

Christmas Customs Of The 1860's

By John Wedeward

Christmas was the most popular holiday in the United States by 1860. Fortunately for those of us who enjoy the many traditions one associates with a modern Christmas, like feasting, decorating the house, church services, exchanging presents, many of them were established by the Civil War.

Among the established customs of a Civil War Christmas was the decorating of the house. Live greenery was the basic decorative device for a house. Drawings from *Harper's Magazine* show greenery, not only in the parlor, but in the dining and bedrooms also. This greenery of holly, mistletoe, and magnolia, specifically, was arranged in a variety of ways. Bunches of it were hung from ceilings or chandeliers, or placed in vases on mantles. Branches were laid across the top or completely around mirrors, paintings, and wooden drapery cornices. Garlands of greenery draped swag style graced mantles. Wreaths were hung from windows and mantles, but not apparently from doors. In addition to this general decorating with various kinds of greens, a bunch of mistletoe was hung from a prominent spot. Mistletoe enjoyed popularity for its romantic opportunity. Young men could steal a kiss from a young lady by catching her underneath the leaves and waxen berries.

Civil War folk also enjoyed the delights of a decorated Christmas tree, though this tradition was not as old or as established as some others, such as feasting and hanging the stocking for Santa Claus. The first recorded Christmas tree in America was set up in Pennsylvania in 1819. References to Christmas trees remain rare until the 1850's. It is possible that their mention and illustration in such magazines as *Godey's* and *Peterson's* may have helped spread the custom in the 1850's. Trees were erected and decorated on Christmas Eve, as children were taught that St. Nicholas brought the tree as well as the presents. The tree was also taken down on a definite date. It was removed on the Twelfth Night.

Up until 1860, all the trees pictured or recorded were table trees, set up on the parlor centre table. In 1860, *Godey's* in, "The Christmas Tree," described the first floor to the ceiling tree. "The square of green baize being tacked down, a large stone jar was placed in the middle of it, and in this the tree stood nobly erect... It was a large evergreen, reaching almost to the ceiling."

As tree stands were not invented until 1867, trees had to be either nailed to a wooden homemade stand or placed in clay pots filled with sand. The pot was then disguised. The *Godey's* tree just mentioned was placed in, "a large stone jar... damp sand was put

around the stem... A flounce of green chintz round the jar concealed its stoney ugliness, and over the top, round the tree, was a soft cushion of moss."

The tree, once erected, was covered by a variety of hand-made ornaments. (Some manufactured German glass, wax and tin ornaments had reached America by the 1860's brought by German immigrants, imported for commercial sale.) Some decorations had religious overtones, while others were strictly secular. Among the decorations mentioned are: "fruit richer than the golden apples of Hesperides," on a tree in Philadelphia in 1825. A Boston tree of 1832 had a few more items. "The cook had broken eggs carefully in the middle for some weeks past, and these cups were gilded and coloured very prettily. We were all engaged in sticking on the last of seven dozen tapers, and in filling the gilded egg-cups and gay paper cornicopae with comfits, lozenges, barley sugar."

A sassafras Christmas tree in Illinois (1833) had, "candles, apples, sweets, ribbons, bright paper, hazelnuts... hickory nuts and polished red haws..." on its limbs. The Reverend Christopher Minnegerode's tree, the first in Virginia in 1834, had candles, red and yellow paper balls, popcorn strings, gilded nuts and a gilded star as decorations. The tree in *Godey's* story of 1860 was festooned with, "strings of bright red holly berries, tiny tapers,...

small bouquets of paper flowers, strings of beads, tiny flags of gay ribbons, stars and shields of gilt paper lace bags filled with coloured candies, (and) knots of bright ribbons."

Candy was not the only edible on a Civil War era tree. Cookies; sugar, gingerbread, springerle and matzebaum graced branches as well as raisins, nuts, slices of dried apples, oranges, and doughnuts. The cookies were either cut into shapes, including soldiers and flags, or designs were pressed into the dough, including dogs, roosters and horses. Housewives also made ornaments that were to be saved and reused from year to year. In these ornaments, corn meal, flour and glue took the place of flour and sugar. These pretties were painted with vegetable dyes after baking. Dough was also formed into shaped objects like baskets. All of these tempting edibles were supposed to remain on the tree until it was taken down. The children were then allowed to eat the sweets while the tree was being dismantled.

Lighting was generally by candles, wired carefully onto the tree. The first commercial candleholder was not patented until 1867. Other types of lights were also available. Oil lights were used occasionally. Oil lights were used to decorate the Christmas tree Jenny Lind was given in Charleston in 1850. The inexpensive version of this light was half of a nut shell, filled with oil and a wick.



"Merry Christmas," From *Illustrated London News*, 1865