

IMAGES

... then and now

From The Indian Hill Historical Society



**Buckingham Lodge
1861**

The Yule Log

Probably the oldest Christmas tradition is the burning of the Yule Log, an integral part of celebrations throughout Europe for centuries.

Norsemen celebrated the Yule season from the winter solstice through January. The solstice was the darkest day of the year, and pagan rites marked the sun's rebirth. It is believed that the word *Yule* is derived from the Norse word *hweol*, meaning wheel. The Norse thought that the sun was a wheel of fire that rolled towards, then away from the earth, and Yuletide symbolized the turning of the wheel. It became a time of extreme importance – when fortunes for the coming year were determined. Numerous rituals were observed amidst days of revelry. After the Norman invasion of England in 1066, the Yule Log tradition came to Great Britain.

Members of a household ventured into the forest and cut a large log (sometimes a whole tree), decorated it with ribbons, and hauled it to their hearth. It had to be massive in size and come from the owner's or a neighbor's property. It could never be purchased. It was dragged home with as many people as possible helping pull the ropes to bring good luck in the new year. Passersby raised their hats as the log was hauled through the streets.

Certain superstitions were observed. A piece from the previous year's log was used to light the fire. No barefoot women or people with squints or flat feet were allowed to attend the lighting ceremony. The father or youngest child poured wine on the log, and prayed for health, wealth, and happiness. Failure to light the log on the first attempt portended misfortune in the future. Having dirty hands while lighting it was disrespectful. The log had to be kept burning for 12 hours minimum, or tragedy would come to the household. The shadows cast upon the wall by the Yule Log's fire were scrutinized for hidden meanings and forebodings. Sprigs of holly were thrown into the fire to burn the troubles of the past year. Feasting, music, storytelling, and dancing continued for as long as the log burned. No unnecessary work took place as long as the log burned. This winter festival occurred after fields had been harvested and animals slaughtered, a time when there was a respite from daily labor.



The remains of the log were retained. A scrap was stored under the bed of the household's mistress to protect the house from fire, hail, and lightning. Ashes from the fire were placed in wells to keep the water good, and also at the roots of fruit trees, vines, and in fields to insure plentiful harvests. Ashes were also saved to heal toothaches and keep vermin from household pets. The largest remaining piece of the Yule Log was preserved to kindle the next year's fire.

In the fourth century AD, when Pope Julius I decided that Christmas should be celebrated near the time of winter solstice, the Yule Log tradition continued, but the fire now represented the light of the Savior instead of the light of the sun. Yule Logs were lit on Christmas Eve and burned through Epiphany. The pagan festival was adapted to the Twelve Days of Christmas. Local variations of practices were numerous, and the practice spread from Great Britain to Europe, Asia, and America. Every December the practice of lighting the Yule Log ensured continuity of good fortune from year to year and generation to generation.

When large open fireplaces disappeared, the French created a cake roll that looked like a tree trunk and called it a *Buche de Noel*. They moved the tradition to their meal, and consumed the Yule Log, a coffee and chocolate dessert. American adaptations included Appalachian backsticks which were soaked in streams to ensure a long celebration, and the 19th century custom amongst slaves to choose the greenest log they could find. Today few Americans burn a Yule Log, as new customs have been born.

A medieval toast: "The Yule Log burns. It destroys old hatreds and misunderstandings. Let your envies vanish and the spirit of good fellowship reign supreme for this season and through all the year".