

## German Christmas Traditions

By Thomas G. Mueller, Jamestown, North Dakota, November 2009

Salomon Mueller came to America in 1905 from Paris, Bessarabia, South Russia when he was 21 years old. He came through Canada because the boat passage was cheaper to Canada than arriving in New York. From Canada he journeyed to Fredonia, North Dakota where he connected with the Christian and Louise Labrenz family, working for them until he married Maria Weispenning in 1908.

Along with his suitcase he brought with him his German culture. Grandpa Salomon's grandfather and great grandfather left Prussia in 1832 and moved to Paris, Bessarabia, South Russia. Grandpa Salomon's great great grandfather left Germany between 1740 and 1750 and moved to Prussia.

A couple of years ago my first cousin, Darlene Mueller Koehn, wrote to me and described how Grandpa Salomon would make his own tree in the 1940's and 50's to celebrate Christmas. She wrote, " I remember Grandpa decorating a handmade feather Christmas tree with red berries in the tips of the feather branches. It was a German tradition of making a tree out of feathers by taking a stick and wrapping the base of the feathers to the stick all the way up the stick. The tree was three or four foot high and he put it on top of the big, tall, floor radio. I still remember the beautiful German ornaments. One was a fragile peacock with a long white tail". From this one can conclude that the German culture was still deeply ingrained in my family, even though they moved out of Germany 200 years earlier.

Exchanging Christmas gifts is a custom that began in memory of the gifts the wise men brought to Bethlehem for Christ's birth. The custom of the Christmas tree started about 1200 years ago in Germany. The legend tells of how an English missionary named Boniface came upon a group of heathens preparing to make a human sacrifice beside an oak tree. Boniface stopped the sacrifice and cut the oak tree down. When the tree fell a fir tree appeared. Boniface proclaimed this a miracle and said the fir tree was the tree of life and it represented Christ.

Decorating homes with evergreen branches goes back to ancient Roman times. The Romans exchanged green tree branches for good luck. But the actual Christmas tree is credited to the Boniface story and took place in northern Germany near Geismar, Germany. The Germans were the first to use Christmas tree decorations, decorating them with toys, candies wrapped in bright colored paper, angels and lighted candles.

This year in North Dakota we are celebrating Christmas with a new understanding of how it started and how Christmas was brought to America when people like my grandfather came here for a new life. The most important things he brought with him were in his heart, his traditions, his faith, his German culture and his handmade Christmas tree.