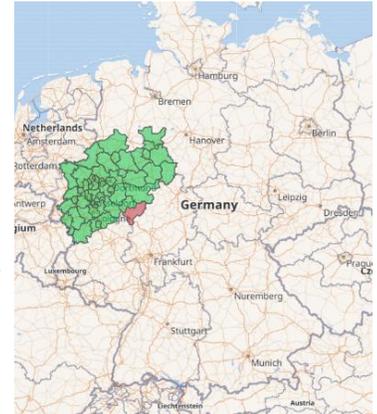


Christmas in Wittgenstein and in Pennsylvania

Most Dreisbachs originated in Wittgenstein - the small red area on the map of Germany at right. It is part of Nordrhein - Westfalen (the green area) and is about 60 miles east of the city of Cologne. The three major Dreisbach immigrants left Wittgenstein in 1743, 1751 and 1754. Contact with Dreisbachs still living in Wittgenstein was renewed some 250 years later, in 2001. A genealogy research trip to Wittgenstein in 2012 cemented the relationship when we met a distant cousin of most Dreisbachs, Heinrich Imhof. A renown archivist, he has been incredibly helpful in understanding Dreisbach genealogy in Wittgenstein. He introduced me to a book by Bärbel Michels, Das Fest der Liebe, Weihnachten im Sauerland und Wittgensteiner Land in früherer Zeit (The Feast of Love, Christmas in the lands of Sauerland and Wittgenstein in Earlier Times). This book, and the book Christmas in Pennsylvania by Alfred Shoemaker, were the basis for this article.



A connection? Are there any connections between the Christmas traditions and celebrations of our ancestors in Wittgenstein and our own Christmas traditions and celebrations? There are, although they are not always immediately apparent. Just as for our immigrant ancestors, in Wittgenstein Christmas has had a strong religious character with little commercialization. It begins with Advent, the four week lead-up to Christmas that starts on the 4th Sunday before Christmas.

For children, Advent was a time of growing anticipation. Before the days of electricity, people gathered in the kitchen on the long December nights, warmed by an oven with an open door and with the room lit by oil lamps. In the country, the house and barn were a single building with a hallway separating the kitchen from the door to the barn area. Animal sounds (and odors) drifted into the kitchen. Just before Advent, slashes were chalked on the door to the barn to mark the days until Christmas. Each morning, children hurried down the hall to the door and crossed off one slash—making it one day closer to Christmas Eve.

This custom of counting down the days until Christmas, may or may not have reached Pennsylvania. However it most likely started in the 1800's, well after our ancestors had left Wittgenstein. Marking the interior door from the kitchen to the barn area would not have worked either. Pennsylvania settlers built separate barns that often were larger and better than their houses. Nevertheless, it is certain that our immigrant ancestors marked the occasion of Advent in some fashion. In frontier Pennsylvania, the church (and by extension, religion) was a very important part of their lives. It was also important to our ancestors as evidenced by the number of churches founded by the Dreisbachs. Christmas and Easter were the highpoints of the year and a mid-winter festival like Christmas was certainly celebrated by our settler ancestors.

In Germany, the Advent calendar was another way for children to mark the passing of time until Christmas came. The first Advent calendar, called the Christkinds-Kalender (at right), was printed in Dresden, Germany in 1908. By the 1920's, Advent calendars were widely known in urban Germany but in rural



Wittgenstein they were seldom seen and were not widely used until well into the 1930's. Production of Advent calendars stopped during WWI and when it restarted, religious motifs were mixed with scenes of toys, animals and similar non-religious images. Production was again halted during WWII but restarted shortly afterwards. By the end of the 1950's, it was possible to buy Advent calendars with chocolates behind each door and Advent calendars had become the yearly delight of most Wittgenstein children.

Advent calendars reached Pennsylvania in the mid 1950's and, as in Wittgenstein, the calendars containing chocolates became very popular. You may remember them from your own childhood, but they certainly were not something known to our ancestors.



Adventskranz or Lichterkranz: The Advent wreath, which seems to be so much a part of German Christmas, did not come into widespread use in Wittgenstein until the 1920's! While the concept of a wheel to celebrate the solstice dates to pagan days, the modern idea of an Advent Wreath was started in 1839 by a Lutheran minister from Hamburg. He used a wagon wheel to create a wreath like the one at left. Four large candles represent each Sunday in Advent as well as moral concepts such as Faith, Hope, Peace, and Love. The small red candles, which are no longer common in Advent wreaths, were lit on weekdays.

Lutheran churches quickly embraced the concept of the Advent Wreath, but the church in Wittgenstein was the Evangelical Reformed Church and it took longer to adopt the idea. Only after WWII, was the wreath found in most Wittgenstein homes. Today it is commonly used and still retains religious significance. The Advent wreath reached the US in the 1930's and was adopted mostly in Catholic and Lutheran churches. Clearly, our Reformed immigrant ancestors and their children and grandchildren did not have Advent wreaths.

In Germany, the Advent wreath has four red candles and that is true of some Advent wreaths in the US. However, in many churches, the colors for Advent candles are violet and rose, corresponding to the colors of the liturgical vestments for the Sundays of Advent. Violet, the color of penitential seasons, is the color for three of the four Sundays of Advent. The remaining candle is rose in color and represents joy. Many Advent wreaths have a fifth, white candle in the center to symbolize the arrival of Christmastide, sometimes known as the "Christ candle." It is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

Advent - a season to help the poor: In Wittgenstein, as in most of Germany and Northern Europe, Advent was a time of semi-fasting similar to Lent where people gave up sweets and coffee, tobacco and wine, and used the money that was saved to help the poor. This ideal of helping the less fortunate to celebrate Christmas with a bit of joy, enough food and perhaps a toy continued throughout the years.

German immigrants brought this concept to Pennsylvania where early settlers prepared baskets of baked goods, cured meats, and candles to be distributed to poorer neighbors. Although we cannot know for certain, it is highly probable that our immigrant Dreisbach ancestors followed this tenet of faith, giving to those poorer than themselves.

Saint Nikolaus (270-343A.D.) was a Bishop in what is now Turkey. December 6th, the date of his death, was chosen as the day to celebrate him. He soon became the patron Saint of children and by the 900's the idea that he brought presents to children and the needy was widespread. Nicholas was also given the job of seeing that children behaved well and said their prayers. (Much more could be said about Saint Nicholas, but we'll leave it at this for the moment.)



The Reformation in 1517 in Germany meant that saints were downgraded, and, in Protestant Wittgenstein, Saint Nikolaus no longer brought presents to children. Instead, their presents were delivered on Christmas Eve by the Christ Child, *das Christkind*, (at left) who wore a long white dress and who was accompanied by a deer or other animal. Previously Nikolaus made sure children behaved and did their religious studies however the Christ Child was not threatening enough to accomplish this. A scary side-kick, clearly Saint Nikolaus in disguise, was added. He came in many forms depending upon where one lived. In Wittgenstein he usually wore a mask, had a long dark coat, carried a big stick and had a small sack on his back in which he carried candies and small toys and was colloquially called "Neckels".

Farther south, in the Palatinate, the scary side-kick was the Belznickel who wore animal skins and horns. Whichever form the side-kick took, he had a beard and a big stick that he used to knock on windows when he came to the house, and to intimidate 'naughty' children. He required children to say a short poem or a Bible verse or to sing a song. If they refused, he used the stick to rap their backs and, in some cases, they got no treats.

In 1977 the Heinrich Imhof's children were suitably delighted and scared when they were visited by "Neckels". Carrying the usual big stick, he gave presents of candy, fruits, and nuts. In the photo at right, Neckels appears set to rap Heinrich for not being a 'good boy'. Unfortunately, such appearances by Neckels are becoming more and more rare in Wittgenstein and elsewhere in Germany.



The Imhof children with ash covered "Neckels" on Decemer 6th in 1977



One concept of the Belznickel.

Courtesy Penna German Cultural Heritage Center,

Both traditions, that of the Christ child as the deliver of presents and of Nikolaus (Neckels) as the person who made sure children learned their Bible and behaved, were brought to Pennsylvania by German immigrants. Just as in Germany, the Pennsylvania German Belznickel wore animal skins, carried a big stick and a bag of small goodies and his job was to make certain that children learned their Bible verses and were good. In Germany, Neckels or the Belznickel came on December 6th. In Pennsylvania, the date of his appearance was less certain, but was always at least a week before Christmas. The Belznickel has almost disappeared from Christmas in Pennsylvania, although some are trying to revive the tradition.

My mother told us about visits by the Belschnickel, as she called him, when she was young. The Belznickel would knock loudly on their door and then burst into the room. Wearing a very scary outfit, his face blackened with ashes, he would confront my mother and her two younger brothers, demanding they recite a Bible verse or sing a song. After they did this, the Belznickel tossed pennies and candies on the floor and the children scampered to pick them up as the Belznickel made a hasty exit. She remembered one year when her brother declined to say a verse and was chased around the room and then whacked on the back with a broom by the Belznickel.

In the mid-1700's, when the Dreisbachs came to Pennsylvania, they brought the tradition of the little Christ Child (called the *Christ-kindl*) as the giver of small gifts, with them. The children and grandchildren of our Dreisbach immigrants would have waited anxiously for him on Christmas Eve. They would have gone out to the barnyard with their father and put out extra hay to feed the mule on which the Christkindl rode. Before going to bed, they put a basket on the hearth or beside the door for presents. On Christmas morning they woke to find small gifts of nuts, dried apple schnitz, gingerbread and, hopefully, some purchased sugar candy (an expensive and rare treat) in the basket.

By the mid 1800's, as Pennsylvania Germans married English speakers, cultures began to mix and the giver of gifts became Kriss Kringle (the English pronunciation of the words "Christ Kindl"). In 1842 a book published in English described "Kriss Kringle" as a fat, good humored man who rewarded children for good behavior. By 1845 the bringer of Christmas gifts to Pennsylvania German children was variously, and interchangeably, called Kriss Kringle, Saint Nicholas and Santa Claus (the latter from the Holland Dutch influence) and was no longer the little Christ child.

Weihnachtsbaum or Christmas tree: The living fir tree that is brought into the house is a very old German custom, so old that its roots lie in the pagan past. Even before the 1600's pine trees decorated with apples, nuts, pretzels and paper flowers were found in the main room of German houses. When candles were added is not known but an 1833 drawing, at left, shows a small Christmas tree bedecked with live candles. As Americans, the concept of lit candles on a flammable fir tree standing inside a house, is almost unthinkable. In recent years, even in Germany, electric lights that resemble candles are replacing live candles on Christmas trees. However many people continue to use live candles as they are an integral part of the holiday.



Traditionally children did not participate in setting up or decorating the Christmas tree. They were not even allowed into the room with the tree until Christmas Eve. You can imagine the impression the first sight of the Christmas tree would have made. The children had waited outside the closed door all day, knowing that wonderful things were happening in the room. Then, at 6:00pm, they heard the sound of a tinkling bell and the door was opened. The children were bathed in the smell of the fir tree and candlelight bouncing off glass tree ornaments. They saw toys and packages beneath the tree and bowls of fresh fruit and nuts on the table. Childhood cannot get more magical than such a moment.

The earliest Christmas trees, as shown above, were quite small and placed on a table, often in the middle of the room. In some cases, the children's presents were placed ON the tree, among the branches. The tree was decorated with gingerbread cookies cut in various shapes, occasionally with handmade ornaments of wood or straw and in later years with glass ornaments. Our ancestors' Christmas trees probably conformed to this pattern. No matter its size, location, or decoration, throughout the 1700's, 1800's, 1900's and into this century, the Christmas tree has been central to the holiday in Germany and in Pennsylvania.

Christmas Day and Second Day Christmas: In Wittgenstein and elsewhere in Germany, there are two days to Christmas, December 25 and December 26. This custom was also brought to Pennsylvania when our ancestors immigrated. For them, just as for us, Christmas was a day to celebrate with family and good food. With the exception of tending the animals, no work was done on Christmas Day or the day afterwards – probably the longest vacation our ancestors had! Prior to Christmas there was there much preparation. There was butchering and sausage making, pies and cookies to be baked, baskets for the poor to be prepared. Turkey and sauerkraut were on the dinner menu. Family members who had moved out, or gone to work in the city, came home for the day. Presents were not commonly exchanged between adults. If there was a church within traveling distance, there would be a service on Christmas morning although women generally stayed home to prepare the big meal. In some places the Christmas

feast was followed by an afternoon of games. One was catching a greased pig. Another game involved picking up potatoes scattered on the ground and putting them into a basket with people given a certain amount of time to do this. The winner, of course, had the most potatoes in their basket. In the early 1800's there were fairs held on Christmas day itself to raise funds for charitable causes. Women solicited donations of baked goods, other food, and needlework to sell and generally a good time was had by all. Second Day Christmas, December 26th, was even more a day of games, laughter, shooting matches and general merriment including drinking. Today Second Day Christmas is still celebrated, this time by a day of shopping – but in some ways it is an extension of the primary holiday.

Die Krippe: Another important part of Christmas is the Nativity Scene which may stand under the Christmas tree or beside it. Here the religious story of Christmas is illustrated in a way that even the youngest child can understand. It, too, has very early origins. In 386 A.D. a nativity scene was erected in a church in Bethlehem. From here the concept made its way through Christian Rome to the German-speaking world. The figures making up the Nativity Scene can be of painted wood or plaster, of metal or of colored paper but they are carefully saved and used year after year. German speaking Moravians, with their origins in Czechoslovakia and Germany, brought the Nativity Scene to Pennsylvania by 1742. At Christmas time, the Moravians opened their homes to non-Moravian neighbors, allowing them to come inside and view the Nativity Scene. Over the years, especially in Pennsylvania, the Nativity Scene expanded to become a small village, often with a miniature train running around it—called a “Putz”. When I was little, one of the main joys of Christmas was playing with the Lionel train that ran around a village of small cardboard houses, our putz, underneath the Christmas tree.

Christmas markets: Outdoor German Christmas Markets, held in the market squares of cities, towns, and villages, have become famous. In Wittgenstein, the most well-known Christmas market is the one at Schloss Berleburg, the castle on top of the hill and one which is still occupied by Prince Gustav of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Berleburg and his family. The market was not held this year because of Covid19 restrictions, but there has been one here for many years. Local craftsmen exhibit their wares and local delicacies are prepared to eat or to take home. The idea behind this market is to show what Wittgenstein was like from the middle ages to the present by featuring plays, story tellers, jugglers, and bands. Below are some photos from Christmas markets over the years in Bad Berleburg.



*Top left to right: Market in front of Schloss Berleburg, roasting sausages, evening at the market
Bottom left to right: Brass band plays Christmas carols, horse drawn wagon ride to the market.
(Courtesy of London-Olios)*

Christmas markets, similar to those in Germany, are now becoming popular in many places including Pennsylvania. Did our immigrant ancestors have Christmas markets? This is highly unlikely. They lived on or near the frontier where there were not enough people to support a market. However, the Christmas fairs of the 1800's may be an echo of faintly remembered German Christmas markets.

Wittgenstein remains surprisingly rural with small villages and wooded hilly terrain. At least in times past, there often was snow for Christmas. Below are a few wintery scenes of Wittgenstein from times gone by - from the collection of Dr. Ulf Lückel. Left to right: the small village of Wemlighausen-Schüllar in 1956. A picture of the lower city in Bad Berleburg in 1910, and a picture of rural Latzbruch in 1958. Unfortunately, the rural landscape of Pennsylvania where our ancestors once homesteaded is largely gone, kept only in the memory of the older generation.



Christmas Stollen by Kimberly Killebrew, the Daring Gourmet



German Stollen have been around for nearly 700 years and are prized throughout the world as one of the most famous and beloved of all German Christmas pastries. Sweet cakes and breads studded with candied fruits and nuts are hallmarks of Christmas baking in many areas of the world. Examples include fruitcake, which is traditional throughout the English-speaking nations, panettone in Italy, keks in Poland, julekake in Norway, bolo-rei in Portugal and birnenbrot in Switzerland. But perhaps none are revered as highly throughout the world as German Stollen.

I grew up in southern Germany and celebrating the Christmas season without homemade Stollen was simply unthinkable. Christmas Stollen, known in Germany as ChristStollen, is a yeast bread that is baked with dried fruits, candied citrus peel, nuts and spices. Variations include Mandel Stollen (almond), Mohn Stollen (poppy seed), Quark Stollen (quark), Nuss-Stollen (nuts), Butter Stollen (high butter content), Dresdner Stollen and Marzipan Stollen. Stollen are famously dusted with a thick coat of powdered sugar, reminiscent of the snowy German landscape, and baked with aromatic spices conveying the warmth of the Christmas season.

The first and most famous variety of Stollen is the Dresdner ChristStollen. Some historians date its origin back to 1329 and over the centuries the Stollen was refined to become what it is today. It has come a long way indeed because until 1650 Stollen was a bland, hard pastry baked during Lent when the use of butter and milk was forbidden by the Catholic church. Prince Ernst von Sachsen, at the request of the bakers of Dresden, petitioned the Pope to lift the butter ban. The initial request was denied but five Popes later the ban was lifted by the Pope's famous Butterbrief (butter letter).

From that point the Stollen gradually developed into an enjoyable sweet bread incorporating additional ingredients and it became an important symbol of the region. King August II in 1730 commissioned the bakers of Dresden to bake a gigantic Stollen in celebration of the strength of the Saxon military, an event to which he invited the dignitaries of Europe in the hope of building allies. The Stollen weighed 1.8 tons (that's 3600 pounds!), was 27 feet long and 18 feet wide and a special oven was designed and built just for this purpose. It took a convoy of eight horses to transport the Stollen to the king's table and a 26 pound and 5 1/4 foot-long knife was used to cut it.

Germany's first Christmas market was held in Dresden in 1434. This market, the Dresdner Striezelmarkt, continues to be held every year. Also held annually on the Saturday prior to the 2nd Advent is the Dresdner Stollenfest featuring Germany's largest ChristStollen. So far 2013 holds the record for the largest Stollen weighing nearly 9400 pounds! Each year a horse-drawn carriage parades the giant Stollen through the streets and on to the Christmas market. Per tradition, a replica of the original 5-foot long knife is used to slice the Stollen. The mayor of the city tastes the first piece and the Stollen is then cut into thousands of pieces that are sold with the proceeds going to charity.

The word "Stollen" refers to a post or boundary stone for a city. It is also thought it could refer to the entrance of a mine shaft. Some historians believe that the Stollen's characteristic shape was molded after the shape of a mine tunnel, reflective of the silver and tin mining industries of the time. But there is also religious symbolism behind the Stollen with the loaf, or bread, being symbolic of the body of Christ. Specifically, being dusted with powdered sugar, it is symbolic of the baby Jesus in swaddling clothes. Thus, it is traditionally called ChristStollen, or Christ Stollen.

I'm sharing with you my recipe for Stollen which is thoroughly authentic in its method and ingredients. It features dried fruits, candied lemon peel, nuts and marzipan (which you can omit if you choose). I LOVE the addition of marzipan and it's one of the most popular varieties of Stollen. Don't worry about having to go out and buy some, it is unbelievably quick and easy to make your own (seriously, it takes about 5 minutes).



A Word About Store-Bought Candied Citrus Peel

I have to tell you, I absolutely detest store-bought candied citrus peel. It has a bizarre chemical flavor no matter the brand. For that reason, I've never been a fan of fruitcakes in general. BUT using your own homemade candied citrus peel is a 100% deal changer. While you can use store-bought candied citrus peel if you insist, I VERY, VERY STRONGLY recommend making your own. Please, trust me on this: Using homemade candied citrus peel is the difference between night and day when it comes to flavor! It is vastly superior in every way and will make your Stollen taste incredible! And the good news is it can be made far, far in advance. In fact, I freeze mine, so it lasts

basically forever, and I take out what I need as needed. (Used with permission of The Daring Gourmet)

FOR RECIPES TO MAKE STOLLEN, CANDIED PEELS AND MARZIPAN GO TO:

<https://www.daringgourmet.com/Stollen-german-christmas-bread/>