

Off the Beaten Path: Legends of Yule Make Holiday Unique

-Guy Priel

Every year as Christmas draws close, people begin looking at their family traditions and decide what to follow and what to change to suit their own family needs. I have always looked at traditions around me and those of places where I live or have lived to see what is different or unique. Many are new ones created by families, while others are carried down through the generations. It is these traditions which make Christmas special for everyone.

Pauline Phillips, better known to the world as advice columnist Abigail Van Buren, or simply, Dear Abby, said once that the first Christmas of a marriage is usually the most difficult, as husband and wife try to bring their familiar traditions to the holiday season to make it feel more like Christmas for both of them.

I have lived in many places throughout the country and have enjoyed sleigh rides through covered bridges in New England, caroling in the snow, drinking wassail and other unique traditions.

When I lived in New Mexico, luminaries were common. People would place candles in paper bags, fill the bottom with sand to keep the wind from blowing them away and light them around their homes and along their sidewalks. I tried to carry that custom with me when I moved to Minnesota, which did not seem to go over as well. There, the tradition was followed of placing an ornament in the shape of a pickle on the tree last. Whoever found the pickle hidden in the branches of the tree would have good luck in the coming year and a special present. It is a tradition started in Germany and brought to the Midwest by immigrants.

Holly, ivy and mistletoe have their origins in ancient Celtic celebrations of the Winter Solstice and were thought to ward off evil spirits. Wreaths have their origins in ancient Rome, also during the Winter Solstice festival known as Saturnalia.

In England, there is the tradition of gathering for a Christmas tea with desserts, biscuits and tea. In Scandinavia, the Yule log is brought into the house and placed on the hearth to burn throughout the night. Originally a Nordic tradition, Yule is the name of the old Winter Solstice celebrations in Scandinavia and northern Europe. The Yule log was an entire tree carefully chosen and brought to the house with great ceremony.

I recently heard that tinsel is an Eastern European tradition, mostly prevalent in the Ukraine. A poor but hardworking widow once lived in a small hut with her children. One summer day, a pine cone fell on the earthen floor of the hut and took root. The widow's children cared for the tree, excited at the prospect of having a Christmas tree by winter. The tree grew, but when Christmas Eve arrived, they could not afford to decorate it. The children sadly went to bed and fell asleep. Early the next morning, they woke up and saw the tree covered with cobwebs. When they opened the windows, the first rays of sunlight touched the webs and turned them into gold and silver. To this day, a Christmas spider can be found on many European Christmas trees.

But, very few of us understand where these traditions originated or why so many are still common today. The answer to the second one is simple actually, as people have handed them down through the generations. The answer to the first one is a little more complicated.

The Christmas tree itself has its origins in the 16th century in Germany, when devout Christians brought decorated trees into their homes. It is a widely-held belief that Martin Luther, the 16th century Protestant reformer, first added lighted candles to a tree after seeing the moon shining behind a tree and gained inspiration.

In America, Santa Claus is the legendary bringer of gifts. Given a description by Clement Clarke Moore in his now legendary *A Visit From Saint Nicholas*, or better known as *The Night Before Christmas*. For those preferring a religious aspect, Nicholas is substituted for Santa Claus.

Nicholas was a fourth century bishop in Asia Minor. An immensely wealthy churchman, he was often credited with helping those in need at Christmas time--always in secret, however. One day he was caught with a sack of toys on his back and his secret became known.

The custom of hanging stockings by the fireplace can also be traced to Nicholas. According to legend, he knew an old nobleman who was very poor, but did not want anyone to know it. Wishing to give him money, Nicholas crept to the window of the house and saw the man sleeping by the fire. The bishop climbed to the roof and dropped his gift down the chimney. The man's daughter had hung stockings by the fire to dry and the money fell into one of them instead of at the man's feet, as Nicholas intended.

After the Protestant reformation in the 16th century, Kris Kringle might have gotten his name from the German "Christkindlein," or little Christ child, who comes during the night with his angels and decorates the tree with presents before going to the next house. This custom still survives in parts of Germany, Austria, Central Europe and Central and South America.

In Spain, the child Jesus - el nino Jesus - brings the gifts on Christmas Eve. A manger is set up under the tree and in the morning, the manger contains the holy child (a doll) surrounded by gifts. This custom survives in many parts of South America and the American Southwest.

As interesting as these customs are, it is sometimes best to stick with familiar customs you have grown up with, so it will always feel like Christmas to you.