



Dollhopf

600 Years in the Baking

A Dollhopf Christmas Centuries of Celebrations

Even though Germany is the origin of many of the Christmas traditions we celebrate today, it might surprise you to know how the Dollhopfs celebrated the holidays before Johann Dollhopf left the village of Mistelbach bound for Pittsburgh in 1871.

They never had a Christmas tree, never opened an Advent calendar, or lit an Advent wreath; never kissed under the mistletoe, never sent Christmas cards, never knew Santa Claus, did not exchange presents other than fruit, nuts, and sweets, and of course didn't have electricity, so they didn't string lights.

But, as you will find out, they did celebrate with a cherry tree in the kitchen.

It is an irony that Johann Dollhopf, our *German* great grandfather, from the land of Christmas trees, most likely never saw a decorated tree until he came to Pittsburgh. Believe it or not, Christmas trees were not a tradition in Mistelbach until the 1900s.



*St. Bartholomäus Kirche (St. Bartholmew Church) on a cold winter day in Mistelbach, the home village of our great grandfather **Johann Dollhopf**, who came to America 150 years ago in 1871. 15 generations of our Dollhopf ancestors, beginning in the early 1400s, celebrated Christmas in this church. The tower seen here was built in 1680 by **Conrath Schabtach** (1640-1713), our 8th great-grandfather, **Matthäus Seyfarth** (1647-1720), our 7th great-grandfather, and master carpenter **Johann Greißinger**, our 7th great-grandfather. The stones of the tower foundation date from the original church built in the 1300s.*

To be sure, the Christmas tree *was*, as far as can be determined, a German “invention.” The earliest mention of such a decorated tree is from the Baltic region (present day Latvia), which at the time was a German speaking territory.

But traditions evolved locally and sporadically, evidence of how fragmented Germany was prior to the 20th century – thousands of villages, many remote, many with their own customs and traditions that evolved over *centuries*.¹

In fact, Christmas traditions have arguably evolved at a faster pace in the last 150 years since Johann arrived in America, than in the previous 450 years of our known grandparents – from the time of our earliest confirmed ancestor, Hans Tolhopff,² who was born about 1400, to Johann, who was born in 1852. Such is the quickening pace of change.

This essay documents how our 15 generations of grandparents might have celebrated the holidays over those 450 years. Most of the German Christmas traditions that we know today were not known in Mistelbach until the 1900s, well after John came to America.

Not that they kept notes. But we get a pretty good idea through a number of sources: 1) the St. Bartholomew church records, 2) a historical essay *Mistelbach: die Chronik eines Hummelgaurdorfes*,³ 3) the local cultural magazine *Hummelgauer Heimat Bote*,⁴ and 4) interviews with cousins still living in the area.

If you’ve read any of the blogs at *dollhopf.net*, you know that our ancestors lived in Mistelbach beginning when Hans Tolhopff obtained a *fief* (“land lease”) of 3½ acres in the village shortly after the Hussite War of 1430. The next 15 generations of his descendants celebrated Christmas in this tiny remote village, which until the mid 1900s was never home to more than several hundred people.

I end with an interview with Anne Dollhopf, a cousin living in Nürnberg, a short drive from Mistelbach, and home to the world’s most famous Christmas market. Following are some of the people, places, names, and events related to the Christmases of our ancestors....

A Few Quick Facts

If you are not familiar with the family history blog at dollhopf.net, here are a few quick facts to help you with this essay...

Johann Bär “John” Dollhopf (1852-1934) is our Dollhopf immigrant ancestor. He came to America 150 years ago in October of 1871 when he was 19.

I refer to him as he is related to my generation – great-grandfather. If you are my children’s generation, he is your 2nd great grandfather, etc.

*I use **Bär** (pronounced “bear”) as his middle name because he was baptized Bär, his mother’s maiden name. His parents did not marry until he was four because of extreme poverty.*

*In America he changed **Johann** to **John**.*

Mistelbach is the small village where he was born. It is next to the city of **Bayreuth**, in northern **Bavaria** near the Czech border.

*Although today a part of Bavaria, the locals are not Bavarians. They are **Franconians**, part of the ancient region called **Franken** (“Franconia”), which today is divided into the three government districts of **Oberfranken** (upper) **Mittelfranken** (middle) and **Unterfranken** (lower). Mistelbach is in Oberfranken.*

*The village of Mistelbach is part of a small culturally distinct farming region, (about 100 sq. miles), called the **Hummelgau**, which in turn is part of a larger geographic region called the **Frankische Schweiz** (“Franconian Switzerland”), a scenic area, so-called because its mountain terrain resembles Switzerland.*

Until the mid 1900s, Mistelbach never had more than a few hundred residents, all peasant farmers, many of whom practiced additional trades. Our Dollhopf ancestors were millers, tailors, and farmers.

¹ Germany did not become a nation state (a unified empire) until 1871 under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck.

² Tolhopff is how Hans spelled it.

³ *Mistelbach: die Chronik eines Hummelgaurdorfes* (“Mistelbach: the Chronicle of a Hummelgau Village”) by Stephan Hartnagel, 2003.

⁴ *Hummelgauer Heimat Bote* (“Hummelgau Region Homeland Messenger”), a magazine published quarterly as a supplement to the community bulletins of Gesees, Hummeltal, Mistelbach, and Mistelgau – all villages within a roughly 100 square mile culturally distinct area called the *Hummelgau*.

Mistelbach

We kiss under the mistletoe, is it related?

Mistel means “mistletoe;” *bach* means “brook.” Indeed, the village was named for the mistletoe that grows by the brook.

Mistelbach is tucked into the hills of Franconian Switzerland in northern Bavaria. It abuts the city of Bayreuth, most famous for its *Festspielhaus*, the famous opera theatre built by composer Richard Wagner, and home to the Wagner Festival held every August since 1876. (John left for America in 1871, so he never knew Tristan or Isolde!) The brook called the *Mistel* flows through Mistelbach, and for more than 150 years, from 1499 to 1648, our Dollhopfs owned the *Dorfmühle* (“village mill”) on the *Mistel*, a stone’s throw from the village parish shown in the picture on the first page.



Mistletoe in the trees above Mistelbach. Mistletoe is a parasitic plant that feeds on the nutrients of the host tree, and is therefore green year round. Because it was green all year it was thought to have magical powers.

The *Mistel* is a nine-mile-long tributary of the *Red Main* River; they converge in Bayreuth. Over the last 600 years there have been at least five water-powered mills along the *Mistel*; at various times branches of the Dollhopf family operated three of them.

Although we kiss under the mistletoe, it is not a German tradition. Its ancient roots are believed to be Norse, and it was definitely not a Christmas, or even a New Year’s tradition. It was first mentioned in an English song from the late 1700s, and the practice – whenever and wherever it arose – was first mentioned and popularized in America by Washington Irving in his book, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* of 1824. The book is largely about Christmas at an English Manor (the famous story of Rip Van Winkle is also part of this book). In the chapter called “Christmas Eve,” a footnote reads,

The mistletoe is still hung up in farmhouses and kitchens at Christmas, and the young men have the privilege of kissing the girls under it, plucking each time a berry from the bush. When the berries are all plucked the privilege ceases.⁵

English author Charles Dickens also popularized the practice in his *Pickwick Papers* of 1837, so the modern tradition is more likely English.

Mistletoe is a parasitic plant that grows on tree branches, especially apple and oak trees. Because it feeds on nutrients from the tree, it remains green year-round, which many ancients believed gave it magical medicinal qualities (even though the berries are poisonous).

The origin of the word “mistletoe” is every bit as complex and obscure as the botany and myth surrounding the plant. The name originated from the perception in pre-scientific Europe that

⁵ Washington Irving went by the pen name Geoffrey Crayon. The *Sketch Book* is a collection of essays and short stories. It is most famous for the “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” and “Rip Van Winkle.” How he knew of the mistletoe tradition is not known. There are historians who believe he might have invented the custom. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sketch_Book_of_Geoffrey_Crayon,_Gent.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sketch_Book_of_Geoffrey_Crayon,_Gent)

mistletoe plants burst forth, as if by magic, from the excrement of the *missel thrush*, a small bird. According to Sara Williams at the University of Saskatchewan, *missel*, or *mistel*, is the Anglo-Saxon word for dung, while "*tan*" [evolved to "toe"], is the word for twig - so the name mistletoe literally means "dung-on-a-twig." Belief in mistletoe's spontaneous generation has long been discredited - in fact, the plant is spread by seeds as they pass through birds' digestive tracts.⁶

Hmmm, let's kiss under the dung on a twig.

What is a "Dollhopf"?

The *Dollhopf* (medieval spellings differ, *Tollhopff* was common) was not exactly a Christmas tradition; but it was a festive treat. According to the Mistelbach Chronicle, the *Gugelhopf*, its pastry cousin, was often served not only for Sunday dinner but also on holidays. It was a yeast cake (German: *Napfkuchen*); more like a sweet bread.

Dol, or *Tol*, can mean "bulge" or "bulging," and *hopf* or *hopfen* means "to hop," or "hopping." In the 1300s, when in central Germany yeast was first added to the mixture of flour, water, sugar, and lard, it caused the resulting dough to "bulge" (rise) and seemingly "hop" out of the cake pan. *Wunderbar! Der Tolhopf!*

Dolhopf (sic) seems to have been ancient dialect for *Gugelhopf*, and originated in the region of *Oberfranken*, where Mistelbach is located. As the dough rose and drooped down the side of the pan, it resembled the *Gugel* ("hood") worn by medieval monks (today, this type of medieval hood is still part of academic regalia worn at university commencements). The resulting cake was called a *Gugelhopf*. In medieval Germany, words for the same object often differed from village to village – *Dolhopf*, *Doglhopf*, *Goglhopf*, and *Guglhopf* were all variations on the name for these yeast cakes (they were often deep fried in lard, similar to doughnuts).⁷

On more festive occasions, raisins, nuts, candied fruit, and possibly *rum* or *schnapps* could be added to the dough for deliciousness. But a *Dolhopf* wasn't really a fruit cake as we know it – the indestructible, rum-soaked, dense mass of flour, nuts, and candied fruit. Since it was often fried, a *Dollhopf* would have been lighter and fluffier.

Fruit cakes as we know them are more like the famous Christmas confections known as *Stollen*, more specifically *Dresdner Stollen* (from Dresden). This treat is known all over Germany, including Mistelbach, where it is a centuries old tradition.



Dresdner Stollen, a type of fruitcake popular at Christmastime, has been a holiday tradition in Mistelbach for centuries.

We surmise that the first person named Dollhopf might have been a baker who was named for his creation, or more likely a flour mill owner, who often was the village baker as well. We know that our ancestors were indeed mill owners in Bayreuth before they came to Mistelbach. In this region the use of a last name became common in the mid to late 1300s; Hans Tollhopff might have been only the second or third generation to use this surname.

⁶ <https://www.thespruce.com/kissing-under-the-mistletoe-2131215>

⁷ Research of the word *Dolhopf* comes from the *Bayerisches Wörterbuch* ("Bavarian Dictionary") authored by Johann Andreas Schmeller, the first edition of which was published in 1827. Schmeller was a philologist at the University of Munich from 1828 until his death in 1852. His *Bayerisches Wörterbuch* is the definitive work on Bavarian dialect. This comprehensive work is sometimes referred to as "*Der Schmeller*."

So Hans Tolhopff of 1400 and all of his progeny very probably enjoyed fruited yeast cakes on Christmas, but he probably enjoyed them as well on any number of other religious holidays, including Sundays.⁸

Christmas

Did our ancestors actually celebrate Christmas? Well, yes and no. In the early Middle Ages they certainly recognized Christmas, but compared to Easter it was a minor holiday.

Christmas was added to the Christian calendar in the year 336 CE by the Roman Emperor Constantine. The December date was chosen by 4th century Christian Fathers to coincide with the Roman celebrations of the winter solstice so that Christians could conveniently piggyback on the pagan merry making.

The German word for Christmas – *Weihnachten* (“consecration night”) – did not appear until the year 1180 in a poem by the medieval poet *Spervogel*. Advent was celebrated beginning in the 13th century, so we know that our earliest known ancestors in the 14th century were indeed celebrating the birth of Jesus in some fashion.

But the degree to which our forebearers celebrated, and how they celebrated, evolved *very* slowly. Hans Tolhopff and the next three generations of Dollhopfs until the 1530s were Catholic, and medieval Catholics, depending on the region, celebrated 40 to 60 saints’ days throughout the year. Hans was indeed celebrating Christmas in the 1400s, but it was certainly not the elaborate holiday we know today. Perhaps it was just a bit more important than most of the other 59 feast days on the calendar, but far less important than Easter.

In the later Middle Ages, Christmas was a public, carnival-like festival (think Mardi Gras) influenced heavily by pagan celebrations. Christmas was not the home-centered, child-focused, gift-giving holiday we know today until the mid-19th century, when a number of cultural stimuli converged to shape our modern image of Christmas:

- 1819: Washington Irving penned the above-mentioned *Sketchbook*, which in its entirety was a collection of stories about the celebration of Christmas in an English Manor. Historians argue that many of the customs described in his celebrations – like kissing under the mistletoe, elaborate decorations, blazing fires, and Santa Claus – were his inventions. “He did not ‘invent’ the holiday,” biographer Andrew Burstein notes, “but he did all he could to make minor customs into major customs—to make them enriching signs of family and social togetherness.”⁹
- 1823: Samuel Clement Moore published *’Twas the Night Before Christmas* giving us the modern version of “Santa Claus” (although he was referred to as St. Nicholas in the poem) and his various inventions – his big belly, the act of dropping down the chimney (this is not how he arrives in Germany today), a bundle of toys for children, stockings hung by the fire, and most fantastical – a sled pulled by eight reindeer that landed on the roof! What was he drinking? (Too much eggnog.)



American author Washington Irving (1783-1859) shaped many of our modern Christmas customs.

⁸ For more about the story behind the name Dollhopf, see *Blog 15: Dollhopf Name Update* at <http://dollhopf.net/>

⁹ <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2016/fall/feature/how-washington-irving-shaped-christmas-in-america>

- 1841: Englishman Sir Henry Cole invented the “Christmas card.”
- 1843: Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, fine-tuning the Christmas story, and again suggesting that toys were appropriate as Christmas gifts for children (look what they started!).
- 1848: Queen Victoria and the royal family posed for an illustration around a Christmas tree, thereby catapulting the decorated tree tradition among the masses.
- 1870s: London department stores began to heavily promote Christmas merchandise to a rising and prosperous middle class, arguably launching the gift-giving consumer orgy of the modern era. New York department stores followed suit, including Lord and Taylor (founded 1826), Macys (1858), and Bloomingdales (1872), among many others.¹⁰

***Die Bescherung*, “Gift Giving”**

The traditional day for gifts in pre-Reformation Germany was the feast day of St. Nicholas, celebrated on December 6th. More about him later. To deemphasize the veneration of saints, Martin Luther encouraged gift giving on Christmas Eve rather than December 6th.

...Luther did have a hand in the German Christmas tradition of giving gifts on Christmas Eve. Although there is some evidence that he and his family continued the established custom of giving small presents on the feast of St Nicholas (December 6th), Luther wanted to make the nativity and the infant Jesus the focus of Christmas celebrations. Thus, he encouraged making Christmas Eve the principal time for gift-giving and identified the *Christkindl* (Christ Child) as the gift bearer. Father Christmas (*Der Weihnachtsmann*) has taken over the role in most German households today, but in others the *Christkindl* still brings the children their presents. [German children still receive gifts from St Nicholas on December 6th as well.]¹¹

As mentioned, Christmas in a peasant village was mostly public merry making and a celebration of food. It differed considerably from the celebrations in the castles or upper-class merchant neighborhoods in the cities. The wealthy exchanged elaborate gifts, serfs not so much.

I have researched numerous accounts of Christmas in German peasant villages in an attempt to ascertain what the children received as presents. I learned that children were excited to receive as their Christmas present...



Christkindl (Christ child) doll from Munich. Martin Luther promulgated the idea of the Christkindl as the bearer of gifts on Christmas Eve, not St. Nicholas. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christkinds>

¹⁰ Palaces of Consumption: The History of Department Stores by Rosa Li, April 21, 2014.

¹¹ <https://blogs.bl.uk/european/2017/12/christmas-with-the-luthers.html>

...an orange! That's it, *one orange*. And some of these accounts were from the early 1900s! If a toy was given, and that's a big *if*, it would have been a simple top, whistle, stick figure, or piece of clothing. Anne Dollhopf, our cousin living in Nürnberg, who was born in 1942, was not given a doll until the age of eight, although it must be noted that she was born in Nürnberg during the devastating impoverishment of WW II.

Our ancestors, beginning with the devastation wrought by the Thirty Years War of 1618-1648, and continuing until the late 1800s, were *desperately* poor serfs. That's in part why so many left for America (more than one Dollhopf made the voyage). Their ability to give gifts (other than food, which was precious enough) was based on their economic circumstances. When our 2nd great grandfather Johann Dollhopf (1830-1858) died in December of 1858, his "estate," which included the contents of his closet, consisted of one pair of pants (presumably he was buried wearing a second pair), two "belly chains" (belts or suspenders), one cloth coat, one felt hat, and one cap. He was probably buried wearing his shoes because there were none in his closet. Other than farming or kitchen implements, that's all he owned.

Someone that poor was not giving or receiving a lot of gifts on Christmas.

Unfortunately, they *were* giving gifts to the local nobleman, or should I say, they were *required* to give gifts to this lord, known as the "margrave," on religious holidays. Remember, our Dollhopfs were serfs, and as serfs they had to pay the lord rent for their land, work on his farm before they worked on their own, obtain his permission to marry, and seek approval to practice a trade – among many other indignities.

From the 1400s through the late 1700s our peasant grandparents owed the margrave "gifts" at Christmas time, as well as certain other religious holidays. These were, in essence, taxes.¹² Such taxes, listed in the Margrave's Feudal Fief Book of the Year 1398, included hens, eggs, milk, cheese, butter and meat.¹³ The Margrave and his minions ate well on holidays.

In the century and a half prior to the Thirty Years War, from 1499 to 1648, our Mistelbach great grandparents were relatively prosperous, even though they were still serfs, as they were owners of the village mill. This run of mill ownership ended when the mill was destroyed and abandoned in the Thirty Year's War. Perhaps before that tragedy they could have afforded to give modest gifts such as silk, porcelain, jewelry, and spices, common at the time. There is no direct evidence of this, only an educated guess.

The "boom" in gift giving, in Europe and America, driven by capitalism, did not occur until the mid to late 1800s:

[The commercialization of Christmas] was driven partly by commercial interests, but more powerfully by the converging anxieties of social elites and middle-class parents in rapidly urbanizing communities who sought to exert control over the bewildering changes occurring in their cities. By establishing a new type of midwinter celebration that integrated home, family, and shopping, these Americans strengthened an emerging bond between Protestantism and consumer capitalism.¹⁴

John Dollhopf, who arrived in America in 1871, was our first ancestor arguably to achieve middle class status. Was he class insecure? Did he partake in the gift-binging rituals of a modern Christmas? Was he buying presents at Kaufmann's Department Store in downtown Pittsburgh after "window shopping" – a custom invented by department stores? We can only guess.

¹² The exact ending date of this practice is not known to me, but serfdom began to be abolished near the end of the 1700s.

¹³ See *Blog 12: Feudalism and Taxes*

¹⁴ See *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/12/why-people-give-christmas-gifts/421908/>

Tannenbaum, “Christmas Tree”

If our 15th great-grandfather Hans Tolhopff woke up in your house on Christmas morning – in a scene straight out of *Back to the Future* – he would have no idea why you planted a pine tree in your living room. Nor would he understand why you hung strange things on it.

Funny, John Dollhopf, before he arrived in America, probably would not have understood either.

Hans in the 1400s definitely did *not* bring a tree into his house, although he and his wife (whose name has been lost to history) and their three known children Dietrich, Hans, and Gerhaws (a girl), all born in the early 1400s, *might* have decorated their house with evergreen boughs, holly, and yes, mistletoe, in recognition of the winter solstice, but even this is highly questionable.

In the midst of the cold, long, dark nights of northern Europe, greenery – *anything* still green in the depths of winter – was a symbol of everlasting life.

Decorating with greenery was not of Christian or even German origin, but a pagan one originating with the ancient Celts and Norse. Traditions varied from village to village, and greenery was likely displayed at various times during the winter because it was thought that it kept away witches, ghosts, evil spirits, and illness.

Lutherans believe that Martin Luther invented the Christmas tree. This is myth, not fact. Luther might have known of the tree tradition, but even this is unsubstantiated:

...it’s pretty certain that Luther had nothing to do with Christmas trees. There’s no mention of such a thing in his letters or *Table Talk*¹⁵ or in biographical accounts by his contemporaries. The popular association seems to go back to an engraving of 1843 by Carl August Schwerdgeburth showing the Luther family gathered round a tree. ...19th-century pictures of Luther’s family life often reflected the artists’ times as much as his, and a tree was a definite fixture of a German Christmas [in some areas] by the 1840s – although not in the 16th century.¹⁶



A Christmas window at Kaufmann’s Department Store c.1926, Pittsburgh, PA. John Dollhopf would not have seen such Christmas consumerism in Germany. This might have been the first time he observed Christmas trees as seen in the window above. He lived less than a mile from this Kaufmann’s store (John died in 1934, his wife Lizzie died in 1951).

¹⁵ *Table Talk* is a collection of Luther’s informal speeches, or “talks” around the dinner table, as related by nine of Luther’s erstwhile dinner guests. Surely, they would have commented on the fact that Luther had a tree in his living room!

¹⁶ <https://blogs.bl.uk/european/2017/12/christmas-with-the-luthers.html>

There are various theories as to the origins of decorating a tree. Some historians posit that the custom evolved from early Christian passion plays depicting the life of Christ. As part of those plays, a tree was decorated with apples to represent the apple tree in the Garden of Eden creation story.

As early as 1470, holiday trees were known to have been erected in Livonia¹⁷ by the guilds of the Brotherhood of Blackheads, a medieval association of wealthy merchants and ship owners.

The first recorded mention of a Christmas tree was in 1576 (30 years after Luther died) in the German village of Turckheim, located along the Rhine River in Alsace, today a region of France, about 300 miles from Mistelbach.¹⁸

The practice seems to have been limited to the upper classes – nobility, clergy, merchants, and the like – and was highly localized.

The likelihood that peasants would have a tree in their house was remote, because in order to do so they would have had to cut down a tree in the nearby woods, and tree-cutting was forbidden. The woodlands surrounding any village were owned by the nobility, and activities such as hunting, foraging for food, or cutting down trees – for firewood or decoration – was strictly prohibited and punishable by imprisonment.

By the 1700s (200 years after Luther) Christmas trees were common in the towns of the upper Rhineland, near Switzerland (Turckheim is in this region). The practice *slowly* spread to rural areas and the lower classes, and in Mistelbach, a remote village, Christmas trees were not a common occurrence until the early to mid 1900s!¹⁹ It took a long time for the peasants in Mistelbach, as it did in other similar villages, to recognize and adopt such a custom. Indeed, a decorated tree, even in the 1800s, was a sign of elevated social status, beyond the reach of most peasants.

Perhaps the greatest impetus to the use and enjoyment of Christmas trees came from England. The London News of 1848 published an illustration of the Royal Couple – Queen Victoria and her German husband Prince Albert – enjoying a decorated Christmas tree, replete with candles, ornaments, and gifts, for the children beneath. You can imagine the impact this might have had on the impressionable masses. An illustration in the London News was a big deal, and the Royals were even more the trend setters in that day and age.

When the Christmas tree did arrive in rural Mistelbach in the 20th century, they were decorated with apples, other fruit if available, (usually dried or preserved with sugar), wafers, cookies, candies, nuts, and colored paper cut into patterns. Sweets and decorations were for the delight of children, who of course would strip the tree of its bounty on Christmas Eve.



This popular 1843 engraving by Carl August Schwerdgeburth depicts Martin Luther's family around a Christmas tree. There is no evidence that Luther knew of or had a Christmas tree, much less invented the idea. This is 19th century German romanticism, a projection of what they thought Christmas must have been like.

¹⁷ Livonia is present day Estonia and Latvia, home at the time to Baltic Germans.

¹⁸ <https://blogs.bl.uk/european/2017/12/christmas-with-the-luthers.html>

¹⁹ Mistelbach Chronicle.

The tree and the gifts were set out and hidden from the view of the children in a locked room – a tradition which for many immigrant families continued in America. A small bell was rung, signaling when the children were allowed to rush into the room and devour the treats.

By the 1900s tree ornaments such as blown glass, pewter, and porcelain – for which nearby Nürnberg was and still is famous – were available. Trees were lit with candles (Luther was also credited for this, again apocryphal) until electric tree lights were invented in America in 1882 by Edward H. Johnson, Thomas Edison's partner. The candle tradition persisted in Germany through the immediate post WW II years, and for some, still to this day.

Alas, even though it was a German tradition, our great grandfather Johann was likely the first Dollhopf ancestor to enjoy a Christmas tree in the house – but only after he immigrated to America. He must have been mightily amused that it was thought of as a German tradition!²⁰

Adventskalender, “Advent Calendar”

Advent Calendars – also a Protestant custom – are hugely popular in Germany and have been since the late 1800s. Before that time Protestants might have lit a candle for each day before Christmas, or placed chalk lines on the wall to be erased with each passing day.

Early advent calendars, before 1900, were handmade and of course many still are, with little pockets for sweets or cookies. In 1902 or 1908 (the date is disputed) the first printed calendar was published in Hamburg, Germany, and in 1922 a printer named Gerhard Lang added the little doors to the printed calendars, concealing pictures, and later, sweets.

I have been to some German Christmas markets that feature real houses whose windows are marked with numbers for each day of advent (you need a lot of windows!).

But alas, this is another German tradition from the late 1800s that would not have been known by any of our ancestors until John came to America.



This is the illustration from the London News of 1848 showing Queen Victoria, her German husband Prince Albert, and their children standing around a “Christmas” tree. As they do today, everyone started imitating the Royals, and the Christmas tree thus became popularized, spreading quickly to America. Bertmann Archive, Getty Images.

²⁰ Curiously, it should be noted that Christmas trees were considered a strictly Protestant tradition because of its pagan origins and shunned by the Catholic Church. The Vatican did not approve of an official Christmas tree until Pope John Paul II erected one at the Vatican in 1982, only 40 years ago.



An Advent Calendar House in the Christmas Market in Salzburg. Each window is numbered and opened to reveal a Christmas scene.

The same is true for the *Adventskranz* (“Advent Wreath”). Although it is said to have originated with German Lutherans in the 16th century, its origins are obscure. Some stories describe advent wreaths as wooden rings – old cartwheels – with 20 small red candles and four large white Sunday candles that were lit successively to mark each day.

Many attribute the “modern” advent wreath, replete with evergreen branches, to Lutheran Pastor Johann Wichern, leader of an orphanage in the suburbs of Hamburg in the 1830s. By the time this “tradition” reached Mistelbach, John was long gone. The wreaths did not become common in Mistelbach until after WW II.²¹

For centuries our Dollhopf ancestors, including those yet unknown before 1400, were Catholic, and Catholics observed at least 50 to 60 saints’ days in the course of a year, depending on the region. These saint day customs have survived, despite the Reformation, and there still are a succession of saint days celebrated in Mistelbach during the Christmas season. These include: *Barbaratag* (“St. Barbara’s Day”), December 4th; *Nikolaustag* (“St. Nicholas Day”), December 6th, which is combined with *Martintag* (“St. Martin’s Day”); *Thomastag* (St. Thomas Day) December 21st; *Stefantag* (“St. Stephen’s Day), December 26th; and *Dreikönigstag* (“Three Kings Day”), January 6th.

Here’s how they were, and some still are, celebrated:

Barbaratag, “St. Barbara’s Day,” December 4th

While our Mistelbach grandparents did not have an evergreen tree in their living room, they did have a cherry branch – sometimes an entire cherry tree – in the kitchen!

They decorated those cherry branches, known as *Barbarazweig* (“Barbara’s branch”) with paper die cuts, fruit, and other sweets, the same as one would decorate a fir tree.

According to the Mistelbach Chronicle, *Barbaratag* was, and in some homes still is, a centuries old holiday tradition in Mistelbach.²²

St. Barbara was a virgin martyr celebrated by the medieval church. Barbara, who supposedly lived in the 4th century, was from Heliopolis Phoenicia, present-day Baalbek, Lebanon. There is no direct evidence of her existence in early church writings; she’s the stuff of legend. Her feast day was added to the Roman Church Calendar in the

²¹ <https://blogs.transparent.com/german/the-history-of-the-adventskranz-advent-wreath/>

²² <https://germanculture.com.ua/german-holidays/st-barbaras-day/>

12th century, but because her authenticity was in doubt she was removed from the official calendar in 1982 (apparently authentication takes a long time in Rome...), but not from the official list of saints.

As the story goes, she was locked in a tower by her strict pagan father who wanted to protect her from the outside world, especially those pesky conversion-minded Christians. Despite his protection, Barbara allowed a priest to enter the tower and baptize her. When her father discovered that she had been baptized a Christian, he sentenced her to death. Egad.

When she was taken to the dungeon to await her beheading, a cherry branch got caught in her dress, and in her dungeon cell she cared for that branch with water from her drinking cup. It blossomed on the day of her execution in the winter of 306. That day, December 4th, became venerated as *Barbaratag* and was celebrated by Christians beginning in the 13th century, eventually including our peasant ancestors in Mistelbach.

Believe it or not, it was also a day to bake *Kletzenbrot*, (“fruit loaf bread”)!²³

Barbara is also the patron saint of miners and those who work with explosives. Why this tradition persisted in the farming community of Mistelbach, where there was no mining (other than sandstone) or use of explosives that I know of, is not known. Nor can it be explained why this Catholic holiday persisted in Protestant Mistelbach, other than the fact that traditions not only evolved slowly, but also died slowly, in remote villages.²⁴

She was popular, however – the given name Barbara appears more than 200 times among the known women in our Dollhopf family tree.

There is an element of truth behind this legend – at least as far as the cherry branches are concerned. If outdoor temperatures hover above freezing for six weeks in the late fall, then branches of apple, chestnut, cherry, lilac, and jasmine can be forced to bloom if brought indoors and kept in a warm place with a lot of light. Often they were placed in the kitchen by the stove in a bucket of warm water. (It must be remembered that medieval peasant



Barbarazweig (“Barbara branches”) cherry blossoms next to the figure of St. Barbara in a modern home.



Kletzenbrot – yet another type of fruit bread baked on St Barbara’s Day in the season of Advent. This bread was baked with a dark mealy flour such as rye, and with, of course, candied fruits, nuts, and rum.

²³ Hey, you can’t make this stuff up. Any excuse to bake fruit cake.

²⁴ While Mistelbach was indeed Protestant, there were other villages in the immediate region that remained Catholic.



Barbarazweig. This is a cherry branch, but elderberry and sloe bush branches were also used in Mistelbach. Sometimes entire trees were brought indoors.

houses had no separate “kitchen,” just one central living area.) If conditions were advantageous, the buds blossomed by Christmas day, and, as superstitious as our ancestors were, it was seen as a harbinger of good luck and a productive new year:

Wie sich die Knospen des Barbarazweiges bis Weihnachten öffnen, so soll sich auch der Mensch dem kommenden Licht auf tun.

“Just as the buds of the Barbara branch open by Christmas, so man should be open to the coming light [of Christ].”

From the December 1993 issue of the *Hummelgauer Heimat Bote*, in an article written by local resident Annemarie Leutzsch, we learn about this tradition in Mistelbach:

Nowadays, the weeks before Christmas Eve are the most exciting and stressful of the year and they should bring us reflection and rest. It was a quiet time until a few decades ago.

"In Advent, you hang your violins on the wall!" is the popular saying. This means that there was no dancing until Christmas and, just like Lent, no weddings were performed. In the country the Advent wreath only appeared after the last war [WW II], and even then, not in all families. Up until the turn of the century [1900], it was customary to cut branches from the cherry, or sour cherry, trees, or the elderberry or sloe bushes, on December 4th, St. Barbara's Day.

Yes, it was often whole cherry trees (known as St. Barbara's trees) that stood in the corner on Christmas Eve, and their branches reached up to the ceiling and sometimes far into the room. The hoped-for timely bloom promised a fruitful year. In later years, the Barbara tree branches were replaced by spruce branches, which were easier to get until the Christmas tree finally moved in.

Christmas decorations were made for both the branches and the tree on some evenings during the Advent season. The girls left their spinning wheels and knitting, and cut and folded artistic roses from tissue paper. Welsh nuts (walnuts) were gilded with leaves of metal foil, small red-cheeked apples were rubbed with a soft cloth until they were shiny. Every year the mother brought something special back from town: angel hair [tinsel], silver chains, glass icicles, and white-dusted pinecones. Yes, they imitated the townspeople and bought glass bulbs and chimney



St. Barbara, a sculpture of lindenwood from Germany, c. 1490; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

sweep figurines,²⁵ little trumpet ornaments, and lots of birds, which then turned the simplest spruce - magnificently decorated - into a miracle tree at Christmas. How gladly would the children have rummaged through their mother's basket when she finally came back from town, eagerly awaited.

Nikolaustag, "St. Nicholas Day," December 6th

St. Nicholas, the figure we associate in America with Santa Claus, comes early in Mistelbach. Because of the fragmentation of customs in German-speaking Europe, Santa Claus went by many names, including several of these most popular: Weihnachtsmann, Nickel, Klaus, and Niglo.²⁶ The name Santa Claus is derived from Saint (Santa) and Nicholas or Niklaus (Claus).

St. Nicholas Day, December 6, is still a popular holiday (but not an official day off) in Germany and widely celebrated, although it is more popular in Catholic regions. St. Nicholas, of Greek descent, was probably born around 245 CE in the port city of Patara, modern day Turkey (again, this is shrouded in myth; very little historical evidence exists). He became the Bishop of Myra and the patron saint of children, sailors, students, teachers, and merchants. He performed many miracles and was legendary for his secret gift-giving – he placed coins in shoes that were left out for him – which is why he became associated with Christmas. In some areas of Germany children still leave their shoes out to be filled with treats.

He was canonized a saint in 1466; his feast day is the date of his death, December 6, 343. Although his canonization was not until the very late Middle Ages, he was celebrated as a saint as early as 1200 by French Catholics. It is hard to say if our earliest ancestor Hans Tolhopf celebrated him in any way beyond how saints were normally recognized. This is difficult to determine. Given the remoteness of Mistelbach, his feast day was probably not celebrated in any elaborate fashion until centuries later.

If and when the St. Nicholas tradition took hold in Mistelbach, it was supplanted by the tradition of the *Pelzmärktl*, which translates as the "fur coated (*Pelz*) St. Martin (*Martl*)" He was a fusion of St. Nicholas and St. Martin (another saint whose feast day is November 11th). In earlier centuries St. Martin's Day was celebrated on November 11th, but more commonly now it is combined with the St. Nicholas holiday on December 6th.²⁷



"We cut a Barbara branch!" from Lila und Ben – das Magazin für Kinder und Eltern. ("Lila and Ben – the Magazine for Children and Parents")

²⁵ Chimney sweeps were seen in Mistelbach as talismans for good luck in the new year. The German word is *Watteschlotfegerlein* – *Watte* = "cotton balls;" *schlotfegerlein* = "chimney sweeper." Cotton added the appearance of winter snow. This is not a tradition unique to Mistelbach; think Mary Poppins. In ancient English folklore, chimney sweeps brought good luck (probably because they prevented chimney fires!)

Chim chiminey, chim chiminey, chim chim cher-ee; A sweep is as lucky as lucky can be;
Chim chiminey, chim chiminey, chim chim cher-oo; Good luck will rub off when I shakes 'ands with you;
Or blow me a kiss, and that's lucky too.

²⁶ German-way.com/history-and-culture/holidays-and-celebrations/christmas/saint-nicholas/

²⁷ St. Martin of Tours was most highly venerated in France, where he was a 4th century Bishop, known for cutting his cape in two and giving one half to a beggar, clad only in rags, in the depth of winter. The St. Nicholas and St. Martin legends arose during the Merovingian Dynasty of the Franks, from the 5th to 8th centuries. The Franks

From the Heimat Bote:

On December 6th, the Pelzmärzl knocked on the door. Often, he didn't have much time, so sometimes he wasn't even seen. But he rolled a few apples into the room, sprinkled nuts and a few gingerbread cookies. Some of the gingerbreads were elongated and thin, decorated with a picture of him, which children kept as a keepsake for a long time. Sometimes he would also threateningly show a sack in order to scare the little boys that he would take them away [if they were bad].

But if he came into the room with a rumble, and read a whole list of misbehaviors, then the boys were meek. It was also too surprising how the Pelzmärzl knew of these misbehaviors – e.g., that one child always made donkey ears in her schoolbooks [bent the pages, apparently a real no-no....] or another child picked his nose! [The Pelzmärzl was alerted of these misdeeds by parents before he entered the house.]

Relieved and with great promises that they would not misbehave again, the children accepted the gifts and hastily said goodbye until the next year.

That evening, and this still happens today [1993], twelve- to fourteen-year-old boys go around the neighborhood noisily after dark. They ring big cowbells, knock on windowpanes, and rattle chains to scare the younger children – the Pelzmärzl returns! But as soon as you opened a window, they quickly ran away.²⁸



Pelzmärzl is a character like Santa Claus who goes door to door in Mistelbach on December 6th. He gives children fruit, nuts, and candies, and threatens them if they continue the bad behaviors that their parents secretly told the Pelzmärzl before he entered the house.

There was a scary side to this Santa-like figure, as many parents can attest in scenes of terrified children sitting on the laps of department store Santas. In many of the St. Nicholas legends, he is accompanied by a dark figure variously known as *Knecht Rupprecht* or *Krampus*, a mean-looking fellow who threatens to punish naughty children by taking them away in his potato sack. Our version of Santa can also be menacing – he keeps a list, noting who was naughty and who was nice, threatening to leave coal for the miscreants.

Speaking of bad behavior, mothers in Mistelbach were known to scold fidgety children in church with the following admonition, again as told in the Heimat Bote:

If you're not good, the *Harsdorf Christkindl* (Little Christ Child from Harsdorf²⁹) will come!" But to keep the children quiet, the mother gave them a *Schweig'n* (rough translation: "treat to keep you

eventually split into two tribes – inhabiting the area in the west known today as France, and an area in the east known as Franken, or Franconia, the region of Germany where Mistelbach is located.

²⁸ The Pelzmärzl made the rounds to all of the house of the village. He was greeted by the parents at the door, who secretly informed him about the misdeeds and mischiefs of the children, which is how he knew. The parents would then – secretly of course – give the Pelzmärzl some money.

²⁹ Harsdorf is another small village in the Hummelgauer region, about 10 miles from Mistelbach.

quiet”) – a white *Bernecker Pfeffernüßchen* (“sugar dusted anise cookie from Berneck”) a foretaste of Christmas. The story of the *Harsdorf Christkindl* must be several generations old [from the 1800s], because it has been threatened for so long in Mistelbach.

As was the custom in other villages, the Harsdorf women took their children with them to church. But the service lasted too long for the little ones and they became restless. Then the mother pointed to the picture...and whispered admonishingly:

“You see, it's *Christkindla* up there! He sees everything. And if you're not good, it won't do *you* any good!”

This threat made many a little fidgety child quiet. This *Harsdorfer Christkindlein* saying became popular in the Bayreuth region.

Thomastag, “St. Thomas Day,” December 21st

This is one of the oddest holidays, celebrated mostly in Protestant villages such as Mistelbach. It was a night filled with fanciful magic and propitious superstitions. Traditionally this is the day of remembrance of St. Thomas, one of Jesus’ twelve Apostles. What the doubting St. Thomas had to do with superstitions is not clear to me. It had more to do with the calendar....

December 21st is the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. The night of December 21st is therefore the longest *night* of the year, and in northern Europe it is long indeed – about 16 hours of darkness. Because it was the darkest time of the year, the influence of spirits – both good and bad – were thought to be exceptionally intense. Many customs born of superstition arose in thousands of remote German villages – some to scare away evil spirits, some to take advantage of their magical powers. They were all different.

The customs peculiar to Mistelbach surrounding St. Thomas Day give us an unusual glimpse into the life of a medieval peasant village, a life full of magic and superstition. From the *Heimat Bote*:

A special day, namely the shortest of the year, is St. Thomas' Day on December 21st. No handicrafts were allowed to be made, because as the saying goes, "whoever knits and mends on *Thomastag*, will shrivel up and become lame!"

The night was one of many magical superstitions in which one could try out all kinds of “love predictions.” On the evening of St. Thomas Day, a social event for young women called a *Rockenstube*, (“spinning room,”) was held.³⁰ The younger girls listened to the older ones, and each tried to look into the future to predict whom they would marry.

³⁰ A *Rockenstube*, or “spinning room” was a gathering of unmarried woman on long winter nights ostensibly to spin yarn, but mostly as an excuse for gossip. Eventually boys would crash the party, and all hell would break loose. The practice had a most interesting history in Mistelbach. To wit: “Spinning rooms are places of a very lively village culture that aimed to reconcile work and life. The spinning room is held alternately in one farmhouse or another, the women and girls spin, later the boys arrive and make music. Folk songs are sung, “witch” and “ghost stories” are told, and all sorts of entertainment [mostly mischievous] unfold. The spinning rooms not only served as a way for girls to spin yarn to earn a living, but were “news exchanges” and a gossip forum as well as a place for youthful sexual culture and boozey exuberance. In later years, because of the immoralities that occurred, there were spinning room laws in various areas, i.e. police regulations regarding the time and duration of the get-togethers, and in some areas banned outright. Numerous folk tales, historical musings and spinning-room songs have been handed down from these social gatherings far beyond Central Europe.” [Meyers Konversationslexikon, 1888-1890].

[Following are the games the girls played....]

Three wooden sticks (called *Brügela*) - each one marked with the name of a certain boy - were thrown over the head into a tree behind. If one of the sticks got stuck in the tree, that was the boy she would marry. If all three sticks fell to the ground, she had to wait patiently until the next St. Thomas Day.

If you were still unsure of your future husband, you shook the garden gate until a dog barked. The boy who by chance came from the direction of the barking dog would be the future husband.

Writing a note was of course safer [than provoking a dog]. The names of three desired boys were written on three pieces of paper. The folded papers were placed under the pillow. At night, at twelve o'clock if possible, you reached under the pillow and...“reached for happiness!” [The paper with the name of the boy you would marry.] Some girls wanted to be absolutely sure, so they wrote the name of the same boy “Hans” on all three pieces of paper, and although that was not allowed, Hans became her husband anyway!³¹

In predicting the future, the bed also played an important role. Many a girl sprinkled flaxseed on her bed and whispered:

Heit is der Thoma	Hello St. Thomas
streu ich aus mein Soma	I scatter my seeds
streu ich aus mein Lein	I scatter my flax
daß mir mein Herzliebster erschein!	that my dearest one will appear to me!

The boy would then appear to her in a dream. [I printed the German because, of course, it rhymes; the English translation does not.]

And the last custom is the kicking of the *Bettbrett* (“bed board” or “headboard”). The girl dreams of her wedding on the night of St. Thomas; when she goes to bed she lies down with her head at the foot of the bed. Then she must kick the bed board with her feet and say:

Bettbrett, ich tritt dich.	Bed board, I kick you.
heiliger Thomas, ich bitt dich,	Saint Thomas, I beg you,
laß mir mein' Herzliebsten erscheinen.	let my beloved appear to me.
Wie er geht, wie er steht,	How he walks, how he stands,
wie er mit mir um Altar rumgeht.	how he walks with me to the altar.

If she can sleep in spite of the excitement, the beloved one will appear to her in a dream.

One young girl [the story is told] was once almost frightened to death. Before she went to bed, a farm helper boy crept into her bedroom and hid under the bed. No sooner had the girl finished her chant than the lad put out his hand and cried, "Here I am!" Screaming and dressed only in her night shirt, she ran down the stairs into the living room and it was almost impossible to calm her down. She had enough of kicking the bed board! This custom of St. Thomas Day was still practiced in the 1920s!

³¹ Of course, in a village where every other boy was named Hans, the odds were pretty good you would get the boy you wanted...

John Dollhopf certainly knew of this tradition – at the very least because the spinning rooms were notorious for their debauchery, akin to what we would associate with the worst of college fraternity parties. There were numerous times in Mistelbach’s history – especially in the late 1700s and early 1800s – when this practice was banned in Mistelbach by church and civil officials because the activities got out of hand. It is likely that the excitement of the holiday season caught up with all of the youth! (Right.) Oh well, boys will be boys and girls will be girls. Our naughty teenage grandparents likely engaged in this great mischief-making around the holidays.

I wonder...our 3rd great grandfather Eberhard Dollhopf (1789-1843) was, in addition to being a farmer, the mayor (sheriff) of Mistelbach in the 1820s and 30s. Did he ever have to break up these wild parties?

Weihnachtsabend, “Christmas Eve,” or Heiligabend, “Holy Night”

Exactly how our ancestors celebrated Christmas Eve – what they ate, the carols they sang, the Bible verses read, and who if anyone brought presents for the children, is a moving target.

Christmas Eve traditions varied widely from family to family and from generation to generation, as they do today. We should remember that there were no TVs, radios, magazines, newspapers, photographs, social media, or written materials (no one wrote down Christmas recipes, for example) – no way to know how families celebrated Christmases past, or how they were celebrating in the next village, or the next German-speaking territory, or, for that matter, in France, or England....

Customs were shared by word of mouth over hundreds of years and thousands of miles. From generation to generation, family customs might have changed gradually, or disappeared altogether, especially if a parent died prematurely, as often happened, and there was no one to “remember” how things were done.

We do know that Martin Luther was a major influence on how Christmas was celebrated.

He urged that presents should be exchanged on Christmas Eve, not on St. Nicholas Day. He translated the Bible from the Hebrew and Greek into German so that peasants could read it for themselves, if they could read. He introduced Christmas carols based on folk songs and bar tunes that could be sung in Church and at home by everyone. Until this time, the only songs heard in church were mostly Gregorian chants intoned by the priest.

When exactly was Luther’s influence felt in Mistelbach by our ancestors? The oldest existing Mistelbach church document, a photo of which is on the next page, is the church’s annual report of 1556 – “*Accounts by the church treasurer of Mistelbach of all the revenues and expenditures of one year from [15]56 until [15]57*” – confirming that the Church was indeed by that time “Lutheran.” The church financial report was an important village document. In



Luther on Christmas Eve, Bernhard Plockhurst, 1887. Plockhurst was a painter of the Nazarene Movement, a German Romantic Art School. This is indeed a romanticized depiction of how Luther spent Christmas Eve, not an historically accurate portrayal. This tells us more about the era of the artist than the times of Martin Luther. There is no evidence that Luther ever displayed a tree. Note the treats on the table, the boy playing with Victorian era toys, and the townspeople peering through the doorway to see the master at work. It is true that Luther was an accomplished musician and was known to have played both the lute and flute.

those times the local church functioned not only as the place of worship and religious ceremonies, but also as the village bank – extending credit and issuing loans. The church also collected taxes.

The *Kirchenvorsteher* (“church warden,” or for lack of a better translation “council president”) at the time was none other than Hans Tolhopff’s great-grandson, our 12th great-grandfather, Cuntz Tolhopff (c.1498-1570). On the title page at right he spelled his name *Conz Tolhopff*, which I underlined in red. He owned the village mill and therefore likely enjoyed elevated social status and wealth. We don’t know the name of his wife, but they had four children for whom we have confirmed records (inferred evidence suggests they probably had many more children) – Georg “the Elder,” Georg “the Middle,” Georg “the Younger,” and Cuntz (Jr.)...and 31 grandchildren that we know of – a family custom made for big Christmas celebrations!³²

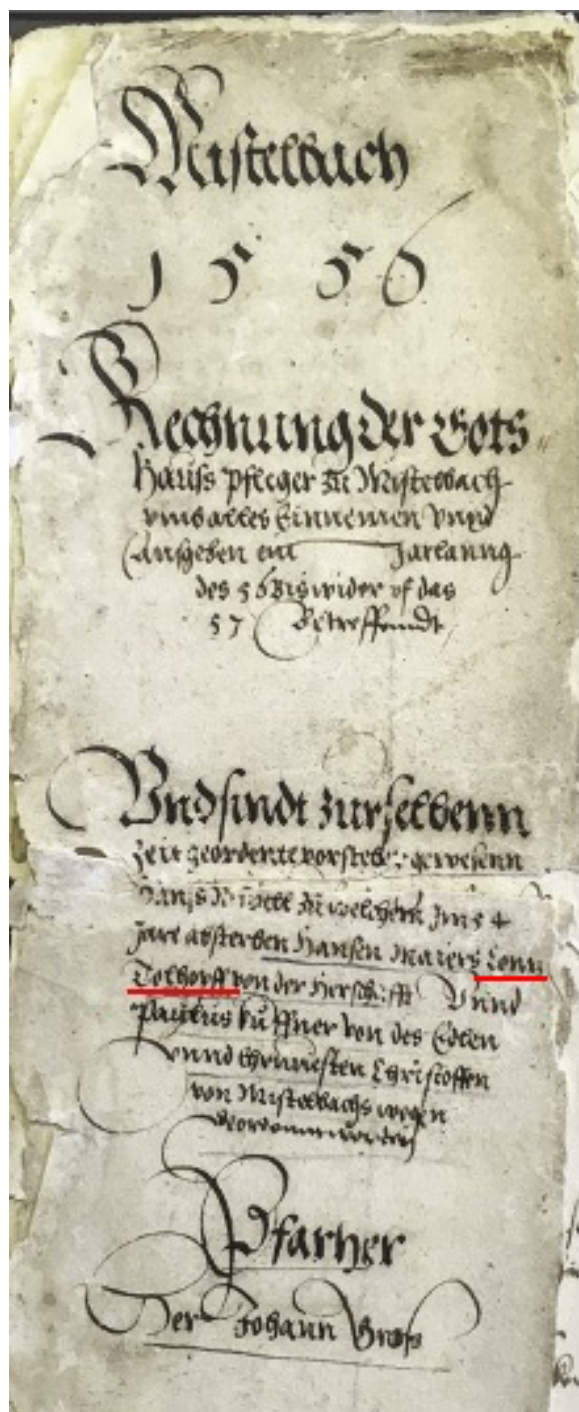
Perhaps Cuntz and his wife – given the size of their family, their relative wealth, and the fact that the church was now Lutheran – were the first to celebrate Christmas Eve reading from the Bible, singing carols, and opening presents. Just maybe they were wealthy enough to exchange gifts. Just a guess.³³

The Reformation unfortunately led to bitter disputes between Catholics and Protestants. No doubt some of those disputes were about how to appropriately celebrate holidays – whether or not to recognize saints, for example. Disputes over the Reformation were so bitter that war erupted, the devastating Thirty Years War of 1618 to 1648.

In 1634, the most disastrous year of that war for Mistelbach, residents of the nearby Catholic villages of Hollfeld and Waischenfeld plundered Mistelbach. They ransacked the rectory, looted houses, and set fire to the buildings that weren’t already destroyed earlier by Catholic troops. (See *Blog 9: Pandemics and War.*)

Although it would be easy to believe that Cuntz and his progeny were the first to experience a family-centered Christmas, it is more likely that this transformation occurred well after the Reformation and the subsequent Thirty Years War, most likely becoming more common in the late 1700s and 1800s.

Unfortunately, by that time our ancestors had slipped into deep poverty, beginning with our 5th great grandparents, Johann Dollhopf (1752-1828) and Kunigunde Seuffert



³² Families that large were rare. To have so many children was also an indication of relative wealth.

³³ For more about Cuntz, his family, and a translation of the church documents, see *Blog 18: Land Owned.*

(1722-1798). They were eking out an existence on a small farm, about 9 acres, barely large enough to support a family. They no longer enjoyed the social status or wealth that came with being millers since the mill was lost in 1634 to the Thirty Years War.

This Johann and his wife Kunigunde were our first great grandparents not to have had the benefit of practicing a trade to supplement their income, as ten generations of their forebearers did. After they were millers, the Dollhopfs became tailors for six generations. Whether this Johann lost the privilege to practice a trade, or perhaps chose not to, is not known. But the next three generations after the run of tailors, beginning with Johann and Kunigunde, were the poorest of our known ancestors, and Christmas was likely a very, very, modest affair. Gifts, few as they might have been in poor peasant families, were mostly food items – fruit, nuts, candies, and baked goods.

As we have noted, St. Nicholas was the bearer of these modest gifts, but Martin Luther discouraged this custom. He abhorred the practice of the veneration of saints, including St. Nicholas. In Catholicism, saints were and are thought to be “intercessors” – one could pray to God only with the help, or “intercession,” of a saint. Luther believed that Christ was the only mediator between God and man, and that Christians should pray only to Christ, not to the saints. He recognized saints merely as examples of God’s mercy, not as intermediaries, and sought to downplay their importance.

To discourage the gift-giving custom surrounding St. Nicholas, Luther promulgated the *Christkindl* (“Little Christ Child”) as the bearer of gifts, not St. Nicholas, and gifts were to be given on the occasion of his birth, not the feast day of St. Nicholas. In Germany today, they practice both customs – St. Nicholas and the *Christkindl* both roam the streets at the traditional Christmas markets.

Hey, what’s wrong with more presents?

Over time the *Christkindl* came to be recognized as a young blond-haired blue-eyed girl dressed like an angel.³⁴ If you visit Christmas markets in southern Germany, this figure makes a grand entrance, often on stilts, with children dancing about her feet. Jesus was a Semite. Go figure.



The Christkindl figure as she now commonly appears at Christkindl Markets.

And for reasons totally perplexing, the *Christkindl* eventually became the gift-giving character used only by...Catholics! Not Protestants! A role reversal! In the north of Germany, the *Weihnachtsmann* (Father Christmas) eventually became the gift giver, influenced heavily by secularism and the commercialization of Christmas by English speaking countries. The *Christkindl* continued to be used in southern Germany, which was mostly Catholic. Thus the switch.

³⁴ This unfortunately was due to the influence of the Nazis, who heavily promoted the Germanic tradition of Christmas markets, and the girls portraying the *Christkindl* were to be purposefully Aryan – blond and blue eyed. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/how-christmas-markets-became-classic-holiday-tradition>

The shift to the use of *Weihnachtsmann* probably occurred mostly in the 20th century. He probably did not come to Mistelbach until the mid 1900s and then probably delayed by the World Wars until the 1950s.

Our great-grandfather would have been raised knowing the *Christkindl*. Only when he started celebrating Christmas in Pittsburgh did he likely introduce his children – our grandparent’s generation – to the character of Santa Claus. (Although he just might have introduced them to “Kris Kringle” – the American phonetic version of “Christkindl.”)

In keeping with this switch to the observance of the *Weihnachtsmann*, Christmas markets in the Protestant north of Germany are called *Weihnachtsmarkt*, while in the Catholic south of Germany and Austria they are still known as *Christkindlmarkt*. In Bayreuth, next to Mistelbach, which today is in the southern German state of Bavaria, the term *Christkindlmarkt* is used, further evidence that our great-grandfather was only familiar with that term.

***Weihnachstag*, “Christmas Day”**

Today in Mistelbach, Christmas Day is the time for festive meals and extended family gatherings. It is not clear how the day, as opposed to the eve, would have been celebrated in the Middle Ages. Luther celebrated on Christmas Eve. My educated guess is that Christmas Day became much more of a family focused celebration with the increasing prosperity of the middle class beginning in the late 1800s and early 1900s – due in part to the rapid industrialization of Germany after 1871.

The Christmas Eve meal in Mistelbach today is traditionally a light meal of *Würstchen und Kartoffelsalat* (“sausages and potato salad”), or fish (carp is most common in Franconia). The big festive meal is on Christmas Day.

This big meal traditionally included roast goose and in some cases pork, if a pig had been available for slaughter. In fact, the raising of geese was a specialty of the Dollhopf farm in the early 1900s. Our second cousin, Hans Dollhopf (1924-2019), who was born and raised on the farm, told me when I visited him in 2016 that it was his job as a boy in the 1930s to take care of the family’s geese. The Dollhopf family had one of the largest farms in Mistelbach in the early 1900s, and the family sold many geese in the markets of nearby Bayreuth.

Hans said that taking care of the geese was his fondest memory of his childhood in Mistelbach.

However, for the geese, the memories probably not so fond...

Here’s why. From the Heimate Bote:

In the last week before the festival, the geese were brought from Mistelbach to Bayreuth for customers. They had been well fattened for that because they were “stuffed” [stuffed while they were alive, that is]. The stuffing consisted of dumpling dough, sometimes with added flour, shaped into elongated sausages, or a firm dough that was made from black and white flour or corn flour. “When you stuff the goose,” says an elderly peasant woman, “you took the goose on



Gänsebraten: *Roast Goose*

your lap, opened its beak with your left hand with your thumb and forefinger and then stuffed the bird's crop full (the crop is the pouch in the bird's gullet or esophagus). If you've done that for a fortnight or three weeks, you've got beautiful, fat geese.³⁵ Of course, nowadays this forced feeding is considered cruel. But people stuff their stomachs so full that it often doubles in size, and then they have to run to the doctor. When they get better, they fill their bellies again. With the geese you stopped when the crop was full. But man knows no measure!

A pig was slaughtered and soon afterwards it was time to bake *Stollen*. The *Hieferstollen* ("yeast stollen") smelled tempting. Although they did not come close to the Dresden Christmas stollen, they were a delicious addition to the *Gugelhopf* every Sunday.

Baking cookies only became fashionable in the country during the First World War. Back then you were only allowed to send small field post parcels to the soldiers, and that's how you baked these scaled-down cakes. The fine recipes were obtained from the teacher's wife or from city women, to whom butter and eggs were delivered. The children were allowed to weigh and measure, prepare anise (fennel) seeds, cut lemon peel and orange peel into cubes, crack and grind nuts, and rub lemon peel off. It smelled of cinnamon and cardamom, cloves, and mace. This is how almond rings and cinnamon stars, anise cookies and springerle were created. The butter cookies were the most popular. They tasted wonderful and melted on your tongue.

Of course, all of these treats were hidden away until Christmas Eve!

Stefanstag, "St. Stephen's Day," December 26th

St. Stephen's Day – The Feast of St. Stephen – the day after Christmas, is celebrated in Mistelbach as a public holiday. Shops are closed both on Christmas Day and St. Stephen's Day. St. Stephen was a Christian deacon in Jerusalem, known for his service to the poor, who was stoned to death for his beliefs in 36 CE, thus becoming the first Christian martyr.

There are no particular customs associated with this holiday in the Mistelbach area, other than shops are closed and it is yet further time for holiday parties and visiting friends. In the Middle Ages our great grandparents might have celebrated this holy day as they did the other 60 or so holy days – mass, festive food, minor public festivities, and the like.

Although we don't celebrate this holiday in America, we are all well aware of it:

Good King Wenceslaus looked out,
On the Feast of Stephen....

Dreikönigstag, "Three Kings Day," January 6th

Three Kings Day is also known as Epiphany, which is derived from the Greek *Epiphinias*, meaning "revelation," or the "appearance." According to the Gospel of Matthew, the three kings – Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar – followed the path of a star across the desert, arriving at the manger 12 days later on January 6th.

³⁵ This forced feeding of the goose – up to four pounds of stuffing daily – causes the animal to suffer from a painful illness that causes its liver to swell up to ten times its normal size. This is how *foie gras* (liver pate) is made. Today, many countries, including Germany, ban the practice. Sadly, it is still legal in the US.

These three kings are recognized by the Catholic Church as saints, so this was yet another saints' feast day to be celebrated.

The custom of *Dreikönigssingen* ("Three Kings singing") today by in Franconia is observed only by Catholics. School children from local churches, dressed up as the Three Wise Men and the Star "Bearer", walk door to door to obtain sweets (similar to Halloween), but most specially to collect money for worthy causes (in Germany they collect money for the Pontifical Mission Societies, a fundraising project for the Pope). The practice is a medieval one, practiced by children who were begging in the cold weather. The tradition died out centuries ago but was revived in the mid 1900s.³⁶

If the homeowners allow the carol singers in, they sing songs and recite prayers or poems in exchange for the goodies and money.

Upon leaving the house the children inscribe on or above the front door, with consecrated chalk, "C+M+B" – a house blessing that has several meanings: Caspar + Melchior + Balthazar," or Christ mansionem benedicat ("Christ bless this house"), or casam meam benedicat ("bless my house").

Depends on whom you ask.

Dreikönigstag marks the end of the Christmas season, traditionally when Germans take down their decorations.



Dreikönigssingen – school children dressed up as the three wise men and the star bearer go to door to door singing carols and reciting poems to obtain sweets and money for good causes.

Christkindmarkt, "Christ Child Markets"

German Christmas markets are celebrated the world over, popular even in the US – one of the most well-known is in Bryant Park, New York City, located behind the New York City Public Library.



Upon leaving the house, the Sternsinger ("star singers") write C+M+B above the door, including the date, in this year 2008.

Early German Christmas markets date from the 15th and 16th centuries. There is evidence of a Christmas market in Dresden on Christmas Eve 1434, and the oldest evidence of the worlds' most famous market in Nürnberg (50 miles from Mistelbach) is from 1628, although some argue that it began as early as 1530.³⁷

In the Middle Ages, Cathedral cities held markets in the church square on religious feast days, which in medieval Europe were many and often. They were not so much holiday fairs as they were street malls – an opportunity for

³⁶ https://de-m-wikipedia-org.translate.goog/wiki/Heilige_Drei_K%C3%B6nige?_x_tr_sl=de&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=sc

³⁷ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/how-christmas-markets-became-classic-holiday-tradition>

peasants from the surrounding territory to sell food (milk, eggs, cheese, meat), clothing, housewares, etc. In most villages there were no stores; commerce took place on the street. So Christmas markets likely evolved from this practice in these “market cities.”

Because Bayreuth was slow to evolve into a town large enough to sustain and attract markets, it is difficult to determine exactly when the custom of a Christmas market arose.

If Nürnberg, which was a large city by comparison, did not have a Christmas market until 1628, we can assume that Bayreuth probably did not have one until well after that date.

The year 1628 marked the period of time during the Thirty Years War when Bayreuth was routed and largely destroyed several times, most severely in the 1630s, and it took decades to repopulate and rebuild.



Christkindl Markt (“Christmas Market”) in Nürnberg, one of the largest in the world. At center is the Catholic Frauenkirche (“Church of Our Lady”) built on the main market square between 1352 and 1362.

Bayreuth began to flourish with the ascendancy of the Margrave Georg Wilhelm I, who built his palace there in 1715. By the mid 1700s Bayreuth had a new larger palace and an opera house (1745-1750). The town, despite its relatively small size, became a cultural draw.

I will hazard a guess that by this time it too would have staged a Christmas market, as any respectable cultural center would have. There is a good chance however that Bayreuth did not have a market until a thriving middle class evolved in the late 1800s. I have found no references as to when the custom of a Christmas market actually began in Bayreuth.

For almost 200 years and six generations – from roughly 1570 to 1750 – our Dollhopf grandfathers were tailors. It is not difficult to imagine that the Dollhopf tailors made the four-mile trek to the Bayreuth market to sell their shirts, pants, skirts, dresses, aprons, coats, and traditional regional costumes, called *tracht*. The Dollhopf tailors, beginning with our 10th great-grandfather, were Cuntz (Cuntz is a nickname for Conrad) Dollhopf (1581-1635); Conrad Dollhopf (1607-1683); Hans der Ältere (“the elder”) Dollhopf (1629-1710); Hans der Jüngere (“the younger”) Dollhopf (1656-1705); Conrad Dollhopf (1693-1759); and Johann Dollhopf (1718-1771). Trades were inherited – passed from father to son like property – but only with the permission of the margrave or his assigns, the “town council,” who regulated the number of tailors, as well as the other trades, in each village.

Depending on when the custom of Christmas markets began in Bayreuth, any of these great-grandfathers could have set up a stall at the market. This would have been a major undertaking for a peasant family. The markets could have lasted a day or two, or for most of Advent. As mentioned above, farmers also sold their goods at market, but our ancestors were farming at subsistence levels, and it is highly unlikely that they had excess food stuffs to sell. But perhaps they did. We’ll never know.



A contemporary photo of the Christkindl Markt in Bayreuth, the city that shares a border with the village of Mistelbach. This Christkindl Markt is roughly four miles from the Dollhopf house in Mistelbach. Seen in the photo are the Christmas vendor stalls set up along the sidewalks and down the middle of Maximilianstrasse (“Maximilian Street”), a wide thoroughfare through the central business district.

The large six-story building in the middle of the photograph, with rounded arch windows on the ground floor, is the famous Mohren (“Moorish”) Pharmacy, built in 1610. It was built as a pharmacy and remains one today. It was named after the exotic dark-skinned Moors – a sort of medieval branding for the pharmacy’s exotic concoctions and elixirs, which were created in the Pharmacy’s laboratory in the same building. The Pharmacy’s address is [Maximilianstrasse 57](#).

In the mid 1400s, our 15th great-grandfather Hans Tolhopff, who was born about 1400, owned a house at [Maximilianstrasse 75](#), a few doors to the right of the Pharmacy and just around the bend in the photo. From old court records we know that Hans’ son Dietrich (our 14th ggf) inherited the house between 1475 and 1477. Dietrich moved to Mistelbach, where his father had purchased property, at some point before 1497, the year in which he appears on the feudal tax roll of Mistelbach. Dietrich’s son Cuntz in turn, (our 13th ggf), even though he was living in Mistelbach, inherited the house in 1511 (again, we know this from court records). Cuntz died sometime between 1523 and 1526, at which time the house left the family. Was the house still standing when the Pharmacy was built in 1610? Good chance. (However, all the buildings surrounding the Pharmacy were long ago replaced, so the original house #75 no longer exists.)

The fact that Hans owned a house so close to the Pharmacy, in this part of the city, is an interesting historical clue – he was likely a relatively wealthy burgher. From this and other clues – that he had enough money to purchase land outside of Bayreuth in Mistelbach, that his son Dietrich had enough money to purchase the mill in Mistelbach, that his son was a miller – we can infer that he too was a mill owner. We also know from “A History of the City of Bayreuth” published in 1823 by historian Johann Holle that Maximilianstrasse 75 was, at that time, located at the lower gate of the city, where a mill and gate houses were known to exist. (More research to follow...)

John Dollhopf's First Christmas in America

Our great grandfather John arrived at the port of Baltimore on Monday, October 23, 1871. Two days later, on Wednesday, October 25, he had already joined his stepsister and distant cousins at the Harmony Society in Economy (now Ambridge), PA.

In December 1871 he encountered his first "American" Christmas. What was it like?

Business as usual, apparently. Members of the German utopian Harmony Society were millennialists – they believed in the imminent Second Coming of Christ, so for them every Christmas was their last. But there was little hoopla. They were austere in their celebration, patiently awaiting with apparent restraint the reappearance of Jesus.

Following is a historical account of Christmas at the Society in 1828. The author relates the story through the eyes of twenty-seven-year-old Catharina Langenbacher, the clerk of the Society's general store. Although we don't know for sure, but given the proclivities of the members, it was likely that little changed from 1828 to 1871. It is here that Johann probably saw his first Christmas tree:



The Harmony Society Church in a photo c. 1880. The Church was built in 1832. John would have celebrated his first Christmas in America in this church (if he attended church). John left the Society in March of 1874.

Yuletide Serenity

According to the general store accounts ledger, probably penned by Catharina's hand, business on Christmas Eve, 1828 looks like any other day of the year. Catharina waits on customers, both Society members and outsiders. Engelhardt Autherieth, supervisor of the Society's numerous stonemasons, picks up 10 pounds of rice; Maria Neff, wife of Jacob, gets 14 pounds of sugar; and stocking weaver, Georg Schaal, 10 pounds of coffee. As Society members, the goods they receive require no payment but serve as compensation for the work they do without pay.

For nonmembers, such as hired hands and townsfolk, goods are purchased with money. For instance, on that same Christmas Eve, Charles Baker buys a pound of coffee and a yard of muslin for 34 cents. Brod Daniel puts \$5.20 worth of sundries on his account, which he settles later. And Wm G. Berring purchases 2,355 shingles for \$2.72.

Tomorrow is Christmas. Catharina will go to work as will every other member of the Society. Harmonists didn't spurn the celebration of the Nativity, but in the days before Santa Claus and Christmas lights, the birth of Christ was marked more by religious zeal than holiday glitter.

According to a Harmonist song titled “Decorate the Festival with Wintergreen,” the day would have been heralded with laurel, myrtle, orange branches, and ivy draped across mantels and lintels, fence gates and sills. Each household had its own evergreen tree trimmed with candles, cookies, popcorn, and nuts wrapped in fancy paper. At noontime, the Society’s children as well those from neighboring farms received a sack filled with candy, colored popcorn, an orange, English walnuts, dried grapes, figs, and dates.

Society members stopped work to gather in the Community Feast Hall [members of the Society dined communally] for a sumptuous meal of rice soup, roast veal and beef, apple schnitzel, sauerkraut, white bread, ginger cakes and wine. Talk was not allowed during the feast. Except for the shuffling of feet and the clinking of forks against plates, music played and sung between courses by the Society’s orchestra and choir would be the only sounds the congregants would hear while indulging their palates.

The modest festivities fortified the effects of morning, noon and evening church services officiated by Father Rapp preaching from a seated position at the front of the austere church. Between services, feasting, music and song, Catharina and the other workers would return to their jobs. While clerking at the store that Christmas Day, Catharina entered in the accounts ledger John Riddle’s purchase of coffee, tea, sugar, tobacco, flour and whiskey.³⁸

They “celebrated” Christmas on the day, not the eve. This might have been a reaction against the Lutheran tradition of celebrating on the eve with the Christkind. The Harmonists, led by their founder Georg Rapp, fled Germany because of persecution by the state sanctioned *Lutheran* (not Catholic) Church.

Since Rapp and his followers came from Württemberg, Germany, near Stuttgart, many of the Society’s Christmas traditions likely reflected customs of that region. Their communal houses did have decorated trees, but there was no mention of St. Nicholas, Father Christmas, advent calendars or wreaths, and certainly no mention of any of the saints’ days to which Johann was accustomed in Mistelbach.

Johann spent almost three years at the Society, departing in March of 1874. It is here where he met his wife, Elizabeth Bender.



The Great House and Feast Hall, seen on the right in a photo c. 1880. The Harmonists took their meals and celebrated holidays in this building. At the end of the street is the Ohio River.

³⁸ Thomas Imerito, the Pittsburgh Quarterly <https://pittsburghquarterly.com/articles/christmas-in-utopia/>

***Weihnachtsgurke*, “Christmas Pickle”**

If you grew up in Pittsburgh, you might have heard of the *Christmas Pickle* ornament. In fact, you might own a pickle ornament.

Santa Claus hides the pickle ornament deep within the “boughs” (get it?) of the Christmas tree. The first child to spot the pickle gets an extra present; the first adult to spot it has good luck in the new year.

Did our Mistelbach ancestors play hide the pickle?

No.³⁹ In fact this is complete hogwash. No one in Germany has ever heard of this. And no one in the US has been able to properly place this Pittsburgh pickle practice.

Pittsburgh boasts of having the largest pickle ornament in the world. This is to be expected – pickles, because of pickle purveyor H. J. Heinz, are synonymous with Pittsburgh.

Here’s one theory:

In the 1890’s Woolworth’s stores began importing hand-blown glass ornaments from Germany. If you’re unfamiliar, Woolworth’s was once one of the most common stores in the USA and was visited by millions of Americans. Now these glass ornaments they sold to American consumers were shaped as fruits and vegetables; they were very well made and desirable at the time. Well, according to legend *most* of them were desirable. It seems no one wanted the pickle shaped ornaments. That makes sense, right? Who would decorate a Christmas tree with a pickle?

So the brass at Woolworth’s found themselves looking at the tremendous amount of unsold glass pickles ornaments, and they realized what they had to do – convince Americans that they *did* want pickles hanging from their trees.

Someone with a marketing mind and...an indifference towards the truth...made up a story to go along with the pickles: that it was an age-old German custom to hide a pickle in the tree for one lucky family member to find. Perhaps it was the power of old-world charm, or our simple and ever-present desire to want the chance at ***just one more*** present. The pickles sold, and when next Christmas rolled around they ordered more.

Was this true? Probably not. There is no clear origin of the Christmas pickle practice.⁴⁰



Weihnachtsgurke or the *Christmas Pickle*. This glass blown ornament is shown in the foreground. There are many theories as to the origin of this tradition. This much is true: it is not a German tradition!

³⁹ Well, maybe at the Rockenstube.

⁴⁰ Heather Funk, Amber Estes Thieneman, and Mick Sullivan, <https://thepastandthecurious.com/stories/whats-the-deal-with-the-christmas-pickle/>.

An Interview with Anne Dollhopf

For three years I had an apartment in Göttingen, Germany, working there with the University. I had many opportunities to visit Anne Dollhopf and her husband Erwin Vogt, who live in Nürnberg, just a hop, skip, and a jump from Mistelbach.

I met Anne 42 years ago when I was doing family research way, way, back then. We have not been able to identify (yet) our common grandparents, but both of our earliest Dollhopf ancestors came from the same environs of Bayreuth four hundred years ago – and there just weren't that many Dollhopfs living then – in such a small region – to think that we would not be related.

I interviewed her before Christmas of 2020, during COVID:



Anne Dollhopf with husband Erwin Vogt (and Hans Dollhopf my son) near their home in Nürnberg, July 2, 2018. Anne was born and raised in a village just outside of Nürnberg, and Erwin is from nearby Bamberg.

Mark: I assume you had a Christmas tree...was it fir or spruce? When did you set up the tree?

Anne: We used and continue to use spruce. Fir trees, or *Tannenbäume* are rare and expensive. But nowadays people can spend more money and they buy *Nordmantannen* ("Caucasian fir"); it does not lose the needles so soon.

Mark: In Mistelbach they celebrate St. Barbara's Day with a cherry branch on Dec 4th. Was that your tradition?

Anne: We know the tradition, but it is not widespread for Christmas any longer; some people still do it (especially all the people named "Barbara"!). Even flower shops sell blossoming forsythias around Christmas. But it does not play a major role. My friend Marion told me that she knew of farmers in her area (a little north of Nürnberg) that cut up whole apple and cherry trees at the beginning of December out of their *Streuobstwiesen* ("orchard meadows"), put them in water for about three weeks and had cherry and apple blossoms on the trees at Christmas. Of course, the trees could not be replanted and so the custom was forbidden (when? maybe beginning of the 20th century) in order to have a good fruit crop in summer.



When Christmas trees finally arrived in the Mistelbach region in the 1900s they were often small because rooms were small, and lit with real wax candles, which unfortunately caused many fires.

Mark: What kind of ornaments did you use for your tree – glass, straw, cookies, apples, ribbons? What was on top – a star or angel?

Anne: We use glass balls, also straw stars and sometimes cookies known as *springerle*. Glass tips (pointed bulbs) are used too. In Nürnberg there is the specialty of a Christmas Angel for the top, folded from gold paper.



A decorated *springerle* cookie Christmas tree ornament from the Franconian region.

Mark: I assume you used candles and not electric lights?

Anne: Of course, we had wax candles and thus occasional fires in the houses. Today we use LED chains.

Mark: Did you celebrate St. Nicholas Day on December 6th? Did he fill up your shoes with candy? Did *Krampus* come with St. Nicholas?

Anne: The Protestants usually celebrate “*Pelzmärtel*” (St Martin in a furcoat, or *Pelz*) on Nov 11th. The Catholics prefer “St. Nikolaus” on Dec. 6th. *Krampus* is a figure still to be found in lower and South Bavaria and the Alpine Region.

Mark: Or did you celebrate Christkindl?

Anne: The Christkindl is the one in our house to place the presents under the tree on Dec. 24th - apart from the religious use of the Christkind (“Baby Jesus in the manger”).

Mark: When did you open presents on Christmas – eve, or day?

Anne: Christmas Eve, 24 Dec.

Mark: I read that some Germans celebrate Christmas for two days – the 25th and 26th?

Anne: Our “*Heiliger Abend*” is Dec. 24; but 25 and 26 are official holidays, die “*Weihnachtsfeiertage*.” Shops are closed.

Mark: Did you celebrate *das Dreikönigsfest*, *Sternsinger*, or *C+M+B* written above the door?

Anne: Dreikönig (Epiphany with *Sternsinger*). This is done by children of the religious communities. They ring the doorbells, get sweets or money (for a good purpose) and paint the C+M+B on your door, if you let them do it. C+M+B = Caspar, Melchior, Balthasar – the three Magi, but the Latin meaning is: *casam meam benedicat* = “May he (God) bless my house.”

Mark: Did you celebrate *Martinstag* on Nov 11?

Anne: Yes, in our Protestant regions we had Nov 11. But now everything is commercialized, and Dec. 6 has become more common.

Mark: There is a German tradition in the US where the tree is decorated in a room hidden from the children until Christmas Eve or morning – *Der Tannenbaum als Geheimnis* (“the Christmas tree as secret”). This was the tradition in our house in Pittsburgh. Have you heard of this?

Anne: Of course. We used to have only one living room that was heated and used only on Sundays and Christmas. So family life happened in the kitchen. And at Christmas the tree was decorated in this one living room, presents put under it, and the room was closed until Dec. 24 after sunset, when the (little) children were admitted for the *Bescherung* (“gift giving”). I happened to talk to Alfred yesterday⁴¹. He told me the same about *Mistelbach*. Life happened in the big warm kitchen, and the *Stube* (“living room”) was almost only warmed up for the Eve of Dec. 24.

⁴¹ Alfred Dollhopf is our third cousin. Our common ancestors are our 2nd great grandparents, Johann Dollhopf (1830-1858) and Margarethe Bär (1829-1891).

Mark: Another US German tradition in our family, including my grandfather's, was the *putz* – a village with toy trains around the base of the tree. Have you heard of this?

Anne: Never heard about!

Mark: Was your big Christmas meal on Christmas Eve or Day – carp, sausage, potato salad? Or meal on the Day? What was it? Goose? Stuffing? Dumplings?

Anne: Meals on Christmas Eve were not too luxurious. Herring and potato salad were common. The big meal is on Dec. 25 – goose or duck with dumplings and red cabbage.

Mark: Did you drink *Feuerzangenbowle*?⁴²

Anne: Yes! Gerlinde (my sister-in-law) used to prepare one on Dec. 24 after dinner to make everybody drunk and dumb. I never had it!

Mark: Did you have an *Adventskalender* (“Advent Calendar”)?

Anne: Always! Even in our poor times (up to the mid 1950s) the mothers packed little sweet nothings for each day and built an *Adventskalender* to show the children when the Christkind would be coming.

Mark: I have read that Christmas cookies did not exist until WW I, when the government restricted the size of the pastries that could be sent to soldiers. Is this true? Did they have what we know of as “cookies” prior to the 1900s?

Anne: Never heard about this WW I thing. Cookies and ginger breads have been known since the Middle Ages. Hildegard von Bingen (a famous nun who researched spices and herbs in the 13th (?) century, goddess of all the bioesoterics) wrote down many kinds of recipes already.

Mark: Did your mother make *Stollen* (“fruit cake”) or *Lebkuchen* (“gingerbread”)? Did you eat *Stollen* specifically on Advent?

Anne: Yes! All the mothers made *Stollen*. Formerly it was made in bakeries because poor people's kitchen stoves could not produce enough heat. Gerlinde still does. They were not eaten before December 24th. The cookies, too, were hidden from the children so that they could not eat up all of them before Christmas.

Mark: Did you go to a Christmas market as a child? What is your favorite memory of a market?

Anne: When we were little, we lived in a little village to which we were evacuated in WW II (we had to leave our home because of air raids), 25 km from Nürnberg. There was no market, and we were far too poor to travel to Nürnberg to go shopping. The Nürnberg market opened again in 1948 after the *Währungsreform* (“monetary reform”), when the Deutsche-Mark was introduced, and goods reappeared in the shops.

Mark: What did children receive as presents in the war years and before? Did they get toys, or was it mostly fruit or candy?



Feuerzangenbowle (“fire tongs punch bowl”) is made by suspending a rum-soaked cone of sugar over a bowl of mulled wine with a set of tongs, setting it afire, thereby allowing the melted flaming sugar to drop into the bowl, sizzling as it hits the wine.

⁴² *Feuerzangenbowle* (“fire tongs punch”) is a type of fortified mulled wine. It is made by combining red wine and some other high proof alcohol, fruit slices, cloves, nutmeg, et al. and then lighting a cone of rum-soaked sugar held above the bowl with tongs. The flaming, melting, sugar drips into the bowl beneath. Stand clear.

Anne: Before 1952-55 most children did not get toys, or sweets, or presents. I had my first real doll at about the age of 8 (1950) – a real “Käthe-Kruse-Puppe” that is still on my piano!!⁴³ Before the war children received toys, such as electric toy trains, but during and after the war there was poverty and misery in most households. it was good for us to grow up with scarce resources!

Anne: OK!! I hope I did not make too many mistakes (on German personal computers the words are often changed automatically) and could be of use to you.

Much love,
Anne and Erwin

In Closing: “New Traditions”

Christmas continues to evolve, especially in the fast paced, increasingly secular America and Germany of today. Many new traditions (an oxymoron!) have been established just in our lifetimes. To wit:

The actual day when Christmas is celebrated in many families today is increasingly dictated by busy travel and work schedules – not the church calendar. Peasants did not travel, nor did they worry about vacation time off, nor did anyone work on the holy days. Christmas was, well....just Christmas.

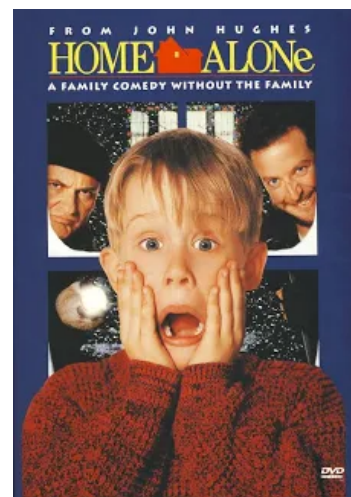
New traditions are increasingly invented and defined by movies and TV specials. If you thought the spinning room customs described above were absurd, try these on: A clinically depressed young boy is mocked by his friends for his puny Christmas tree (*A Charlie Brown Christmas*). A giant, scrawny, cat-like creature terrorizes a small village during the holidays (*How the Grinch Stole Christmas*). A reindeer with a really bad sinus infection flies through the air and delivers presents collected from an island of trashed toys (*Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*). I could go on... our “customs,” ahem, keep evolving.

Popular hymns are not those of Martin Luther, but ones such as *Frosty the Snowman*, *All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth*⁴⁴ and *Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer*. Instead of *Rockenstube*, it's *Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree*. What would Martin Luther think of such sacrilege?

The stories heard on Christmas Eve are not of Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar; they are of *the Muppets*, *Scrooge*, and *Elf*...and not of a boy



Käthe-Kruse-Puppe doll from the early 1900s.



A sign of the times – the most popular Christmas movie of 21st century America.

⁴³ Käthe Kruse (1883 -1968) was a famous German actress and later one of the world's most famous doll makers. She is the founder of today's Käthe Kruse GmbH (Company). Their dolls are now popular collectibles that are sold at very high prices.

⁴⁴ Of course it should be “are” and not “is.” Don’t blame me, I didn’t write the song.

born alone in a manger, but a boy left home alone by parents off on a vacation (*Home Alone – 1, 2, and 3!*).

Trees are likely to be artificial. All decorations are likely to be artificial.

As church attendance dwindles, so do Sunday School pageants, church choir concerts, and midnight candlelight vigils. For an increasing number of Americans and Germans, the church is no longer the focus of holiday festivities – or traditions.

Roast goose, dumplings, and red cabbage have been replaced with tofurkey, lentil loaf, and gluten free rolls – depending of course on whether you are ovo-, lacto-, or ovo-lacto vegetarian; pescatarian, pollotarian, flexitarian, vegan, or good, old-fashioned carnivore.

We don't bake Stollen; we send for mail-order fruit cakes and regift them.

And who has time for baking cookies?!

Yes, Christmas is forever changing. What will Christmas look like 600 years from now in 2600, a year as far removed from us today as was the time of Hans Tolhopff?

I hope you found this stroll through Christmas history in Mistelbach as much fun to read as I had in researching it. There are some less common traditions I left out. If you would like more information about Christmas in Germany, visit:

<https://www.german-way.com/history-and-culture/holidays-and-celebrations/christmas/a-to-z-guide-to-christmas-traditions/>

And a Merry Christmas to all, and to all, a goodnight!

Mark R. Dollhopf
New Haven, CT
December 25, 2021
In anno corona virum.

Editor: Anne Dollhopf, Nürnberg.