

Yule log, mistletoe and Santa part of Christmas folklore

Daily Collegian Staff Writer

The candles will be lit for Hanukkah, the tree decorated for Christmas and the champagne will flow on New Year's Eve. It's that time of year again — the long awaited winter holiday season.

The Santa Clauses invade every street corner in New York. Perry Como gives his annual television special even before the Thanksgiving leftovers are gone, and Neiman-Marcus tries to persuade its

customers what a practical gift mink golf club covers will make. Despite what many might say is commercialism and media hype, the

winter holiday season is rich with century old traditions. Today, an old-fashioned American holiday still exists in the homes and hearts of many. Christmas, which is celebrated all over

the world in various ways and at different times of December, has become an important American tradition. It is a



tradition that has borrowed from the Romans, Scandinavians, French,

Germans and English. The first American Christmas, in 1620 with the Pilgrims, was actually not a celebration. They chose to work instead, refusing to acknowledge its existence. Many of the Pilgrims believed it was a pagan ritual and no one who observed Dec. 25 was considered a true Christian.

In 1659 in Boston, a fine of five shillings was imposed on anyone guilty of celebrating the holiday or anyone who looked as though they were having a good

time. As the years passed and the colonies became more established, European immigrants came to America with their holiday customs which the Americans eventually accepted and then elaborated upon. Sending Christmas cards, one way to keep up with old friends and family - and

remember the ones you neglected all year - started in England. Young schoolboys away from home would send elaborately decorated holiday notes to their parents to ancient superstitions. The trading of gifts tell about their progress in school in the

hope of receiving gifts. Even though no one is quite sure who sent the first Christmas card in America, the idea of the card became a popular event during the winter holidays in the 1860s and '70s.

Cards would sometimes be considered as gifts since many were handpainted, porcelain or illustrated booklets. By the was in full swing. Today, as mass produced cards fill

mailboxes, the original intention has remained the same — to remember family and friends during the holiday season. Whether they are cut down in the woods, bought at the nursery or made of plastic, Christmas trees have become one of the most important parts of holiday decor.

The first decorating of a Christmas tree in America was said to have taken place during the American revolution. The homesick Hessian soldiers decorated fir trees to remind them of there homeland. Trees, whether they were fir or fruit,

symbolized life and immortality for many Europeans. The decorating of the trees was a symbol of reverence for the tree. The custom of having a Christmas tree. however, did not become popular until many years later. Instead of a tree, the Yule log was often

the center of attention in many American homes. Families went to the woods to find the

biggest log possible, pulling it home by oxen or by rope. The log was lit at one end and was supposed to last until the 12th day of Christmas. The Yule log was a symbol of the light

that came from heaven when Christ was born. Ashes and small pieces of the log were kept for luck and to light the yule log from next year. Mistletoe, that innocent-looking sprig of

leaves which gives bashful admirers the opportunity to kiss the object of their affections, has been around for centuries for different purposes.

But at Christmas time, legend has it that a man may kiss a woman under the mistletoe only if it was cut with a golden knife. The privilege of kissing under the mistletoe only extends to how many berries are on the plant. After each kiss, a berry must be picked off. Legend has it that any woman who passes beneath mistletoe and is not kissed

will not be married that year.

The exchanging of gifts between family and friends has been a strong Christmas tradition that was derived from various was supposed to protect the gift doner and receiver from evil for the coming year. The origins of the most popular gift

bearer in the world are a combination of different European folklore. St. Nicholas, Kris Kringle and Father Christmas are some of the many names we call that jolly white bearded man — Santa Claus.

Different countries explain the origin of 1880s, the business of card manufacturing this mysterious gift giver in various ways. Some say he was a wealthy bishop who enjoyed giving gifts to the poor, but was Please see CHRISTMAS Page 18.

American Christmas:

By JOYCE WASHNIK Daily Collegian Staff Writer

various wavs.

Are you aware of how many different Christmas traditions are celebrated across the world? Consider the following:

• In Sweden, Tomte, the "Good Spirit of the House," is given a dish of food to placate him so that he will keep watch over the family through the year. • In early Spain, the "Urn of Fate" could decide who

would be devoted friends for the coming year. • In pre-Revolutionary Russia, a girl would kick her slipper up over her head, and depending on where it landed, she could tell from which direction her husband

would come. • In Rumania, it was the practice for the housewife to place grain under the mattress, hoping to increase the supply of eggs for the coming year. • In Holland, houses with many children, could expect

a visit from elders dressed in churchly robes as the Bishop St. Nicholas. • In Greece, special loaves of bread are baked for Christmas with silver coins put inside. He who finds the

coin will have good luck through the year. These are just some of the hundreds of thousands of different Christmas traditions and customs that have been practiced through the years — and some are still practiced today. Whether it is called Kerst-Misse, Badnjak, Noel, Il Natale, Weihnachten or El Natal,

Christmas is a holiday celebrated all over the world, in

But what about Christmas in the United States? Our country is a vast melting pot, with many of our Christmas favorites, such as Santa Claus, mistletoe, holly and, of course, the Christmas tree, brought to this land by immigrants.

The idea of Santa Claus, also referred to in other countries as Sankt Nikolaus, Father Christmas, Pere Noel, Kriss Kringle, Krist Kindlein or Sinter Klaas, stems from an early Christian bishop, Saint Nicholas, who lived during the fourth century. He was supposedly a man of unusual generosity who gave presents to the poor, especially to children.

When the Dutch settled "Nieuw Amsterdam" -- now New York — they brought the idea of St. Nicholas with them. However, his image had changed from that of a robed bishop to a chubby tharacter in red breeches. Hence, the figure of our modern Santa Claus.

Another Christmas favorite, holly, was brought to the United States by the English settlers. Many legends are connected with holly. For instance, the Druids believed that holly was sacred due to its eternally green leaves, which proved the sun never completely deserted the earth.

Holly was also believed to ward off witches and protect the occupants of a house from bad weather. And if holly was placed by one's bedpost at night, he would surely have pleasant dreams.



Hanukkah: festival of lights and time of remembrance

By STEVE BENOWITZ **Daily Collegian Staff Writer**

Fighting for freedom in Israel today has the same meaning as the Hanukkah of old. said Rabbi Jeffrey Eisenstat. Eisenstat, director of Hillel Foundation, 224 Locust Lane, said that historically,

Hanukkah celebrates the victory of a small number of Jews over a larger invading Greek army and the rededication of the second Temple in Palestine in 165

re a group of ref called the Maccabees — who claimed they did not want to have the Greek culture, and therefore they fought for the first time inrecorded history for religious freedom," he said. "Judah Maccabee and his followers

were fighting for their way of life. The Greeks would not allow them to study Torah, eat kosher foods or even circumcise their sons — basic philosophies in Judaism," Eisenstat said.

The Greeks, the greatest known power in the world at that time, outnumbered the Maccabees by more than five to one. This situation required different types of strategies that had never been used

"It was the first time that guerrilla warfare was used," he said. After three years of fighting, the Greeks were driven out and the Temple was reclaimed and purified - rededicated. The word Hanukkah means dedication, Eisenstat said.

But Hanukkah has taken on an even greater meaning to Jews, especially since 1948, the year of Israeli independence. "There are growing similarities

between the Israeli army and the Maccabees, the main thing being that they are constantly outnumbered by their Arab enemies," Eisenstat said. "In 1967, when Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia attacked Israel,

Israel became victorious in only six days. And it was at that point that the Israeli army became likened to the Maccabees," he said. "Today in Israel," he said, "we're

fighting for our homeland. Israel is the place where all Jews can go and be free to celebrate their Judaism the way they

Hanukkah is known as the festival of lights, since its most well-known symbol, the Menorah (a nine-branched candelabrum), is often visible from windows each night the holiday is

celebrated. "When the victorious Jews entered the Temple — and this is the legend all the little children are taught — they found a cruse of oil that would light the everlasting light (representative of the everlasting presence of God) for one day, until supplies could arrive. The light lasted for

eight days," Eisenstat said. "The custom is that in honor of the eight days that the light lasted, we light the candles of the Menorah for eight nights. At nightfall we take the shamus, the main candle, and light the candles in succession, an additional one each night," he said. This year Hanukkah lasts from Dec. 20

Another custom observed during Hanukkah is giving presents. "The idea of getting a present developed

from a different idea, called Hanukkah gelt," Eisenstat said. The custom began 2,000 years ago, he said. A child was given a piece of gold or

some metal — to wish that person a prosperous year. The gold coins later were filled with chocolate. "Not until the last 75 years, perhaps

from the influence of the December Christmas shopping season, did kids start to get presents instead of gelt, said.

The Hanukkah celebration at Hillel will consist of a party on Dec. 17 where traditional Hanukkah foods such as potato pancakes and jelly doughnuts will be

served. There will be games and a humorist there. Yachad will join Hillel in sponsoring the activity, he said. He said the Jewish Community Center is

also having a large Hanukkah party on Dec. 20 for their students and townspeople.



Hanukkah has always been a familyoriented holiday, as its many observances

demonstrate. "Hanukkah means sharing with my family," said Rebecca L. Glass, a 7thsemester religion and Hebrew student at Temple University in Philadelphia.

"We light the candles of the Menorah together every night, and usually we all get together with the extended family for the celebration," she said. "And of course, it includes giving gifts," she said.

"It's kind of sad not being with your family," Cindi Kleeman (11th-accounting) said. "But last year many of the girls on my floor were Jewish, so each night we celebrated — we lit the candles in a different room.

The celebration in Israel differs in some ways.

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A melting pot of many customs

Mistletoe, another Christmas tradition, is also known as "the kissing plant." For instance, in Greek mythology, mistletoe was thought to be a charm against evil. The Norse believed this plant possessed healing powers.

Among the Romans, mistletoe was considered a symbol of hope and peace. Enemies would lav down their swords when meeting under the mistletoe, kiss each other, and declare a truce until the next day. This could possibly be the origin of the kissing custom under the mistletoe.

The Christmas tree was introduced to America by the German settlers in the 18th century. Many legends are also connected with the Christmas tree. Primitive tribes worshipped nature, and would bring trees into their homes to "bring the world of nature indoors."

A second legend stems from the story of St. Boniface, an English missionary in Germany during the 8th century. Supposedly, after chopping down a sacred oak tree on Christmas Eve in Germany, a young fir tree grew in its place. After this incident the saint suggested the fir tree as a symbol of the new faith he had brought to Germany.

The first decorated Christmas trees in this country are said to have been those set up by the Hessian soldiers during the American Revolution. However, the customary use of Christmas trees did not catch on until years later, during the 1800's.

As you celebrate this holiday season with family and friends. consider our Christmas customs and traditions, and think about their origins.

to Dec. 27.

