

by J. Lawrence Smith

Christmas Greenings

When the spruce and balsam fir of the Blackwater country are decked out in a mantle of snow, the scene is worthy of being on a Christmas greeting card. Evergreens are very much a part of the Christmas season by their use in creating wreaths, garlands and, of course, the Christmas tree!

Evergreens have long been symbolic of continuing life and vitality since conifers such as pines, spruce and fir remain green throughout the year unlike hardwoods that shed their leaves in the fall. Many of the beliefs associated with greenery are rooted in the pagan Druids of Europe.

"Deck the halls with boughs of holly" are words from a favorite carol. Pagan believers regarded holly as sacred and believed the leaves were a sign that the light of the sun never left it. The Holly Meadows along Cheat River near Parsons were named for the abundance of this shrub sized tree, or tree sized shrub, found there by the early settlers.

The most popular custom associated with a plant is kissing under mistletoe which is a parasite that grows on the branches of many trees. The belief may have come from Scandinavia where enemies meeting under a tree with mistletoe were to refrain from combat and live in peace.

Club moss or ground pine is another plant that stays green in winter and finds its way into many decorations. The ancestral plants of club moss and ferns grew to tree size ages ago when the formation of coal first got underway.

An old German tradition associates the origin of the Christmas tree with Martin Luther, the churchman and reformer, over four centuries ago. The beauty of snow-clad evergreens one starry night moved Luther to cut a tree and bring it home to delight his children. Candles were placed on the branches to symbolize the Star of Bethlehem.

The Revolutionary War played a part in bringing the Christmas tree to America when Hessians who fought against the colonists observed Christmas with a tree. It may be more fiction than actual fact that Washington's Army won the Battle of Trenton by surprising Hessians lost in revelry around their Christmas tree in 1776.

The custom of the Christmas tree spread after the Revolution and German settlers brought it to Pennsylvania where it was popular by 1840. Missionaries and preachers from such denominations as Episcopal and Presbyterian introduced it into many areas of West Virginia and the southern Appalachians after the Civil War and late in the Nineteenth Century.

There is an evergreen to meet about every taste for selection as the tree that will be the center of family attention at Christmas. Spruce and fir have the "classic" look of the Christmas tree seen in art of the season and have a pleasing fragrance. Only a fresh-cut spruce should be used due to the needles drying out quickly and falling when someone brushes against it.

The stately white pine grew abundantly on Horseshoe Run in Tucker County where the cutting of the stands of pine marked the early days of logging in the county. This pine is popular as a Christmas tree and the tapering cones from large trees can be used in many ways for decorations.

Other plants that can be used at Christmas for decoration are mountain laurel and rhododendron. Use your imagination in creating new expressions symbolic of the season that express the old beliefs associated with evergreens.
