

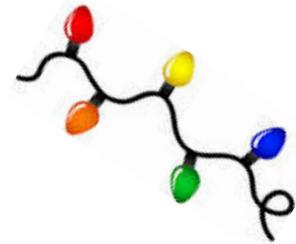
Name _____

Christmas Traditions

There are few holidays people celebrate as much as Christmas. Decorations are everywhere: in homes, in shop windows, all throughout the neighborhood. Cookie making, tree trimming, gift exchanges and holiday gatherings are among the many events that brighten up winter and celebrate this special time of year. How did many of our favorite traditions come to be? Read on to find out about one of the most central, the Christmas tree.



The Christmas Tree



Germany has long been thought of as the country that first introduced the Christmas tree to the world. However, the German people were not the first to decorate evergreens at the end of the year. Ancient Romans decorated boughs of pine, holly and ivy during their year-end festival. In ancient Egypt, it was common for people to adorn their homes with palm branches on the shortest day of the year. The first written record of people in western countries decorating trees in their homes dates to 1605 in the town of Strasbourg, Germany. These first trees were lit with real candles, a tradition that continued for several hundred years. By the 1880's, after Thomas Edison's company began manufacturing electric lights, people began stringing colorful light bulbs on their Christmas trees.

According to legend, the lighting of the first Christmas trees in America took place at the time of the American Revolution during the Battle of Trenton in 1776. The British had paid German soldiers, called Hessians, to fight the rebel colonists. The Hessians were said to have been seen by George Washington's men attaching lighted candles to the branches of a pine tree. While this may or may not be true, German soldiers likely introduced the Christmas tree to the American colonies.

In England, Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, introduced the custom to the British royal family in 1841. He set up the first Christmas tree in Windsor Castle. It didn't take long before homes all over England copied the tradition.

At the turn of the 20th Century, Christmas trees had become more common throughout America, especially in places where German immigrants had settled, such as Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and North Carolina. Today, Christmas trees can be found in homes throughout the country. The trees are so popular that almost a half million acres of land are dedicated to growing Christmas trees.

Did You Know?

- The first Christmas trees were smaller trees that sat on tables. The idea of the floor to ceiling tree was introduced in forest-rich America in the early 1800's.
- Every year 25-30 million Christmas trees are sold in the United States.
- Christmas trees take 5-7 years to mature.
- For every Christmas tree that is cut and sold in the United States, 2-3 trees are planted in its place.



Since 1929, when Henry Hoover was president, the first ladies have had the honor of overseeing the decorating of the White House Christmas tree. In 1961, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy began the tradition of selecting a theme for the tree. That year the tree was decorated with ornaments from the “Nutcracker Suite” ballet: ornamental birds, toys, angels and characters from the ballet.

The tradition of decorating a tree outside of the White House began in 1923 with President Calvin Coolidge. On Christmas Eve, the president lit 3,000 electric lights on a 60-foot fir tree harvested from Vermont’s Green Mountains. Like Theodore Roosevelt, President Coolidge was concerned about cutting down healthy trees. In 1924, he commissioned the American Forestry Association to plant a national living Christmas tree in Sherman Square near the White House. Every year since, the tree has been lit by the president.

The Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree

Perhaps one of the most famous Christmas trees erected in the United States each year is the tree at Rockefeller Center in New York City. The idea for a public tree began in 1931, during the Great Depression. A 20-foot balsam was set up at Fifth Avenue and 50th Street, as a way to bring cheer to the city’s numerous unemployed and struggling citizens. Two years later city officials put up another tree, and a tradition began. The Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree has been a major part of New York City’s holiday celebrations ever since.



The search for the tree that will be placed in Rockefeller Center begins in the spring. The search is conducted by helicopter flight over the Northeast. The tree, which is usually about 90 feet tall, is usually chosen by July 4. It is fertilized and pruned, and its cutting is a media-covered event. A new tree is planted in its place. The tallest tree so far dates from 1999. It was a Norway Spruce from Connecticut. It measured 100 feet tall!

Once the tree arrives in Rockefeller Center, it takes two days to put up the scaffolding for decorators. The tree is adorned with approximately 26,000 light bulbs, and on the Wednesday after Thanksgiving, the lighting of the tree is broadcast on NSC. The tree's owners receive the honor of flipping the switch at the first lighting. The tree remains lit through January 6.



Did You Know?

Birds love a recycled Christmas tree. Simply remove all artificial decorations and place your tree outdoors after the holidays are done. Fresh orange slices or strung popcorn will attract the birds and they can sit in the branches for shelter. Within a year the branches will become brittle and you can break the tree apart by hand or put the tree through a wood chipper to create mulch for your garden.



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Three Famous Christmas Trees Timeline

Place a dot with the letter of its event above each date to make the timeline complete.

1834 1889 1894 1909 1923 1924 1929 1931 1961 1999

- A. Tallest Rockefeller Center Christmas tree
- B. "Snowball" fight in the White House
- C. First Christmas tree in the White House
- D. "Nutcracker Suite" themed White House Christmas Tree
- E. First Rockefeller Center Christmas tree
- F. First White House Christmas tree on public view
- G. First ladies have been in charge of decorating the White House Christmas Tree since this time
- H. First White House Christmas tree to have electric light bulbs
- I. First outdoor White House Christmas tree
- J. First National Christmas tree

