

Homestead Notes

Cloister decorations depict older holiday traditions

By Sally Bair
Farm Feature Writer

The traditions of Christmas, passed on from generation to generation, are what makes each family's Christmas very special and different from every other family.

While customs vary from family to family, in southeastern Pennsylvania many traditions are German in origin because of the predominant German influence in this area.

Ephrata Cloisters was the scene this Christmas season of candlelight tours organized by the Cloister chapter of the Pennsylvania Federation of Junior Historians. The Junior Historians are sponsored by the Cloister Associates which worked closely with them in researching and carrying out the traditions of bygone Christmases.

John L. Kraft, curator of the Ephrata Cloister, explained that the Cloister community did not celebrate Christmas during the mid-18th century when it flourished. The celebration itself was considered a transference of heathen ideas, and so, while they recognized the birth of Christ, there was no celebration of the event.

The Junior Historians noted that religious sects such as Episcopalians, Moravians Lutherans and other "Gay Dutch" did believe in celebrating Christmas, but Mennonites, Quakers and Presbyterians didn't celebrate.

Kraft said, however, that the Cloister buildings are used today to serve as a background for community Christmas celebrations, and therefore the buildings are decorated very simply in what would have been considered appropriate to that period.

Mrs. Shirley Bischoff, advisor to the Junior Historians, explained that the young people decided to do the tours to interpret Christmas customs in the German tradition and show how some of our present customs were derived.

Tour participants were welcomed to the Cloister buildings by the glow of tiny electric candles in each of the small windows in every building in the complex. The guide explained that the reason for the tradition of the lighted candle in windows was to welcome and light the way for the Christ Child.

The Moravian star which hangs in front of the gift shop was a big attraction. The secret of making these many pointed stars was passed down from mother to daughter in Moravian families.

In the householder's cabin a simple German family Christmas was depicted. On the hearth in front of the fireplace a cradle was placed to represent the nativity scene. The first nativity scene is said to have been prepared by St. Francis of Assisi who set out a live creche in the year 1223. It was very simple but the people and animals were real. A cradle was always used because a mother rocking the cradle indicated love between mother and son, Mrs. Bischoff explained.

Also in the hearth was a basket of rye straw. The straw was to be given to the donkey ridden by the Christ Child and the Christ Child, the giver of gifts, would fill the basket with candies.

There was also a simple tree, decorated with straw figures, candies, gilded walnuts, pine cones, candy canes, molded cookies, paper stars and scratched eggs.

Germany was the home of the Christmas tree, according to the guide, and the idea of a tree originated with Martin Luther. Before 1600 the trees were ringed with candles or a pyramid of candles was placed beside the tree.

The guide explained that the first decorations were

probably oranges and apples, which gave way to our brightly colored balls. And sacramental wafers were once used which then evolved into our molded cookies of today.

The print shop was in operation, with a Christmas greeting from 1796 being printed. The greeting was in both English and German and was printed on the third press to be used in the Cloister, having been installed in 1804.

The Saal kitchen featured pomander balls hung on the fireplace and a tree with tiny lights hanging full of the simple folded paper stars. An interesting table decoration of that time and in the "Williamsburg" tradition was an "apple pyramid." Three cabbage heads formed the base. They were stacked and held together with a knife. Then apples were attached to wooden stakes and stuck into the cabbages to form a pyramid effect. Greens were added to complete the decoration.

In the refectory, a special treat awaited tour goers. Moravian sugar cookies were served with hot chocolate and coffee, and the table decoration was a "light stock," which was a forerunner of the green Christmas tree. It was a post into which arms had been set, and on the arms were placed lighted candles.

In the Saal itself, an Advent wreath had been placed. It was made of greens and four natural colored candles. A single candle was also a tradition of the church, representing the star of Bethlehem.

There was also a special "Krippen," or "Putz" from which came our manger scene as we know it today. Figures were carved by the fathers and sons in a family and dressed by the mothers and daughters. These figures became cherished possessions.

The guide explained that this nativity scene was placed under a tree, and gradually evolved into barnyard scenes, ice skating scenes with mirrors for ponds and today we find train yards and other scenery at the base of the tree as part of the decorations.

But how did Santa Claus become such a big part of our celebration? That too evolved through some customs of the church. In Germany there is a figure known as Belsnickle or Knecht Ruprecht who represented the devil. He dressed in black with a blackened face and on December 6, Saint Nicholas chained Belsnickle and took him as his servant as he made the rounds of homes. Saint Nicholas was the messenger for the Christkind and candy and cookies were given to the good children while Belsnickle carried switches for those who may have strayed during the year.

It was a special surprise to be greeted by Saint Nicholas, the Christkind and Belsnickle as the tour was completed. The Christkind very generously distributed goodies to all, but Belsnickle did not seem to have much cause for giving out sticks.

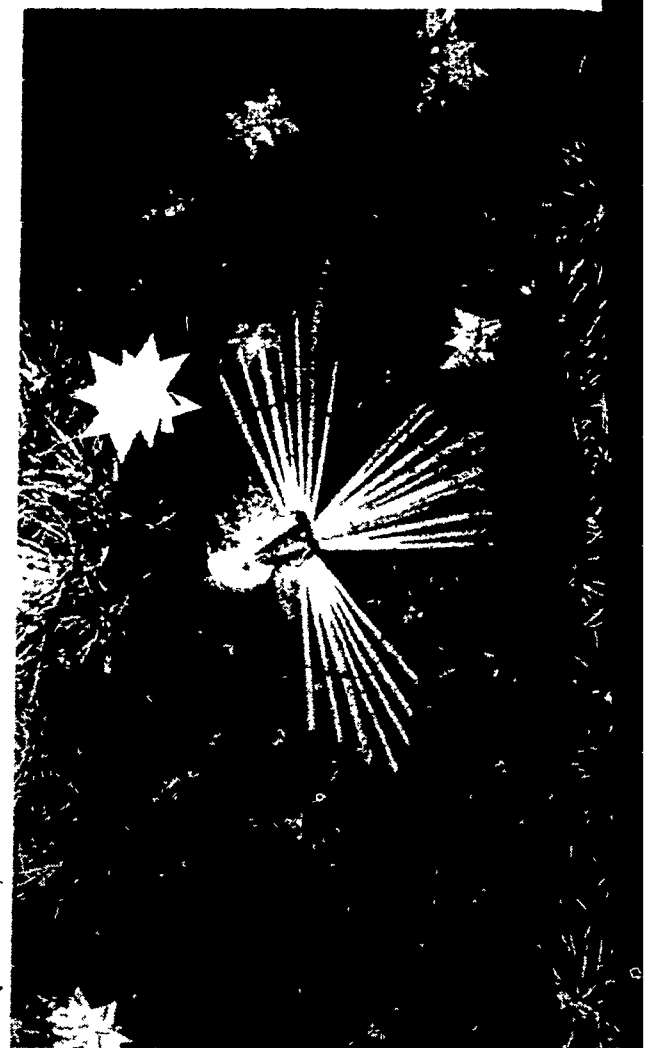
The Junior Historians used many sources as they researched old customs and unearthed interesting tidbits about Christmases of the past. A Lancaster newspaper account of 1808 talked about a "second Christmas" which was celebrated the day after Christmas in much the same way as Christmas day, but the observance was not a religious one.

Another account told about a menu to turkey, gravy, potato filling, bread and apple butter.

Think about the customs which your family has just observed. Perhaps some of yours have been explained and become more meaningful to you because of their roots in the celebrations of another century.



A real surprise was the arrival of Saint Nicholas, the Christkind and Belsnickle. The Christkind distributed candies, and Belsnickle found no one who deserved his switches.



Straw birds adorned many of the trees at the Ephrata Cloisters.

Country Corner

A Christmas dream comes true

By MELISSA PIPER

It was 11 years ago this holiday that my Christmas dream came true, thanks to my parents and especially my brother, Roland

Ever since I had received my pony, Dusty the previous June, there was nothing I wanted more than a saddle!

Dad had financed Dusty, but there just wasn't enough for a saddle too, so I had spent the summer riding bareback and using borrowed tack, but I was anxious to have my own real equipment

For months, I had been peering into the Sears catalog and leaving it conveniently open on Dad's desk - just so he'd remember. It was even a trial for my brother or parents to take me near the hardware store as I'd usually meander to the tack section and be hard to coax away. Yes, I really wanted a "genuine" saddle!

In fact, I kept telling my father that if I saw a big Sears box under the tree - then my Christmas dream would come true. My mom and dad would always laugh at this comment and nod their heads quietly.

Although I kept hoping, I knew that saddles weren't the cheapest item to come by and when December rolled around, I resigned myself to the fact that if I don't get a saddle for Christmas, it might come a little later next year.

I was up early that Christmas morning and bounded downstairs quickly. My heart must have been near my throat, beating wildly, and I'm sure my body must have been quivering. I ran to the tree and glanced around quickly, but there was no Sears box or any box big enough to hide a saddle and I felt a lump quickly rise in my throat.

My parents and brother filtered down the steps

and were standing quietly in the room. I turned and looked questioningly and my father could contain no smile no longer. He told me to go to the living room and bring in the rest of the gifts. I left quietly, my head hanging down and shuffled to the other room.

The room was dark, but faintly outlined against the black I could see a large box propped up on a chair. I leaped toward the box and reading the label - "Sears" I left out a squeal of delight.

Opening the box in a flurry, I carefully pulled out a hand-tooled brown leather saddle with a red velvet seat. My parents had really had the last laugh on this Christmas gift and it certainly made my Christmas dream come true! But oddly enough the saddle hadn't come from Sears, but had been purchased by my brother in Lancaster County!

HAPPY NEW YEAR