

The Christmas Tree In The Front Parlor

by Lynne Belluscio

The second grades visited LeRoy House last week to take a look at our “old fashioned” Christmas tree. They stood in the back parlor while I explained some of the historical traditions. “You know in the old days, before there was electricity, families often didn’t have trees in their homes. And if they had a tree, it wouldn’t be put up weeks before Christmas. It would be set up on Christmas Eve and sometimes the kids wouldn’t see it until Christmas morning.

(In my childhood, Santa brought the tree and the presents!) The tree would be lit with candles, so it was particularly beautiful at night. The kids would gather in the back parlor and when the doors were opened, they would say ... ooh and ahh. Can you practice saying that? So when I open the parlor doors, you’ll say ooh and ahh. (The second graders, giggled and said ooh and ahh on cue.)

As the children went into the front parlor and sat on the floor, I described some of the ornaments – the popcorn strings and popcorn balls ... the paper cutouts ... the gingerbread cookies ... the little flags and the paper chains. You notice that the tree is on a table ... just like the tree that Queen Victoria had for her children in England in 1848. There are candles on the tree, but we won’t light them today. That’s why there was a bucket of water right next to the tree - - just in case the candles caught the tree on fire. We have little electric lights on the tree so you can imagine how the tree might have looked. The tree is a real tree. How many of you have a real tree?

In the old days they didn’t go to the farm market to buy their tree. They had to hitch up the horse and take the sleigh into the country to cut down the tree and they had to make all the ornaments. So you can see that the tree was very special.” That’s about all the history a second grader needs to know about an old fashioned Christmas tree, but the Christmas tree has a curious history.

The German Christmas tree came from a localized tradition



observed in Strasbourg that was described by a traveler in 1605. The fir tree was hung with paper roses, apples, flat wafers, gilded candy and sugar. It was not a wide-spread custom, but gradually the tradition spread, and by 1810, wealthy German families in Berlin had Christmas trees trimmed with garlands and toys.

There is a story that the Hessian soldiers during the Revolution brought the Christmas Tree to America, but that is more folklore than fact. It’s generally accepted that the first Christmas trees in America appeared in Pennsylvania German communities in the early 1800s, but not earlier than 1810. (This is the same time that Santa Clause - - St. Nicholas appeared in the Dutch neighborhood of New York City.)

An in depth study of the origins of Christmas and the Christmas tree are included in a book, “*The Battle for Christmas*” by Stephen Nissenbaum. His research indicates that the spread

of the customs of the Christmas tree and the giving of presents by Santa Clause had a lot to do with the change in the attitudes toward children. The early Dutch custom of Santa wasn’t a jolly old elf, but rather someone who threw candy in the door and then beat the selfish kids who grabbed for the candy first. Children’s selfish behavior had to be broken, thus the punishment. Whether parents chose to whip their kids or lavish presents on them, was based on

whether they believed in the Puritanical theology of original sin. In the early 1800s, this belief began to change and many people believed that although the human will might be imperfect, it could be trained and that children needed to be reminded that they were responsible for their own actions. One of the earliest stories about the Christmas tree decorated with presents was a morality story. The children were told that if they were good for a year, Santa would return with a tree filled with presents, but each present was designed to demonstrate the child’s virtue. In the story, the selfish child has to give away his presents in order to receive another.

The element of surprise - -the oohs and the ahhs – was another part of the Christmas tree story. As children became the center of the Christmas celebration, it was important to recreate the child-like element of wonder. The tree was mysteriously set up in a special room and then revealed to the children. From a story written in 1836:

“Upon his throwing open the drawing-room door, an universal exclamation of delight burst from their lips at the beautiful sight presented to them. In the center of the room was a large table covered with a damask cloth, and in the middle of this was placed a Christmas Tree, brilliantly illuminated with wax tapers and suspended to the branches were all kinds of beautiful gifts ...”

Here’s wishing you lots of oohs and ahhs this year and a very Merry Christmas.

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