

The story of the Christmas pickle – is it fact or myth?

Presentation by Elmy Biermanns
at the Houston Saengerbund Christmas Party 2016.

The tradition of the Christmas Pickle has to be one of the strangest modern Christmas customs in that no one is quite sure why it exists at all! It is commonly believed by Americans to come from Germany. However, hardly anyone in Germany has even heard about it. Additional inquiries among family and friends only resulted in astonishment and shaking heads.

It has been suggested that the origin of the Christmas pickle may have been developed for marketing purposes in the 1890s to coincide with the import of glass Christmas tree decorations from Germany. Woolworths was the first company to import these types of decorations into the United States in 1890 and glass blown decorative vegetables were imported from France from 1892 onwards. It seems like pickles must have been among the selection.

There are two rather far-fetched stories linking the pickle to Christmas. One suggested origin has been, that the tradition came from Camp Sumter during the American Civil War. The Bavarian-born Private John C. Lower had enlisted in the 103rd Pennsylvania Infantry, but was captured in April of 1864 and taken to a prison camp. There he fell ill before Christmas and pleaded with the prison guard to have just one pickle before he died. The guard took pity on him and brought him a pickle. Legend has it, he recovered soon after and returned home. In remembrance of his good fortune he hung a pickle in his Christmas tree every year and instituted the tradition, that the person who found the pickle would be blessed with good fortune just as he had. But one of the curious shortcomings in this theory is that German glass ornaments didn't become popular in the United States until 1890, 15 years after the Civil War ended.

Another story comes from Berrien Springs, Michigan, which – you will not believe this – is the self-proclaimed Christmas Pickle Capital of the World. In a Victorian era tale, a cruel innkeeper trapped two Spanish boys in a pickle barrel, who were on their way home from boarding school for their Christmas break. As the story goes, St. Nicholas stayed at the same inn and rescued the boys. Ever since the family had a pickle hanging on the Christmas tree. But, the curious shortcoming in this story is, that the barrel was originally holding meat for pies - not pickles!

So it's most likely, that an ornament salesman with a lot of spare pickles to sell, invented the legend of the Christmas Pickle and the myth lived on until today, the day the myth of the Christmas pickle ornament came to an end at the Houston Saengerbund Christmas party.

But.... don't despair. There is a place for a pickle during the Christmas season. If you have been baking Christmas cookies and Stollen for weeks like I have and have been surrounded by the sweet aromas of sugar and honey, you are craving something really sour or spicy. That is when a pickle is exactly what you need. Here is to a Merry Christmas.

