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Some historians trace the lighted Christmas tree back to Martin Luther, who lived from 1483 to 1546. The story is that while strolling through the countryside one Christmas Eve under a brilliant starlit sky, his thoughts turned to the nativity of the Christ Child. Luther was impressed with the beauty of the heavens and the wintry landscape. He saw the snow-dusted evergreen trees sparkling in the moonlight. Returning home, he related the experience to his family and attempted to reproduce the outdoor scene. To a small evergreen tree he attached lighted candles to simulate the reflections of the starlit heaven — the heaven that looked down over Bethlehem on the first Christmas Eve.

This would date the first lighted Christmas Tree prior to 1543. However, the use of candles apparently did not at once become firmly established as a decoration because mention of the Christmas Tree custom in Strasbourg a century later does not refer to lights. At first, lights on a tree were considered ridiculous or "child's play". Until about 1700 the Christmas tree custom appears to have been confined to the Rhine River District. From 1700 on, when lights were accepted as part of the decorations, the Christmas tree was well on its way to becoming a tradition in Germany. During the American Revolution the tradition of the Christmas tree crossed the Atlantic with the Hessian soldiers. A description of Christmas festivities at Fort Dearborn, Ill., in 1804, mentions a Christmas tree. However, the practice did not gain much headway on this side of the Atlantic until about the middle of the nineteenth century when, after a year of controversy and doubt, it became an established custom in Cleveland, Ohio.

Finland is credited with having accepted the custom about 1800, Denmark 1810, Sweden 1820 and Norway about 1830. From these Scandinavian countries the customs spread to France and England about 1840. Records show that about 35,000 Christmas Trees were sold in Paris in 1890.

At first, the trimmings, if any, consisted mostly of tufts of cotton and strings of popcorn and cranberries. Other decorations were flowers, replicas of foodstuffs, paper ornaments and the like. Such trimmings have long since been replaced by factory-made, highly colored ornaments, tinsel, strings of electric lights and various novelties.

The traditional use of evergreen trees during the Christmas season provides a time when all Canadians are brought into close contact with the fragrance and freshness of the forest. Christmas Trees probably

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Multitudinous legends claim innumerable origins for the Christmas tree. One better-known legend concerns an early Christian missionary, some times identified as St. Wilfred, who once came upon a group of Druids preparing to make a human sacrifice under a large oak.

He had the oak cut down and as it fell a young fir tree sprang up in its place. The missionary seized the evidence and made the fir tree a symbol of the new faith; henceforth, the tribesmen were to set this symbol of immortality in the halls of their lodges at Christmas time and surround it with feasting and love and the laughter of children.

The legend of the Faithful Pine which sheltered the Holy Family during the flight to Egypt is less well known perhaps, but so very charming and touched by the mysticism appropriate to the Nativity theme.

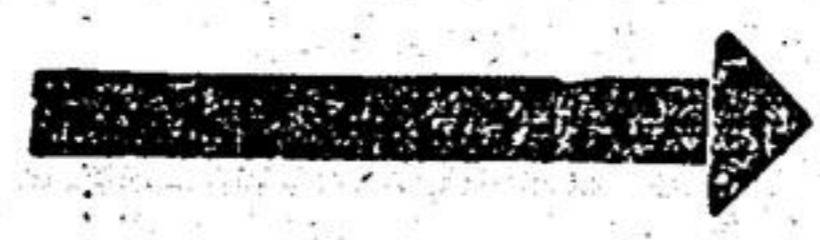


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