

PA Dutch Holiday Traditions

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Antique Goose Feather Tree

In preparation for the annual Lynn-Heidelberg Historical Society's Annual Holiday Open House, some research on the culture, customs and Christmas tradition of the "Pennsylvania German" or "Pennsylvania Dutch," as they came to be called, was needed.

The Christmas Tree

For much of the 17th century, the Puritans in Massachusetts outlawed the celebration of Christmas, slowing down the growth of the tradition of the Christmas tree. Although banned in Boston, in the 18th century, the Christmas tree first took root in "Penn's Woodland" - or Pennsylvania - by German immigrants. Specifically, in Lancaster County, in 1821, as is the first written mention of the Christmas tree tradition in the United States.

Even though Pennsylvania Dutch are credited with bringing the Christmas tree to America, they were not like the familiar ones we see today. Up until Civil War times, the trees used were branches of small trees from the sassafras or the zuckerbaam (wild cherry tree) and not the evergreen trees used presently.

These table top trees of branches and limbs were surrounded by or decorated with apples, gilded nuts, colorfully wrapped candies and other ornaments.

Antique Goose Feather Tree

Originated in Munich, Germany in the 1860's. Germans, at that time, preferred tabletop trees and artificial ones were the perfect answer. The trees were made of goose feathers dyed green. Germans loved Christmas so much that when they moved to America, they brought these trees with them.



Belschnickel, the PA Dutch Santa Claus

Belschnickel, nothing like Santa

Dressed in furs and a scary mask, Belschnickel's "mission" was to punish naughty children. The distinctive Pennsylvania Dutch tradition, which took place on December 26th, Belschnickel would carry a bag filled with switches, bells, nuts and candy as he went door-to-door.

To announce his arrival, he would reach in his bag and pull out a switch and clatter it against home windows. When the children would open the door to investigate, Belschnickel would throw candy treats from his bag on the floor and then swat the hands of the youth who were quickly trying to pick up the sweets.

The Pennsylvania Dutch were already known for their "Schnitzing Parties," a frolic to socialize, dance and enjoy, perhaps a little too much, spirited beverages. Belschnickel's visits would always turn into one of these frolics. In January 1920, prohibition would bring an end to this custom.

Shooting in the New Year

The last day of the year, all the people went "to shoot in New Year." Sometimes there were crowds of twenty or thirty together, starting at midnight and going from house to house, shooting the old year out and New Year in. On all these occasions, it was customary to have plenty of apple-jack and to give as much as people wanted to drink.

The shooting was not all of it, find out what else went along with it.



Pork and sauerkraut, a PA Dutch New Year's Day tradition

The Pig Roots Forward

Pork and sauerkraut is a staple in Pennsylvania Dutch tradition and served up on New Year's Day with the promise of guaranteeing good luck. As the saying goes:

"A pig roots forward, but a turkey or chicken scratches backward."

According to Don Yoder, the foremost living scholar of the Pennsylvania Dutch, "If you ask why pork and not our festive American turkey is dished up for New Year's, the answer may be a symbolic one. The pig roots forward and the turkey scratches backwards."