



Oh, Christmas tree!

From a mighty oak, an evergreen fir tree grows

By Rebecca Unger
Hi-Desert Star

YUCCA VALLEY — Lunchtime lecture-goers were treated to a holiday history lesson at the Hi-Desert Nature Museum Thursday.

"One of the many things the Germans have contributed to civilization is the Christmas tree," museum supervisor Lynn Richardson announced.

"And every region in Germany claims to have originated the Christmas tree," program coordinator Stefanie Ritter put in with a laugh.

The custom of attaching this pagan symbol to the Christians' holy day might be traced back to St. Boniface in 723, Ritter said.

The missionary from the British Isles saw the Germanic people worshipping a oak tree sacred to Thor. He chopped it down, challenging Thor to strike him dead. Boniface was unharmed, and legend says a little fir tree grew from the stump.

Yule logs were integral to pagans' celebrations of winter solstice, and German-born Ritter noted that European pagans always had greens in their homes, including mistletoe.

Fifteenth-century Christian church pageants began to include a fir tree as the tree of paradise, decorated with apples and a snake.

The first record of a candle-lit Christmas tree was by Protestant

Dorthea Sibylle van Brandenburg in 1611. Soon, Catholics were calling the new faith the "Christmas tree religion."

However, the festive tree idea "swept over Germany," Ritter said, and tree poaching became an issue for land owners. To avoid fines for cutting down trees, the peasants decorated wagon wheels and other forms with pine boughs, treats and candles.

A Christmas carol popular to this day, "O, Tannenbaum," was originally an ode to the evergreen fir tree. German composer Ernst Anschutz immortalized the ancient melody and lyrics into the Christmas standard in 1824.

"By that time the Christmas tree was deeply ingrained," observed Ritter. "Every German household, in the country or the city, had one."

In the German tradition, the tree is put up and lit for the first time on Christmas Eve, and then every night thereafter to the Feast of the Epiphany on Jan. 6.

The tree was a tougher sell for early Americans, as the Puritans strongly opposed Christmas celebrations. Christmas didn't become a national holiday until 1870.

"What made Christmas and the tree popular in the United States was the influential Godey's Lady's Book magazine," Ritter said. "In 1850 it showed Queen Victoria and

her family around a candle-lit tree."

Franklin Pierce was the first president to have a Christmas tree in the White House, in 1856.

The first tree with electric lights in the White House was put up by President Grover Cleveland in 1894. It was decorated with red, white and blue lights.

President and conservationist Theodore Roosevelt rebelled at destroying a tree for such a purpose. However, he was told that thinning small trees was healthy for a forest, and in 1903 the Roosevelts had a small tree in the White House.

The first national Christmas tree was installed by President Calvin Coolidge on the Ellipse and was lit by red, white and green lights.

In 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower presided over a gala tree-lighting event that has been celebrated ever since as the month-long "Pageant of Peace."

The national Christmas tree was destroyed this year in a February storm, but a new one was planted to carry on the tradition.

Ritter showed slides of old postcards and photographs showing the festive trees in every setting from farmhouses to hospitals to wartime trenches to Depression-era shanties.

"As you can see, the Christmas tree became very important to people," Ritter observed.



REBECCA UNGER/Hi-Desert Star
Stefanie Ritter, program coordinator for the Hi-Desert Nature Museum, shows a Christmas tree she decorated with traditional straw ornaments for the museum's "Season of Lights" exhibit.