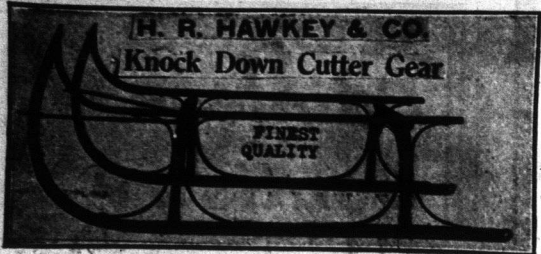


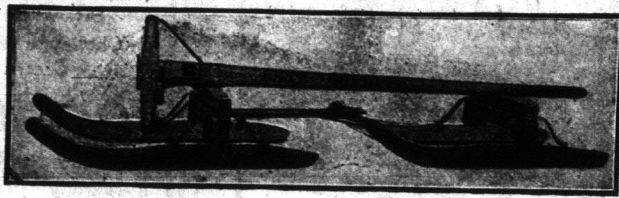
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Stories and Legends of Yuletide

Christmas celebrates the birth of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. On diversified dates and in different parts of the world we read that Protestant, Catholic and Greek churches observed this religious event. Festivities pertaining to the day may be traced to the ancient rites celebrated in Scandinavia, Rome, Greece and Egypt, wherein the pagan people feared, as the days shortened in the darkest month of the year, that the sun was dying, and observed with rejoicing when the sun began to remain with them for a trifle longer each day.

From time immemorial we have heard of the singing of Christmas carols. The first carols were modeled on the songs composed to accompany the choric dances and caroling—a combination of dancing and singing—which descended from the pagan rituals into the Christian church. Many of the carols dating from the fifteenth century resemble the folk songs, and numerous curious legends are preserved therein. Carol singing was greatly in vogue during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We are indebted to the greatest of our English writers, among which were Milton and Ben Jonson, for many beautiful carols. The celebrated, "Hark, How the Welkin Rings," more commonly known as "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," was written one century later by Charles Wesley. We read that the earliest printed collection of carols was issued about the year 1621. This collection contained the famous "Boar's Head" carol, which is still sung every year at Oxford College. Although the custom has died out in Scotland and many of the continental countries, the carol is existent in Germany and Italy, also in France, where it is known as "Noel."

The first Christmas tree to be erected in a home is credited in an ancient legend to one, Saint Winfried, who was a missionary to the Scandinavians in the eighth century. He essayed to expound to the people that the Druid priests had made them worshippers of trees only, and not of a living God. On Christmas Eve, it is stated, a huge oak tree, around which the people had gathered to offer a human sacrifice, was hewn down by him. As the mammoth oak fell to the ground, it was as if a young fir tree appeared miraculously beyond it. Then speaking to the astonished people, Winfried said: "Here is the living tree, with no stain of blood upon it, that shall be the sign of your new worship. See how it points to the sky. Call it the tree of the Christ child. Take it up and carry it to the chieftain's hall. You shall go no more into the shadows of the forest to keep your feasts with secret rites of shame. You shall keep them at home with laughter and songs and rites of love. The thunder oak has fallen, and I think the day is coming when there shall not be a home in all Germany where the children are not gathered around the green fir tree to rejoice in the birthright of Christ."

The custom of kissing under the mistletoe is still carried on to some extent. About one thousand years before Christ the romantic Scandinavians, when honoring their great god Thor, built huge

fires called "Yule" fires. It was imagined that the higher the flames towered through the forests the greater pleased was Thor. Very soon it was discovered that trees upon which mistletoe hung would give the brightest fires. This was thought to be due to the great Thor himself, who caused the mistletoe to grow on those trees to make known to his people which were the better for burning in his honor.

We are accustomed to acknowledge December 25th as the birthday of our Saviour, but whether that is the authentic date on which Christ was born or what people first celebrated the festival on that date remains unknown. Following the triumph of Christianity the prejudices of the early Christians against the celebration of birthdays as heathenish, died out. During the period between 337 and 352, Pope Julius directed Saint Cyril to ascertain the correct date. Saint Cyril reported that the Western churches observed it on December 25th, although various other churches kept the day in January, April, May, March and September. So immensely satisfied with Saint Cyril's report was Pope Julius that he immediately declared December 25th as Christmas Day. Our observance of that date has descended to us from that decision.

Religious rites pertaining to Twelfth Night are still observed in some form. To commemorate the Magi's offerings the British sovereign each year places by proxy three purses on the alms dish for presentation on the altar.

The custom of decorating the Christmas tree is associated with the ancient Teutons, who were sun worshippers. To them the expanding of a huge tree was symbolical of the sun rising higher and higher in the heavens, and the embellishing of our Christmas tree is supposed to be symbolic of the sun tree, the lights representing the flashes of lightning overhead, the apples, nuts and balls symbolize the sun, moon and stars, while the little animals represent the sacrifices made to the sun god. Another interpretation, as stated by the early Christians, attaches new meanings to its decorations. In this instance the fir with its lights represented the Christ, who was the beginning of a new life in the midst of the wintry darkness of heathendom, the tree of life, the Light of the World. "Purely Christian symbols were introduced, the angels, the anchor, cross and heart, the star of the east and the golden threads, called Lametta, which represent the Christ child. Under the branches of the tree lies the Babe in a manger, watched over by His parents, and surrounded by sheep and oxen."

We are wont to wonder why Christmas centers around a star. At the time Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Rome boasted that "Miliarium Aureum," the Golden Milestone, from which her great military roads diverged, marked the center of the world. To-day that stone is in fragments, while from the star that marks in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the place where Jesus was born, and commemorates the star that shone in the heavens o'er Bethlehem on the first Christmas night, radiates the influence that inspires the populace criticizing and making all men akin.



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