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GEDDY GARDEN NEWS

*"The thyme was on sweet Mary's bed
 to bring her courage rare,
 While shepherds lifted up their hearts
 In silent joyful prayer."*

Author Unknown

This year, like many others, I have had a difficult time getting myself into the spirit of Christmas. I needed impetus and decided to try something new. Instead of telling the visitors about the 18th-century Christmas traditions, wishing them happy holidays and bidding them good day, I added one more thing. I asked them to think back to their childhood and try to recall some aspect of Christmas that was special for them. As they thought, they slowly smiled and then, much to my surprise, they began offering wonderful comments. Some times they began with just one word such as "bread" and then they enlarged upon it. "The smell of my mother's raisin bread as it baked." The visitors began to exchange stories and even recipes. Instead of being the talker I became the listener for a change and I learned so much. I was reminded that Christmas is all about love and home, togetherness and happy memories. The visitors were not merely willing participants, but anxious to share their personal memories. I usually inquired of any unusual foods or quirky customs.

I learned about many diverse customs due to so many cultural differences in our backgrounds. We tend to do what our parents did, especially when it comes to Christmas food. I seemed to hear more traditions from those of German descent. The Germans, of course, gave us our Christmas tree and several people remembered using real lighted candles on their trees as children in Germany. One German visitor described how her mother baked cookies called matzabaum, which are wafer-thin cakes pressed in molds and decorated with images of flowers and animals. She said these were used as decorations on the trees as well as eaten. They also enjoyed pfeffernuesses, those round little spice cookies covered with powdered sugar. Other German visitors told of the tradition of eating blue carp. The carp started out looking like the carp in the palace canal, but was cooked until it turned blue and then served at table with its head still on. This was just one of the traditional dishes of Germany that I found unappealing. Another was the golden eel, and still another was the blood sausage which was eaten as breakfast fare after midnight Mass.

There were two people who offered very memorable German stories. One was a man who was born and raised there and told us about the feast day of St. Nicholas. St. Nicholas, or Weihnachsmann, (Christmas Man) was the Bishop of Myra in the 4th century A.D. and the model for our Santa Claus. His feast day is celebrated not on December 25th, but on December 6th. He told how St. Nick appeared at homes with a sidekick called Black Peter. Peter was dressed all in

black because he was a chimney sweep and it was his job to report to St. Nick on the behavior of the children. They all met face to face, which must have been traumatic for the children. This visitor then recited the poem that he spoke to St. Nick as a child. He spoke in German but translated it. Basically, it said, "I am a good boy. If I were a bad boy I would be hiding behind the stove, but I have come out so you will know I am a good boy." It was very touching to witness this older gentleman reciting as he did as a six-year-old.

The other impressive German story came from a CW tour guide whom I have known for many years. I asked her to tell us about her memories in pre-war Germany. She painted a word picture of the beauty and happiness of her childhood. She told of riding in a horse-drawn sled in the moonlight through deep snow to midnight Mass at a beautiful monastery. She said she treasures those memories as the happiest time of her life.

It seems the custom of cookie baking and candy making was a part of the celebration the world over.

In Denmark a special tea ring was prepared with cream cheese, nuts, and sugar and enjoyed at breakfast. In Norway something like short bread called Kringla, made with sugar and nutmeg, was enjoyed with tea or milk. In Poland opotki was prepared in the home. It was unleavened, unconsecrated bread cut into squares and decorated with pictures and scenes of the nativity. It was passed around to each of the family and then each exchanged a kiss of peace. These customs are recreated today by these people in our country to pay homage to their families and to keep in touch with their roots. I was very impressed with the peace that these rituals seemed to bring to those practicing them.

Some customs were related to Christmas Eve. In one German household the dinner on the vigil was to consist of all white foods such as cauliflower, mashed potatoes, and fish. Similarly, a Polish custom on Christmas Eve, after fasting, was to consist of a cold fish dinner which included pickled herring, never meat, after attendance at midnight mass. One family of Polish descent always places hay under the tablecloth to represent a manger as a place setting for the Christ Child. An Irish visitor offered a more superstitious custom. One Christmas day the guest must enter and exit through the same door of your home or it will be bad luck for those in the home.

We have a co-worker in the Geddy House of Italian descent who continues to practice one of the customs of Italy, the baking of pizzelles. These are wafer-thin cookies made with anisette or almond flavored and they are delicious. I can attest to that, as Sandy was nice and generous enough to make us all some as gifts.

A visitor from the British West Indies recalled how when she was a child groups of people went door to door singing a song about a certain jelly. It is a custom in the Caribbean to make guava berry jelly at Christmas and for carolers to go about singing a song similar to "bring us some figgy pudding," but it is more like "we have come for our guava jelly."

We had a young man from Trinidad recall how his family did not allow even one gift to be opened on Christmas morning until the family returned from church.

I learned of a custom of placing a real bird's nest in your Christmas tree for good luck and another of hiding a tree ornament on the tree and the first to find it receives a present.

Several people hide an ornament that is a pickle. One person hid a silver bell. Very often people said the ornament that is placed on the top of their tree is the first ornament they acquired when they married.

Not all the customs mentioned had foreign origins. For instance, I learned that the traditional Christmas dinner in New Orleans for many is chicken gumbo. In New Mexico a posale dinner is the traditional fare for Christmas, and fried oysters are often enjoyed on the Eastern Shore. Oyster Stew was mentioned for many states throughout the country. A young man from the western part of the United States told how he always left not only cookies and milk for Santa, but because he had a horse of his own, he always remembered to leave hay for Santa's reindeer. In Ohio one family always serves bread pudding and hides one almond in it. The finder wins a prize. There was an 89-year-old woman who spoke of being so poor in her childhood that they never received presents, just fruit and walnuts in their stockings, but then when she was ten years old there was one gift for her. It was the first book she ever owned and she recalled that it was Anne of Green Gables.

A teenager told how her family has a custom called Virtues. On Christmas Eve they draw from a hat a slip of paper. Each paper has a suggestion such as "be more patient" or "be less self centered." What you draw is the virtue that you must concentrate on for the coming year.

There were also New Year traditions. In the Pennsylvania Dutch section of our country they place coins on the window sills and retrieve them before dawn. This is done to insure prosperity. Certain foods are consumed on New Year's Day. In the south they eat ham hocks and black-eyed peas. Some Irish eat sardines on New Year's Day for luck. Another man who was from Virginia said we should never eat chicken on New Year's because chickens scratch away for their food. You must eat ham because pigs dig toward themselves for food; therefore; chicken will make you poor and ham will make you wealthy.

One young mother who had been silent finally joined in the conversation and told how being an orphan and being raised in a number of foster homes, she had no ethnic background to draw upon so when she married and had her own daughters she decided to create her own Christmas traditions. After her girls go to bed on Christmas Eve she bakes an angel food cake and on Christmas morning the children are told that the angels came and baked a birthday cake for Jesus.

I don't know when I have enjoyed my job more than I have this Christmas season. The visitors have really helped me to look forward with anticipation to the joys of Christmas. I've realized that by going through the rituals we are not simply dwelling in the past, but these are acts of hope for the future.

Merry Christmas.

Janet Guthrie

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