

Name _____ Date _____

Christmas Traditions

The Christmas Pickle

The tradition of the Christmas Pickle has got to be one of the strangest modern Christmas customs in that no one is quite sure why it exists at all!

In the 1880s Woolworth stores started selling glass ornaments imported from Germany and some were in the shape of various fruit and vegetables. It seems that pickles must have been among the selection!

Around the same time it was claimed that the Christmas Pickle was a very old German tradition and that the pickle was the last ornament hung on the Christmas tree and then the first child to find the pickle got an extra present.

However, the claim that it's an old German tradition seems to be a total myth! Not many people in Germany have even heard of the Christmas Pickle!

Some families now have the tradition of hanging the pickle on the tree, with the first person/child to find it getting a present. But it probably didn't start in Germany!

There are two other rather far-fetched stories linking the pickle to Christmas.

One features a fighter in the American Civil War who was born in Bavaria (an area of what is now Germany). He was a prisoner, and starving, he begged a guard for one last pickle before he died. The guard took pity on him and gave a pickle to him. The pickle gave him the mental and physical strength to live on!

The other story is linked to St. Nicholas. It's a medieval tale of two Spanish boys traveling home from a boarding school for the holidays. When they stopped at an inn for the night, the evil inn keeper, killed the boys and put them in a pickle barrel. That evening, St. Nicholas stopped at the same inn, and found the boys in the barrel and miraculously bought them back to life!

There is an old legend about St. Nicholas rescuing boys from a barrel but the barrel was originally holding meat for pies - not pickles!

So it's most likely that an ornament salesman, with a lot of spare pickles to sell, invented the legend of the Christmas Pickle!

The American city of Berrien Springs, MI (also known as the Christmas Pickle Capital of the World) has an annual pickle festival held during the early part of December.

Mistletoe at Christmas

Mistletoe is a plant that grows on range of trees including willow, apple and oak trees. The tradition of hanging it in the house goes back to the times of the ancient Druids. It is supposed to possess mystical powers which bring good luck to the household and wards off evil spirits. It was also used as a sign of love and friendship in Norse mythology and that's where the custom of kissing under Mistletoe comes from.

When the first Christians came to Western Europe, some tried to ban the use of Mistletoe as a decoration in Churches, but many still continued to use it! York Minster Church in the UK used to hold a special Mistletoe Service in the winter, where wrong doers in the city of York could come and be pardoned.

The custom of kissing under Mistletoe comes from England. The original custom was that a berry was picked from the sprig of Mistletoe before the person could be kissed and when all the berries had gone, there could be no more kissing!

The name mistletoe comes from two Anglo Saxon words 'Mistel' (which means dung) and 'tan' (which means) twig or stick! So you could translate Mistletoe as 'poo on a stick'!!! Not exactly romantic is it!

Mistletoe was also hung on the old English decoration the Kissing Bough.

Poinsettias at Christmas

Poinsettia plants are native to Central America, especially an area of southern Mexico known as 'Taxco del Alarcon' where they flower during the winter. The ancient Aztecs called them 'cuetlaxochitl'. The Aztecs had many uses for them including using the flowers (actually special types of leaves known as bracts rather than being flowers) to make a purple dye for clothes and cosmetics and the milky white sap was made into a medicine to treat fevers. (Today we call the sap latex!)

The poinsettia was made widely known because of a man called Joel Roberts Poinsett (that's why we call them Poinsettia!). He was the first Ambassador from the USA to Mexico in 1825. Poinsett had some greenhouses on his plantations in South Carolina, and while visiting the Taco area in 1828, he became very interested in the plants. He immediately sent some of the plants back to South Carolina, where he began growing the plants and sending them to friends and botanical gardens.

One of the friends he sent plants to was John Bartram of Philadelphia. At the first Philadelphia flower show, Robert Buist, a plants-man from Pennsylvania saw the flower and he was probably the first person to have sold the poinsettias under their botanical, or latin name, name 'Euphorbia pulcherrima' (it means, 'the most beautiful Euphorbia'). They were first sold as cut flowers. It was only in the early 1900s that they were sold as whole plants for landscaping and pot plants. The Ecke family from Southern California were one of, if not, the first to sell them as whole plant and they're still the main producer of the plants in the USA. It is thought that they became known as Poinsettia in the mid 1830s when people found out who had first brought them to America from Mexico.

There is an old Mexican legend about how Poinsettias and Christmas come together, it goes like this:

There was once a poor Mexican girl called Pepita who had no present to give the the baby Jesus at the Christmas Eve Services. As Pepita walked to the chapel, sadly, her cousin Pedro tried to cheer her up. 'Pepita', he said "I'm sure that even the smallest gift, given by someone who loves him will make Jesus Happy."

Pepita didn't know what she could give, so she picked a small handful of weeds from the roadside and made them into a small bouquet. She felt embarrassed because she could only give this small present to Jesus. As she walked through the chapel to the altar, she remembered what Pedro had said. She began to feel better, knelt down and put the bouquet at the bottom of the nativity scene. Suddenly, the bouquet of weeds burst into bright red flowers, and everyone who saw them were sure they had seen a miracle. From that day on, the bright red flowers were known as the 'Flores de Noche Buena', or 'Flowers of the Holy Night'.

The shape of the poinsettia flower and leaves are sometimes thought as a symbol of the Star of Bethlehem which led the Wise Men to Jesus. The red colored leaves symbolize the blood of Christ. The white leaves represent his purity.

Based on your reading, how do traditions connect us to people, places, events, occasions, or things?