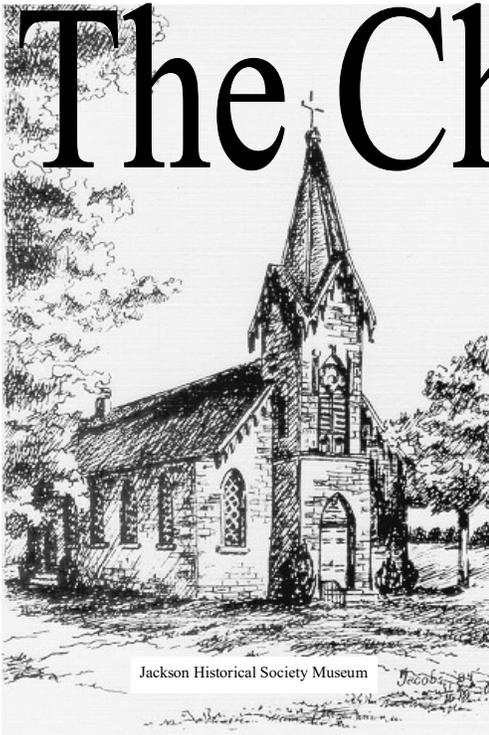


The Church Mouse



Volume 31 Issue 3 Jackson Historical Society December 2023

THE HISTORY OF MANY CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

The 25th of December is recognized for the birth of Jesus Christ and celebrated around the world by many people. The festivities are often accompanied, however, by traditions that are Pagan in origin. Before Christianity reached Scandinavia, home to the Vikings (800-1050 CE) the Vikings would celebrate the winter solstice, a time of year when the days were shortest and the nights longest. Friends and family would gather to enjoy food and drink during a festival called Yule.

With the area's conversion to Christianity, (about 1100-1200 CE), many of the Viking Yuletide traditions were



adopted by the Christians and remain, to this day, part of our modern celebration of Christmas. Here are a few that may sound familiar.

The Viking god Odin, considered by the Vikings as the father of all gods, was represented as a bearded man dressed in a hat and cloak, who would ride his eight legged horse "Sleipnir" across the midwinter night's sky delivering gifts to those below. His ravens Huginn & Muninn would fly ahead to check whether the children were good or bad. Children would leave their shoes by the hearth with sugar and hay for Slepnir. Could Odin and eight legged "Sleipnir" have evolved over time into Santa and his sleigh drawn by **eight** reindeer delivering gifts? *Now Dasher! now Dancer! Now Prancer and Vixen! On Comet! on Cupid! on Donner! on Blitzen!*

Santa Claus has many names, and so does Odin. One of them was *Jolfaor*, or "Jul Father," meaning something very close to Father Christmas, which is how Santa is still known in many countries.

The midwinter celebration of Yule began on the longest day and night of the Winter Solstice with the feasting lasting exactly 12 days. Could the 12 days of Yule become the 12 days of Christmas? If the Norse had discovered a "partridge in a pear



(Christmas Traditions continued on page 2)

MEMBERSHIP DUES

Your annual **\$20** dues cover a calendar year starting in **January**. The current year for your membership is shown on The Church Mouse address label.

Your dues help us preserve our historic site, Jackson history, and include The Church Mouse.

JHS MEETINGS TIMES

The Jackson Historical Society meets the 3rd Monday of every other month, Jan/Mar/May/Jul/Sep/Nov, at 7:00pm.

May/Jul/Sep held at 1860 Mill Rd., Jackson, in our restored, log home. Nov/Jan/Mar held in Jackson Town Hall.

jhsheritage.wi@gmail.com
Send mail to P.O. Box 197
Jackson, WI 53037

JHS OFFICERS

Clif Koeller—President
Jerry Prochnow—Vice President
Lenore Kloehn—Treasurer
Doris Koeller—Secretary

BOARD MEMBERS

JHS Officers, Elmer Kloehn,
Gordon Ziemann, Russ Hanson



tree”, though, it was most likely eaten during the feasting!

The Vikings also had a Yule evergreen tree that they decorated with statues of their Norse Gods, food, and clothes. A Christmas tree?

During the Yuletide feasting, to honor the Norse god Freyr, a wild boar was sacrificed in the hope of a good harvest during the next growing season. Although not yet the Christmas ham that graces many tables today, it was pork and cooked over an open fire. Close enough!

In Viking tradition, a Yule log was brought into homes and burnt on the hearth. If it was permitted to burn out during the 12 days of Yule, bad luck would befall the home. At the end of Yule, a piece of the log would be retained to protect the home and to start the following years Yule log.

With all of the holiday festivities progressing during Yule, Viking folklore provided the elf. Called the *Alfar*, elves were described as tall, pale, and beautiful and possessing magical powers, good and bad. Through time however, elves have become described as being more like the “*nisse*” a much smaller individual associated with the Winter Solstice and the Christmas season. Nisse were described as short, bearded, and wearing a red pointed hat. After the passage of still more time, the “*nisse*” have been changed into pointy eared, gnome like elves who work in Santa’s workshop producing many gifts for Santa to deliver Christmas eve.

And so as we enjoy our Christmas celebrations, recognize the Viking contributions made centuries ago that have become part of it. From the winter solstice, 12 day, YULE celebration to the Viking God Odin, a bearded man riding an eight legged horse through the sky delivering gifts, to the evergreen Yule tree, Christmas ham, and, of course, elves.

Although Christmas celebrations continue to change with time and location, much of what we celebrate today was celebrated by the Vikings centuries ago.



Material for this issue of the Church Mouse was gathered from various free internet articles & printed material.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE COMES TO AMERICA.



A Christmas tree, live or artificial, has become a common sight in many American homes during the holiday season. But, it was not always so. The Vikings introduced the decorated evergreen tree during their winter solstice celebration, Yule. As Christianity expanded in northern Europe, the decorated Christmas tree became part of the Christmas celebration.

However, it took a long time for the Christmas tree to be accepted in the United States.

The American Puritan communities felt Christmas was sacred. The Plymouth Colony governor sought to stop the use of evergreens and decorations. He considered them a non Christian intrusion of the holiday observance. The Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell preached against the singing of carols and the use of decorated evergreen trees. In 1659 the General Court of Massachusetts declared that any celebration on Christmas, other than a church service, was a criminal offense. People could be charged for displaying Christmas decorations. In

(The Christmas tree continued on page 5)

TODAY WILL BE HISTORY TOMORROW

**HELP THE JACKSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY PRESERVE
OUR YESTERDAYS**

**VISIT JACKSON'S HISTORY AT OUR 1860 MILL ROAD
SITE—APPT. ONLY PLEASE**



LOST CEMETERIES



Gordon Ziemann’s LOST CEMETERIES article will next appear in the March 2024 *Church Mouse*.

This December 2023 issue of the *Church Mouse* begins a column by Gordon Ziemann titled *DID YOU KNOW?*

Did you know that it is illegal for women to wear red in St. Croix? Or that it is illegal to “worry” a squirrel in La Crosse? Or that it is illegal to throw snowballs in Wausau? These are some of the weird laws still on the books around the State of Wisconsin. Conversely, there is not a law in the Wisconsin law books prohibiting burying someone in their own back yard! Really! Officials have kept their hands off of that one and instead have left it up to the local folks to administer the practice. Amazing!

In researching this article, I inquired about this practice with town and county clerks and, for the most part, got blank looks. It kind of shows that this is no longer a common practice. Family plots, and they are out there, generally are maintained by the family left behind and it generally works out fine until the family dies off or moves away and the new owners either don’t know or care about the remains buried in their back yard. But, it is not against the law.

Now, before you get too excited about this concept of home interment, there are some state regulations. Most pertain to funeral directors, but some pertain to the citizen. Online you can check with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services website on “the disposition of human remains” or how to secure a death certificate, etc. Check with local municipal and county offices to be sure you have checked all the boxes.

While researching for this article, I came across the term “Green Funerals”. Never having run across the term, it was new to me. The term is used for people who want a more “natural” funeral, eliminating the common things we associate with the normal funeral, embalming, fancy casket, burial vault, etc. However, you may want to locate a funeral director familiar with the “natural” process and willing to offer the service. And, you have to locate a cemetery that permits “green burials”.

Have room for a family plot? Check it out!

Thanks for reading. I’ll be back in the March *Church Mouse* with another “*Lost Cemeteries*” article.

'til then, God Bless! Gordy Ziemann.....

** See a “Savvy Senior” article in the Sep 16, 2023, page 7B in the *Daily News* for helpful info.



Looking for something special to give as a Christmas gift? We’ve got a couple of great ideas for you.

Why not give a copy of THE HISTORY OF JACKSON, WISCONSIN 1842-2001. It’s 200 pages full of information about Jackson way back when! Good reference!

Or, consider giving a copy of PIONEER CHURCH RECORDS SPEAK 1847-1974. It’s a 220 page story of Immanuel Lutheran Church of Jackson, through its church records. It’s also an excellent genealogical resource.

Either book is available for \$20 (\$25 if mailed in a padded envelope)-Please contact the Jackson Historical Society—Royal Natzke @ 1-262-334-9811 or rdnatzke@yahoo.com The books are also available for pickup in Jackson at the Village Hall, the Community Center, and at the Jackson Town Hall on Division Rd. Or, contact the *Church Mouse* editor for help.

THE JACKSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY.





SOME HOLIDAY TRADITIONS IN GERMANY

“FROEHLICHE WEINACHTEN”

According to legend, on Christmas Eve in Germany rivers turn to wine, animals speak to each other, tree blossoms bear fruit, mountains open up to reveal precious gems, and church bells can be heard ringing from the bottom of the sea. Of course, only the pure in heart can witness this Christmas magic. All others must content themselves with traditional German celebrating. Actually, there is so much celebrating that it has to begin on Dec. 6th, St. Nicholas Day.

As in many other European countries, on the eve of Dec. 6th children place a shoe or boot by the fireplace. During the night, St. Nicholas, the patron saint of children, hops from house to house carrying a book of sins in which all of the misdeeds of the children are written. If they have been good, he fills the shoe or boot with delicious holiday edibles. If they have not been good, their shoe is filled with twigs.



December 21st, supposedly the shortest day (longest night) of the year, is dubbed St. Thomas Day. In parts of the Sauerland, whoever wakes up late or arrives late to work on that day is issued the title "Thomas Donkey." They are given a cardboard donkey and are the subject of numerous jokes throughout the day. But this gentle abuse ends deliciously with round, iced currant buns called "Thomasplitzchen."

This is all preliminary to the excitement of Christmas Eve. Prior to the evening feast, is the presentation of the tree. The



Christmas tree has a mysterious magic for the young because they are not allowed to see it until Christmas Eve. While the children are occupied in another room (by Father) Mother brings out the Christmas tree and decorates it with apples, candy, nuts, cookies, cars, trains, angels, tinsel, family treasures and candles. The presents are placed under the tree. Somewhere, close to the bright display are laid brilliantly decorated plates

for each family member, loaded with fruits, nuts, marzipan, chocolate and biscuits. When all is ready a bell is rung as a signal for the children to enter this Christmas fantasy room. Carols are sung, sometimes sparklers are lit, the Christmas story is read and gifts are opened.

"Dickbauch" means "fat stomach" and is a name given to the Christmas Eve because of the tradition that those who do not eat well on Christmas Eve will be haunted by demons during the night. So the opportunity is given to enjoy dishes such as suckling pig,

"reisbrei" (rice pudding with cinnamon & honey), white sausage, macaroni salad, and many regional dishes. Christmas Day brings with it a banquet of plump roast goose, "Christstollen" (long loaves of bread bursting with nuts, raisins, citron and dried fruit), "Lebkuchen" (spice bars), marzipan, and "Dresden Stollen" (a moist, heavy bread filled with fruit).



“EIN GUTES NEUES YAHR”

The night of the Holy Sylvester, the last night of the year, has always been the night of fools and a funny good time. The saint of this day, Pope Sylvester I, according to legend is



the man who was healed from leprosy and baptized the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great.

There was a great amount of drinking, dancing and singing at the "Sylvester Balls" held that night. As the old year ended and the new year was about to begin, everyone refilled their glasses with champagne or wine. Then the hugs and kissing began, accompanied with "*ein gutes neues Jahr*." The bells throughout Germany rang and many revelers ran out in the streets to enjoy the merry sounds. There was usually some fireworks displays and the sounds



of shooting was often heard along with the ringing bells.

Naturally, there were some superstitions connected with Sylvester. People dropped molten lead into cold water and then interpreted the shape it made into a future event they believed would take place in the coming year. If the shape could be interpreted as a heart or a ring - it meant a wedding, a ship meant a journey, a pig meant there would be a year of plenty, (etc.).

(Sylvester continued on page 5)



A Belated THANK YOU

DANKE DIOLCH TACK TAKK KAK

BEDANK MERCI GRAZIE DZIEKUJE

As I drove onto the Jackson Historical Society grounds this past summer, I noticed how nice the freshly mowed lawn looked. It made the whole site look so nice, I commented to myself, "nice job! Much appreciated to you and your son!

Jack and his son, Bob, do not live in Jackson, but drive over from West Bend to mow the lawn as needed. But why? You see, Jack and Bob's last name is Reis, the same name as Franz Reis on whose land much of the Village of Jackson was established and who was instrumental in bringing the railroad through Jackson and whose name the community originally used, Reisville.

So, I would like to recognize you both with a belated Thank You for your extra efforts keeping our Jackson Historical Society looking good. Thanks to you both.

Russ Hanson—The Church Mouse

A Reis History Quiz

- 1) Where is REIS Park in the Village of Jackson?
- 2) Where did Franz Reis live in the village?
- 3) At the top of this article, I have added "Thank You" in various languages immigrants to Wisconsin and Jackson may have spoken. Can you identify their country of origin? Can you add "Thank You" in other settler languages? Send me an email jhsheritage.wi@gmail.com with your answers to the three questions.

(Sylvester continued from page 4)

Traditionally, carp was eaten on Sylvester; it was believed it brought future wealth. It was also important to leave a bit of each type of food on the dinner plate, which was to remain there until after midnight. This insured that they would have plenty of food throughout the coming year.

And so the holiday celebrating ends and the new year begins.

(The Christmas tree continued from page 2)

the 1800's it was unusual to find a Christmas tree in an American town square or home. This began to change with the emigration of Germans in the 1800's who brought their own Christmas traditions with them. Christmas trees had been a tradition in German homes since the 16th century.

The first instance of a Christmas tree in an American home was believed to be in the 1830's. Outdoor, community Christmas trees are recorded in use in Pennsylvania by the mid 1800's.

In the late 19th and early 20th century many Americans decorated their trees with ornaments. The Christmas tree had been accepted. Having a brightly lit Christmas tree in our home has become a normal American tradition.



'Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house not a creature was stirring not even my uncle Fritz, who was asleep in front of the warm fireplace!

Merry Christmas 2023



AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETIES COMING EVENTS

RICHFIELD HISTORICAL SOCIETY Maple Syrup Family Day, March 23, 2024, 9am to 4pm. Art at the Mill, Saturday, June 15, 2024, 10am to 4pm. All events held at the Richfield Historical Park, 1896 State Rd. 164. Please contact richfieldhistoricalsociety.org. for events details.

GERMANTOWN HISTORICAL SOCIETY Please contact the Germantown Historical Society at germantown-historicalsociety.org. for future events.

POMMERSCHER VEREIN FREISTADT Please contact Pommerscher.org. for future event information.

THE TOWER HERITAGE CENTER 320 S. 5th Ave., West Bend, WI 53095. **Home School at the Museum** series, various dates and subjects. Please contact www.thetowerheritagecenter.org or call 262-353-4678 for more information on this educational series.



The Editor welcomes newsletter comments. Please mail all suggestions for articles, etc., to

***** The Church Mouse, P. O. Box 197, Jackson, WI 53037, or phone (262) 353-3641 or e-mail jhsheritage.wi@gmail.com Russ Hanson, Editor**

THE JACKSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Keeper of Our Local History

During the Bicentennial Celebration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, our nation took a look back at the 200 years of its history since that signing. History became something to celebrate and maintain. This celebratory period saw the formation of many historical societies including our own Jackson Historical Society.

Interest in discovering and documenting the history of Jackson was actively pursued with members of all ages taking part in the society's activities. Meetings were held, events scheduled, and our first book, THE HISTORY OF JACKSON, WISCONSIN 1843-1976 was produced.

As the years passed, the society sponsored programs and festivals (we still do), secured funding to acquire and restore our Immanuel Lutheran Church historic site, started the Church Mouse, our newsletter, and began work on our updated and expanded HISTORY OF JACKSON, WISCONSIN 1843-2001 book, currently available. In 2003 we moved and restored a two story log home to our historic site. In 2014, we added a new history book, PIONEER CHURCH RECORDS SPEAK which remains very popular. We continue to offer group visits to our JHS museum, restored log home and one room schoolhouse including teacher led school class visits.

If you are a "JHS old timer" and would like to reactivate your interest in the Jackson Historical Society, we need your help and knowledge. Or, if you are recent to the Jackson area and would like to learn your *new* history, come visit us. Give us a call. Families welcome. Please contact us for an introductory tour. We have a lot of knowledge to share.

Call Clif Koeller at 262-677-3457 and leave a message. Clif will answer or return your call A.S.A.P. Or, email Russ Hanson, The Church Mouse, jhsheritage.wi@gmail.com or Phone 262-353-3641

TODAY WILL BE HISTORY TOMORROW

HELP THE JACKSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY PRESERVE OUR YESTERDAYS—JOIN US

VISIT JACKSON'S HISTORY AT OUR 1860 MILL ROAD SITE—APPT. ONLY PLEASE

Call Clif Koeller @ 262-677-3457 or email jhsheritage.wi@gmail.com to arrange a visit