

The Christmas Tree Comes to America

The Christmas tree is a familiar symbol of the holiday season, but the decorated evergreen wasn't always part of the American celebration of Christmas. The Rev. Henry Schwan put up a Christmas tree in his Cleveland, Ohio, church in 1851. Many members of the church felt it was a pagan gesture. Schwan was a recent immigrant from Germany, where a decorated tree was the holiday tradition.

The Christmas tree tradition grew slowly in this country. In the early 1800s, Germans who had settled in Pennsylvania had introduced the custom. By 1825, a big part of the holiday season in Philadelphia was a trip around town to see the decorated trees.

As German settlers moved west, so did their holiday tradition. But some of America's western states had to change the tree-decorating tradition a bit because of local conditions. On the high plains, for example, a cottonwood or even a tumbleweed might have to be substituted for an evergreen. Articles in women's magazines gave suggestions on decorating. This helped make the Christmas tree tradition more popular. Within a few years, farmers elsewhere had started growing Christmas trees as a seasonal crop. This lessened the demand on the nation's forests.

By the turn of the century, the Christmas tree was a big part of the holiday celebration. The state of Maine began doing a booming business in harvesting balsam trees. President Theodore Roosevelt worried that the state's tree supply would be depleted quickly. The president urged a ban on Christmas trees, but his fears were quieted when the head of the U.S. Forest Service explained that thinning the forests actually helped them grow better.

Unit 9

- Describe some contributions your culture has made to American traditions.

- The Christmas tree took many decades to become the symbol it is today. What innovation of today do you feel has the potential to evolve into part of our national culture? Explain.

- How has the media helped to make other rituals popular?