

Unusual U.S. Christmas Traditions (Part 1)

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

Scott Sosebee is Executive Director of the Association and can be contacted at sosebeem@sfasu.edu.

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(Dec 18 2022) Christmas is a time for tradition and each family likely has some sort of custom that is unique for their gathering. For my house, one of our traditions is that we cook and eat lasagna on Christmas Eve and each person present has to wear a goofy Christmas hat. Families are not the only people that have strange Holiday traditions, so for the next two weeks I'll give a glimpse at some of the strangest Christmas traditions in the United States.

Pickle Ornaments: I have written about this before, in 2019, but I have to include it here because I find it fascinating. . .and weird. No one really knows where the tradition of hiding a pickle ornament on the Christmas tree began or even when. Some have posited that it began in Germany—which makes sense since that is where the Christmas tree tradition began—with a legend. This version offers that an evil innkeeper killed two young boys around Christmas and hid their bodies in an empty pickle barrel. When St. Nicholas came to make his annual rounds he was able to revive the boys. The other legend is that it began with a German American soldier in the Civil War who was captured and placed in a Confederate prison of war camp. The camp, like so many run by the Confederacy, was ill-supplied and lacked basic essentials, so the young soldier was starving to death. He begged one of his captors for one last pickle before he died. The guard took pity on him and gave him one and it saved his life. Thus, he and his family placed a pickle ornament on their tree every year in honor of his salvation. More likely, according to those who have studied the tradition, all of these stories were made up and the real origin was a shrewd marketing person in the early 20th century who wanted to sell some mis-ordered ornaments that he was stuck with. Whatever the origins, the tradition of hiding a pickle ornament has become one practiced by a number of households in the U.S. The ornament is hidden somewhere on the tree and the first child who finds it receives an extra present.

Popcorn Garland: We did this at our house for a years, a tradition I looked forward to because stringing the popcorn was fun—and I usually ate about as much as I strung. As decorated Christmas trees began to get very popular in the United States in the late 19th century, manufactured Christmas tree ornaments became big business. Many families had to turn to homemade ornaments, and in many of those families popcorn became a replacement for garland and other manufactured products. As the years advanced, stringing popcorn became a tradition unto itself in many households, one that continues today.

Tamales at Christmas: Another thing we do quite often at our house is eat tamales at Christmas. This tradition is most apparent in the Southwestern United States, which makes sense since tamales' origin is from Mexico. Tamales are eaten at all times of the year, but they take on special importance in many Mexican American households at Christmas. Tamales are a “New World” food. They originated in Mesoamerica as a tasty and hardy portable food that became a staple among the Maya and later the Aztecs. After the Spanish conquered and subjugated the Native peoples, the tamale remained within Mexican culture. But the larger question is why did they evolve to have a special place at Christmas? There are several theories. One is that corn—the primary ingredient in the tamale's outer shell—had a special place in Mesoamerican culture. The Maya believed that people came from corn and thus tamales became symbolic as ritual offerings at holidays. Another is that the special formation of the tamale—a tasty core, wrapped by a soft corn outer shell, and then wrapped in husks, represented the Virgin Mary and her carrying of Jesus. Those may or may not be accurate, but what is beyond doubt is that making tamales is labor-intensive, which allows for the perfect occasion for family and friends to gather. Isn't that what the holidays are all about?

Luminarias (Farolitos): The display of luminarias, or farolitos, is another tradition that comes from Mexico and has found a home in the Southwestern United States, particularly the state of New Mexico. Luminarias, today, are small paper lanterns that contain a lighted candle with sand as a base, but the original ones were crisscrossed pinon boughs arranged in a three-foot square. Tradition, in Mexico, was that luminarias lit the path for Mary and Joseph as they searched for lodging in Bethlehem so that Mary could deliver their infant. The custom came from Spanish settlers in Mexico who lit “farolitos” (“little lanterns”) as a symbolic honor to the young couple that brought Christ into the world. Spanish churches also burned small bonfires in churchyards to commemorate Christ's birth. The custom passed to Pueblo Indians after they converted to Christianity and became a pervasive custom in New Mexico from the seventeenth century onward. It has since spread outside of New Mexico to other states and includes industrially manufactured luminaria lights that have become a feature on sidewalks and driveways as a way to decorate homes for the Christmas season. The thousands of luminarias that adorn the plaza principal in Santa Fe is a particularly beautiful site during the holiday season.

Next week we will continue with other unusual Christmas traditions in the United States.

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