

# “A HOLIDAY TAPESTRY”



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Since Pennsylvania is a virtual slice of America— in fact, America’s first melting pot— I think it most *à propos* to discuss the holiday customs of our varied ethnic peoples.

Of Irish extraction, I used to wonder if the intense cleaning before the holidays was something that went back to the old-country custom of whitewashing the cottage before Christmastide!

In Irish homes, after everything is sparkling clean, fresh (usually white lace) curtains are hung and a candle placed on each windowsill, a very large one in the “front room.” On Christmas Eve, a family member named “Mary,” or the youngest child, is given the honor (with adult supervision) of lighting this candle. Lighted candles in the windows are, to the Irish, a *symbol of welcome* for the Holy Family, who sought shelter that first Christmas Eve. After the candle lighting, the assembled family recites prayers aloud for their departed members— and don’t we *all* miss those who have passed on, the very most, during the holidays?

Another Irish contribution to Christmas is holly. Irish homes and churches were always lavishly festooned with holly, for it grows profusely in the south of Ireland. Early settlers brought the custom to America, where it has become one of the most popular Christmas decorations. (Planting two holly bushes (male and female) near an entrance of your home is said to keep evil at bay.) Merry Christmas! *Nollaig Shona Duit!*

Like the Irish, the Scots have always decorated with evergreens and holly; and they, too, place candles in their windows, lighting the way of strangers and travelers, as well as symbolically remembering the Holy Family. Christmas Eve in Scotland, called *Oidche Choinnle*, translates “Night of Candles.” Shopkeepers give their customers Yule candles as a symbol of goodwill, wishing each “A fire to warm you, and a light to guide you!”

A Scottish Christmas tree is oft decorated with bows made from a colorful variety of

tartans, the family’s own tartan the largest bow at the top. Candlelight Service is the warm, glittering tradition in many Protestant churches on Christmas Eve.

We can credit the English with wassailing— merry toasting with a hot, spiced apple drink as a gesture of goodwill. And most of our traditional Christmas carols are from either Old English or German.

There is an antiquated custom, sadly all but disappeared, called the Yule Log that I used to believe of English origin. I have discovered, however, that it most likely originated in Scandinavia and was brought to the British Isles in medieval times by Viking invaders. Actually, the Yule Log custom, dating back to the twelfth century, widely spread and became popular in most European countries, notably France and Italy.

On Christmas Eve, family members went out into the deep forest to select an enormous log of freshly cut wood. They covered it with gay ribbons and dragged it home with great ceremony. *Anyone meeting the procession paused and raised his hat in salute, for to encounter this rite was an especially good omen for the coming New Year.*

After the Yule Log was wrestled into the hearth, the master of the house sprinkled it with oil, salt, and mulled wine. The mother then lit it with the charred remains saved from the previous year’s log, thought to bring good luck by protecting the house from lightning and fire. Next, the family gathered round, and prayers were offered aloud. The huge wood cylinder was burned for the Twelve Days of Christmas.

Today, the Yule Log has modified into a traditional cake roll, smothered in coffee or chocolate-flavored icing and decorated with holly and sugared roses. To the English, it’s “Happy Christmas!”

The Germans have given us *tannenbaum* or *christbaum* and the silvered glass balls, *kugeln*, to brighten it— the Christmas tree in all its glory! I have already mentioned carols, but mustn’t neglect to include here that *the* most

popular carol, *Silent Night*, came to us from Austria, *Stille Nacht*, in its original German.

And the German goodies! There's *stollen*, a delicious fruit bread, similar to the Irish *barm brack*, and *marzipan*, made with almonds and sugar, and the German version of hot, mulled wine called, appropriately, "glow wine." *Fröhliche Weihnachten!*

Italian Christmas Eve dinner focuses on fish, *baccala*, smelts, and *calamari* (squid). Then there are *zeppela*, pieces of fried bread dough with raisins and sprinkled (while hot) with honey or sugar; pastel-colored Italian knot cookies, and those delectable, soft-hued, sugar-coated almond wedding candies. I must not forget to mention my personal favorite—those individually boxed nougat candies. An orange in a stocking is traditional, as is Midnight Mass, where carols sung in Italian are especially stirring, as *Bambinella Bella*, *Bella* and *Tu Scendi Delle Stelle*. Some of the finest *Crèches*, Nativity scenes, come from Naples or France. *Buon Natale!* Or, *en français—Joyeux Noël!*

A wonderful Polish Christmas tradition is a sleigh ride complete with jingling bells, the singing of carols and lots of frosty frolic! *Pierogi*, stuffed with different kinds of fillings, including potato and cheese; apricot, poppy seed, and nut rolls; *borsch*, a beet soup, and *krupnik*, a holiday brandy made with honey and spices, have become welcome additions to our holiday tapestry.

"I wish happiness and peace to this house, to you, your wife and your children!" This is the Christmas entreat that has opened the doors of Slovak homes since ancient times. Strict tradition of reconciliation was honored days before the holiday. Children promised they would be good for the whole year, the reward a visit from Saint Nicholas (Mikulas), who filled the shoes and boots set out for him on windowsills. The traditional Slovak Christmas Eve dinner begins with *oplatky*, wafers dipped in honey and said to bring good health for the coming year. Garlic is eaten on Christmas Eve too, this to keep away evil and sickness. *Bobalky* is a Christmas bread, baked in small pieces from a dough roll, over which a mixture of hot water with sugar or honey and ground poppy seeds is poured. Mushroom or sauerkraut soup, oftentimes served over creamy mashed potatoes, is next on the menu, then herb-breaded fish, since Christmas Eve, for most Catholics, is a fast day. *Kolatch*, long

poppy seed, nut, apricot or cottage cheese rolls are a traditional Christmas treat.

*Sviatki*, Russian Christmas, lasts from January 7 through January 19. *Borscht* is the traditional Christmas soup, made with cabbage, onions, stewed tomatoes and beets, among other good things.

Christmas in romantic old Russia, before the Revolution (1917) and the communist takeover, was a *magical* time, when *kolyadki*—carols derived from the ancient folk songs—resounded in the glittering streets; and Grandfather Frost, who lived deep in the snow-blanketed woods, visited the children, bringing a bagful of goodies.

Hungarians, too, celebrate with those wonderful nut, poppy seed, apricot, or cottage cheese rolls (associated with *all* the Eastern Europeans), and old folk traditions, some of which go back to pre-Christian times. One that I uncovered is the "Bethlehem Play," a short play about the child Jesus, with songs and poems documented from the 1600s. A lighted candle, blessed in advance by the parish priest, is placed in the center of the dinner table Christmas Eve—to remind the family of the guiding Star of Bethlehem.

*Kwanzaa*, the African-American holiday, was initiated by Doctor Maulana Ron Karenga on December 26, 1966. *Kwanzaa* is a celebration of family, community and culture—the oneness and goodness of life, which claims no ties with any religion. Based on ancient African harvest celebrations, it is a time, still, for gathering—of families, a time of strengthening of African-Americans as a people, honoring the past, evaluating the present, and committing to a fuller, more productive future. The word *Kwanzaa* comes from a Swahili phrase, translating "first fruits." Celebrated round the world, it is the fastest growing holiday in America.

The symbol of *Kwanzaa* is a candleholder with seven candles, one black, three red and three green. The black represents the black people; the red is for their struggle, the green for hope and the future. The lighting of the candles begins on the first day of *Kwanzaa*, December 26, and ends on the first of January, a period signifying that every end is, in essence, a new beginning.

Hanukah, *Chanukah*, is celebrated every year between the end of November and the end of December. The date each year will vary, however. Known as the "Festival of Lights,"

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the holiday celebrates events that took place over 2,300 years ago in what is now Israel. There was, in that land of Judea, a Syrian king who ordered the Jewish people to reject their religion to worship the Greek gods. Most refused. One who did was Judah, who, with his brothers, formed an army, choosing as their surname “Maccabee” meaning “Hammer.”

And hammer they did, for three years, until they finally drove the Syrians out of Israel. When Judah and his followers went to illuminate the eternal light in the reclaimed Temple in Jerusalem, they found but one tiny jug of oil, enough for only one day. Nevertheless, they filled and lit the lamp. Then a great miracle occurred, for the light stayed lit, not for one day, but for *eight* days! Jewish people celebrate *Chanukah*, that means “rededication,” to commemorate the rededication of the Jerusalem Temple. The “Festival of Lights” lasts eight days, commemorating the miracle of the oil.

Families celebrate *Chanukah* by lighting the holiday menorah, and by gift giving.

The *Chanukah* menorah has nine candles, eight of which represent each night of the celebration; the ninth, called the *Shamash*, lit first, is then used to light the other eight. The *dreidel*, a spinning top, its four sides marked with a Hebrew letter standing for the phrase “A great miracle happened there!” is an ancient *Chanukah* game, commemorating the time when it was a crime to study the Torah (the first five books of the Scriptures/sacred literature and oral tradition).

*Latkes*, potato pancakes, served with sour cream; cheese *blintzes*; poppy seed cookies, and honey roasted mixed nuts have all found their way into our hearts- and tummies.

On the first night of the holiday, the first *Chanukah* candle is lit, as always, at sunset Friday. *Chena Tova! Shalom-*

*And goodwill toward all!*

I have endeavored to include a few of our largest ethnic groups, but *each of you is a special thread in our holiday tapestry*. With its multi-colored threads, it is bright and beautiful, for it is who and what we are- a virtual slice of America- and it is, most assuredly, what makes us *strong*, here in the multi-hued, multi-cultural place we call-*Pennsylvania!*

Postscript: I feel compelled to add this footnote to the above holiday discussion. I get upset when I hear some people erroneously stating that those who celebrate Christmas cannot legally display a Nativity scene, and those who celebrate *Chanukah* cannot legally display a menorah, and so on. “Separation of church and state” means, simply stated, that Congress cannot establish a *state* religion (meaning a *national* religion), and does *not* translate that folks cannot openly practice their religions.

Freedom of religion is a basic right upon which our government was founded. It is the very *first* right discussed in Amendment I of the Bill of Rights: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, *or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ...* .”

