



O Christmas Tree

by Marilyn Loser

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Many of my favorite things about the holiday season involve evergreens. I love decorating the house with boughs, making wreaths, and trimming the tree we cut in the mountains.

Long before Christianity, plants and trees that remained green all year had a special meaning for people in the winter. Ancient people hung evergreen boughs over their doors and windows. In many countries it was believed that evergreens would keep away witches, ghosts, evil spirits, and illness.

And in the northern hemisphere, people celebrated winter solstice – the longest night of the year. During this time of the year Druids decorated their temples with evergreen boughs as a symbol of everlasting life.

Early Romans marked the solstice with a feast called the Saturnalia in honor of Saturn, the god of agriculture. The Romans knew that the solstice meant that soon farms and orchards would be green and fruitful. To mark the occasion, they decorated their homes and temples with evergreen boughs.

The first written record of a decorated Christmas tree was in Riga, Latvia, during the winter of 1510, according to the National Christmas Tree Association (NCTA) website. Men of the merchants' guild decorated the tree with artificial roses. By the 17th century, it was common in Germany to decorate trees with apples.

In parts of Austria evergreen tips were brought into the home and hung top down from the ceiling. They were often decorated with apples, gilded nuts and red paper strips. Edible ornaments became so popular on Christmas Trees that they were often called "sugartrees."

Accounts differ regarding the first lighted Christmas Trees. Some say using small candles as decorations started in the mid-17th century; others claim it wasn't until the 18th century.

"Most 19th-century Americans found Christmas trees an oddity," reports the NCTA. "The first record of one being on display was in the 1830s by the German settlers of Pennsylvania, although trees had been a tradition in many German homes much earlier. The Pennsylvania German settlements had community trees as early as 1747. But, as late as the 1840s Christmas trees were seen as pagan symbols and not accepted by most Americans."

As we know, Americans have long since embraced the concept of Christmas trees. The Germans mostly used short table-top sized trees while Americans favored floor-to-ceiling sized trees, even from the start.

I'd always thought the first artificial trees were produced in the 1950s. I remember seeing a few and thinking they were very dorky. The artificial ones were to cut Christmas trees as tree-looking cell-phone towers are to real evergreens today. Yuck! But, I was off by 70 years. Sears, Roebuck & Company began offering the first artificial Christmas trees around 1883 states the NCTA. You could get 33 limbs for \$.50 and 55 limbs for \$1.00.

In 1882, the first electrically lit Christmas tree appeared in New York City, according to Inventors.About.com. Edward Johnson, an inventor who worked with Thomas Edison, used 80 small electric light bulbs. By 1890 Christmas lights were mass produced.

In the early 1900s, two things happened. Conservationists became alarmed at the overharvesting of evergreens and the first Christmas tree farm was started. Teddy Roosevelt banned the Christmas tree from the White House for environmental reasons during his tenure (1901 – 1909).

A walk or drive around town after dark attests to the popularity of Christmas trees in Alamosa. Some people look for a perfectly shaped tree. When we go to the mountains to cut a tree, we try to pick one that is too close to another tree for either of them to thrive. Our hope is that we'll enjoy one tree and that the remaining tree will flourish in the forest.

Of course, you could go minimalist. You could purchase one of the 7-foot high metal trees I saw offered in a catalogue. Instead of branches, it has filigree arms sticking out that look like coat racks. Plenty of room to hang your ornaments without pesky branches getting in the way. And, no needles to clean up!

“O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree, Your branches green delight us. They are green when summer days are bright; They are green when winter snow is white. O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree, Your branches green delight us!” - O Christmas Tree lyrics