or artificial), and exchanging gifts with those we love are still the hallmarks of the holiday season.



Trail End Christmas Decorations, 2009 (TESHS Collection)

While we often think of Christmas as an increasingly secular and commercialized celebration of a Christian holiday, some of the familiar components that make up our yuletide festivities actually predate Christianity, having evolved and blended with more recent developments to form our current customs.

Take the Christmas tree for example. In its now-popular form, the decorated pine tree we recognize today dates back just over one hundred years, yet its origins can be traced back to much earlier civilizations. According to George Johnson's *Christmas Ornaments, Lights and Decorations: A Collector's Identification & Value Guide*, the symbolic use of greenery dates back to the ancient Egyptians, who used evergreens as symbols of everlasting life. In pre-Christian times, evergreens and other winter trees reminded people of the promise of the coming spring.

Many ancient religions picked up the symbolism and incorporated trees into their traditions, associating the evergreen with immortality.

When Christian leaders officially assigned Christmas the date of December 25th to make it coincide with Pagan celebrations, a blending of the traditions reinforced the use of evergreens during the winter holiday season. By the Middle Ages, the use of trees in religious celebrations had expanded outside church doors, and community trees became popular.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, decorated trees in individual homes became increasingly common, and by the late nineteenth century both Europeans and Americans had thoroughly embraced the custom. At Trail End, our staff and volunteers from the Trail End Guilds decorate several trees throughout the house in celebration of the holiday season. In keeping with the period of interpretation for the Kendrick family's former home, the Christmas finery reflects the style of the early Twentieth Century. Our hope is that the Rosa-Maye who wrote with love about her first Christmas away from home would recognize the abundant yet "simple expressions" of Christmas tradition in the trees, greenery and decorations we use today.



© 2020 – Trail End Guilds, Inc. & Trail End State Historic Site

All Rights Reserved

For more information, visit www.trailend.org