

West borrows German Christmas customs

By Judi Nygren
Daily Nebraskan Senior Reporter

A roly-poly Santa Claus flies through the sky in his sleigh, the Christmas tree's dazzling lights sparkle and the bulging stockings dangle from the fireplace mantle.

These things seem as American as Mom's hot apple pie, but actually they are German ingenuities with an American twist, according to a UNL history professor.

America's jolly old Santa Claus is a corruption of Germany's and the Netherlands' tall, thin character who carries a staff, dons a white robe and bishop's miter and rides a white horse. — St.

Nicholas, a fourth century bishop of Myra, said Frederick Luebke, history professor and director of the Center for Great Plains Studies.

St. Nicholas visits European children Dec. 5 — the eve of St. Nicholas Day — bringing with him fruit and nuts for all the good little children and perhaps birch switches for the naughty ones. These are left inside the shoes standing next to the doorway, Luebke said. This custom led to America's stockings, he said.

Krist Kindlein — the German words for Christ Child — brings gifts Christmas day. The European gift giving is done on a much smaller scale than America's, Luebke said.

Much of America's perception of Santa Claus came from the Dutch settlers in upstate New York, Luebke said. The Dutch word "Sinter Klaus" — St Nicholas — became Santa Claus, he said. And once in America, "Sinter Klaus" rode a sleigh through the sky Dec. 24 rather than the dashing white horse Dec. 5.

The German Christmas tree also fell prey to Americanism, Luebke said.

The evergreen, mentioned in Genesis as the Tree of Life, was used long before Christ's birth in festivals celebrating the winter solstice, which occurs in late December, he said.

Later, the evergreen was used in celebrating Christ's December birthday —

evidence shows that Christ was born in the spring, but the pope in 354 A.D. designated Dec. 25 as the date to take the place of a mid-winter pagan festival, Luebke said. As part of these celebrations, "morality plays" were performed on Dec. 24. An evergreen sat on stage and it became a Christmas symbol, he said.

The Germans picked up on this association during the 1600s, Luebke said, but American's condemned the custom as a pagan symbol until the 1800s. Eventually, Germans living in the Midwest and West convinced Americans that it was a Christian custom. This was accomplished, Luebke said by spreading the myth that Martin Luther had introduced the tree.

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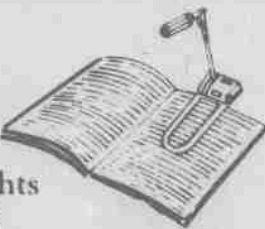
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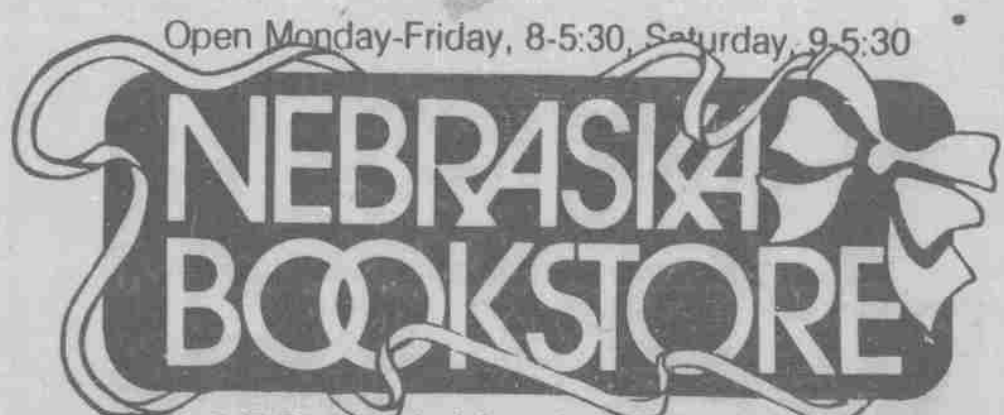
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