

News from

The Monterey County Historical Society

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Christmas Traditions

by Mona Gudgel



POINSETTIA

Poinsettia, the Christmas Flower,
casts a magical spell,
Making all things happy
and all things well

The poinsettia originated in Mexico. The Latin name is *Euphorbia pulcherrima*. The traditional Mexican name is Flor de Noche Buena (Christmas Eve Flower). The legend is that a poor Mexican girl Maria and her brother Pablo were not able to leave gifts for the baby Jesus at the manger scene during the annual Mexican Christmas festival.

One Christmas Eve Maria and Pablo, on their way to church, picked some weeds growing along the roadside to place as a gift to the baby Jesus. As they proudly laid the leaves around the manger a miracle happened, and the leaves of the weed turned into brilliant red petals.

The bright petals of the poinsettia give the illusion of being flowers, but are really leaves in solid red, white or pink that surround the cluster of yellow florets, which are the true blossom.

In ancient Mexico the blood red leaves were placed on the chests of those

suffering heart diseases to help circulation and were used as a poultice for treating skin infections.

In Mexico today a rich, dark beer is made from the leaves and distributed only during the Christmas season.

The name Poinsettia was given to the flower when, in 1820, the first U.S. diplomat to Mexico, Dr. Joe Poinsett, became so enchanted with the fire-red flower in Mexico that he brought several cuttings to his home in Charleston, North Carolina. Today, nearly 185 years later, they are as much a part of the Christmas season as the Christmas tree.

MISTLETOE

With the Mistletoe hanging there,
A kiss or two I well may dare.

Mistletoe is a parasite that grows on oak, apple and poplar trees, and from the earliest times has been the most magical, mysterious, and sacred plants of European folklore. The custom of using mistletoe to decorate houses at Christmas is a survival of the Druid and other pre-Christian traditions.

The mistletoe of the oak was sacred to the ancient Celtic Druids who believed it could

perform miracles such as providing fertility to humans and animals, to healing diseases and protecting people from witchcraft.

Kissing under the mistletoe has been associated with primitive marriage rites believing the plant provided fertility to the wedded couple.

Mistletoe was considered a plant of peace in Scandinavia under which enemies could declare truce or fighting spouses would kiss and make-up.

In parts of England, the mistletoe is burnt on the twelfth night of Christmas just in case the boys and girls who have kissed under it should never marry.

For those of you who hang the traditional mistletoe remember a man who kisses a woman beneath its mystical branches should pluck a berry, and when the last berry is removed all kissing stops.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

The Christmas tree is one of the most beloved and recognized symbols of the holiday season.

One of the legends surrounding the lore of the Christmas tree is the story of Saint Boni-



The Christmas card on the left is from 1911-1912.

The Poinsettia card on the first page is from about 1920-1930.

Both are in the collection of the Monterey County Historical Society.

face who was an English monk. One day he came upon a group of pagans gathered around an oak tree preparing to sacrifice a child. To save the child the saint flattened the oak tree with one blow of his fist. Suddenly a small fir tree sprang up where the oak tree had been. Saint Boniface faced the startled pagans and told them the fir was the Tree of Life, and represented the life of Christ.

Another legend is that of Martin Luther, the founder of the Protestant religion. Late one evening, he took a walk through the woods. It was a beautiful clear winter's night. The stars were brilliantly shining through the branches of the trees giving the impression of twinkling lights. Martin Luther was so inspired by the beauty of the sight he cut down a small evergreen tree, brought it home, and recreated the stars by putting candles on the tree's branches.

It appears the tradition of bringing the Christmas tree indoors began in Germany. However, in some areas, evergreen trees were scarce and the families built a Christmas pyramid, simple wooded structures, which they decorated with branches and candles.

In 1841, Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, following the tradition of his German homeland, set up a tree at Windsor Castle decorated with candles, candies, gingerbread, and fruit.

In 1846, the *Illustrated London News* published a sketch of Queen Victoria and her German prince, Albert, standing with their children around a Christmas tree. Because of Queen Victoria's popularity, what was done at court immediately became fashionable with Britain.

The customs of using decorated trees begin to grow and by the 1880s, the demand in the London area was so great that nurseries had

to ensure that they had a healthy supply of trees.

The Christmas tree followed the German immigrants to America. However, in the 1830s most Americans still considered the Christmas tree to be an oddity and a pagan symbol. It was not until the late 1800s that the Christmas tree was accepted.

In the Victorian era, the Norway fir became very popular and was important for the exchange of small gifts. The tree was decorated with cakes, sweetmeats, ribboned bags of sugared almonds or bonbons. In 1865, glass trinkets, silver wire ornaments, and the use of imported German glass ornaments begin to decorate the boughs of the trees. However, only the wealthy bought the expensive German glass ornaments until in 1880 Woolworth's produced them commercially, making them affordable to the average home.



This Christmas card, dated 1912, is in the collection of the Monterey County Historical Society.



Tinsel was another German decoration. It was originally made in the early 17th century using a special machine to make real wafer thin silver tinsel to use for decorative purposes. This was used, until the 1950s, on Christmas trees. The modern version is made of aluminum foil sandwiched between two layers of clear plastic.

After the invention of electricity in 1879 many people began using electric fairy lights on their trees in place of candles. The lights came to America around 1882, and did not reach Britain until 1895. By the 1920s, the use of the candle on the Christmas tree was on its way out.

Within my own family, a traditional Christmas tree included spending hours baking and decorating gingerbread men and candy cane cookies for use as decorations. However, when Jigs, our Australian shepherd, became a member of the family, he would proceed to eat half of the gingerbread men on the bottom of the tree. Tired of this, I decided one year to make paper gingerbread men. We cut, pasted felt trousers and faces, and proudly hung them on the tree. Jigs came in tail wagging, full of excitement, grabbed one of the “gingerbread” men, and then looked at us, put his head down, and sorrowfully wandered away. I felt so guilty I removed all of the paper men, and my children and I baked and decorated all day to return “the real thing” to the tree. In the evening with the Christmas tree lights on we proudly looked at the most beautiful tree in the world—with the half eaten gingerbread men scattered around the bottom of the tree.

May you have a Christmas tree lit with sparkling lights and decorated with family tradition to inspire warm memories of Christmases past.

The Christmas card at the top is from the early 1900s. It is in the collection of the Monterey County Historical Society.

The card to the left is from 1926, and is in the Breschini collection.

THANK YOU

Thank you to Comgro Incorporated and George Fontes for making possible a drainpipe crossing our property to his for all of the rain drainage which comes from the upper Boronda area. Comgro shared the project by providing labor for the placement of the pipe.

Thank you to Ausonio Construction for their generous donation towards the purchase of the drainpipe.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

- Supervisor Louis E. Calcagno
- Bill Wilkinson
- Mrs. Louise Angulo
- Lucille Alvarado Diaz
- Kathy Yamamoto/Coldwell Banker Gay Dales, Inc.
- Donald Chapin/Don Chapin Co.
- Marjorie McCarthy

MEMORIALS

- DonorIn Memory Of
- Nick G. CominosEva Koulos
- Nick G. CominosWalter A. Moser
- Nick G. CominosMary Georgalos
- Sophie BrittonElsie Massa

IN HONOR OF

- A Gift Membership in honor of Ms. Lee Stewartfrom Mr. W. K. Stewart
- A Gift Membership in honor of Michael P. Georgarioufrom Sophie Britton

WEBSITE

Don't forget the website at:
<http://www.mchsmuseum.com>



The Christmas card above is from 1926, and is in the Breschini collection.

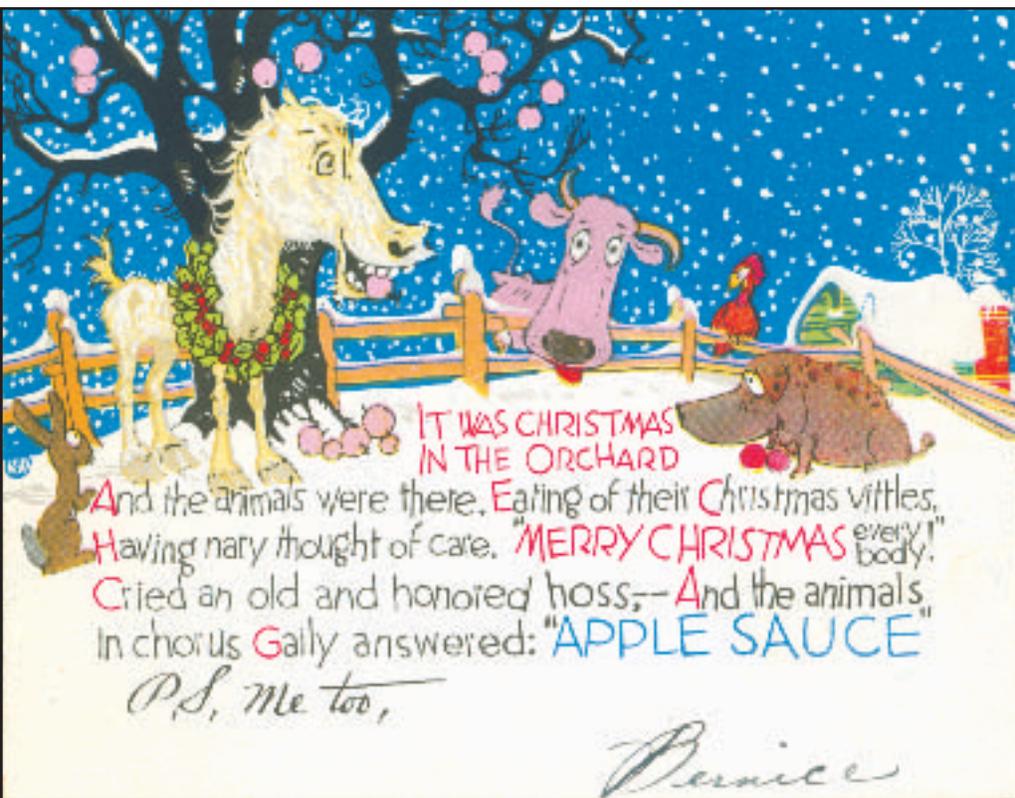
The Christmas cards on the back page are as follows (from top left moving clockwise): 1925 (Breschini collection); 1912 (Monterey County Historical Society collection); and 1925 (Breschini collection).



Landscape grading at the Boronda Adobe History Center, September 21, 2005.



Landscape grading at the Boronda Adobe History Center, October 18, 2005 (and you should see it now!).

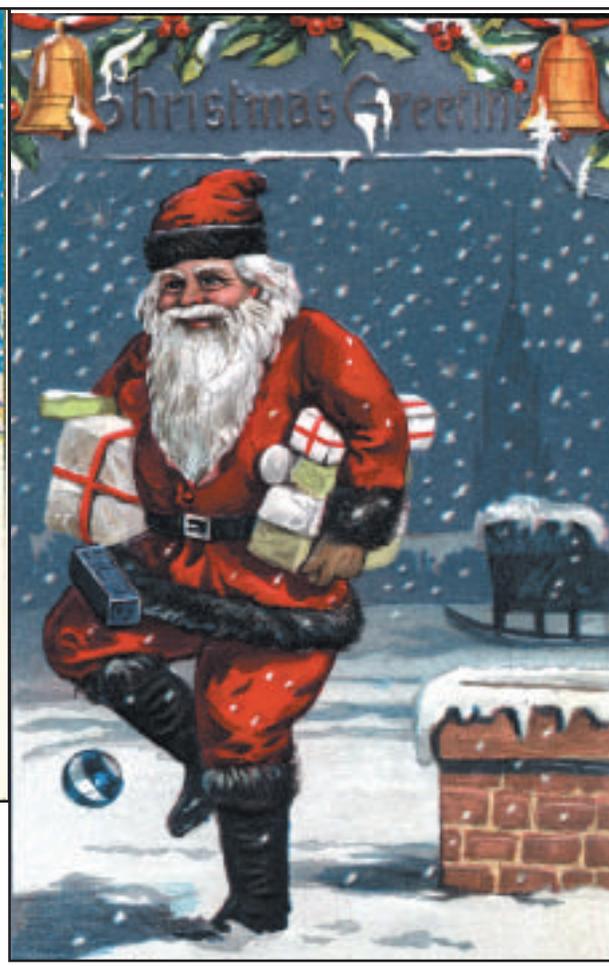


IT WAS CHRISTMAS
IN THE ORCHARD

And the animals were there, Eating of their Christmas vittles,
Having nary thought of care. "MERRY CHRISTMAS every body!"
Cried an old and honored' hoss,-- And the animals,
In chorus Gaily answered: "APPLE SAUCE"

P.S. Me too,

Bernice



With kindest thoughts and best
wishes for a Merry Christmas.

Miss Elita Rossi