

The background of the cover is a photograph of several pumpkins and autumn leaves. In the foreground, there are two large pumpkins, one yellow and one white, resting on a burlap surface. Behind them are more pumpkins and a pile of colorful autumn leaves in shades of orange, red, and yellow.

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IS IT CHRISTMAS WITHOUT *Ornaments?*

story by FAYE RIVKIN

It's Christmas Eve and the only light in the room is the glow from the Christmas tree in the corner. What comes to mind when you think of Christmas trees from years past? One particular ornament? Or does a tree full of ornaments make you smile?

No matter the image, whether an ornament more traditional like Santa holding a bag of toys, or more modern like Santa wearing your favorite football team's jersey, memories are what make the holiday unique to each of us.

The Christmas tree tradition came to America in the early 1800s. But what do you know about the history of Christmas ornaments? Early records in Germany show trees decorated with food, including apples, onions, pears, nuts, and small candies. Oh and pickles. Legend says that the last ornament placed on a tree in German households was a pickle, hidden for the smallest family members. The child who found the pickle was to receive a special gift from St. Nick. Whether authentic or fabricated, many American households continue the tradition today with glass or aluminum pickle ornaments.

glass ornaments make their debut

By the late 1800s, glass ornaments were being made in Lauscha, Germany and were slowly replacing edible decorations. Until the mid 1920s, Germany seemed to hold a monopoly on the manufacture of ornaments. Around that time Japan began producing and exporting large quantities of glass ornaments with colorful designs, followed closely by Czechoslovakia. By 1935, more than 250 million ornaments were being imported to America; ornaments weren't produced here in any great quantity till around 1939, due to the beginning of World War II.

Woolworth's Department Store was among the first North American retailers to carry glass ornaments. Apparently F.W. Woolworth was a little leery of the new product. But he soon changed his mind, as after a short time Woolworth's was selling \$25 million worth of ornaments.

Glass ornaments went out of fashion in the 1960s, as did the use of live Christmas trees, replaced by aluminum trees covered with aluminum ornaments of similar shape and colors. But that didn't last long. In 1973, Hallmark began manufacturing its line of keepsake Christmas ornaments, which is said to have completely revolutionized the ornament industry in the US, through the addition of materials not previously used to mass produce ornaments, such as wood, acrylic, bone china, and porcelain.

Let's not forget Christopher Radko, the modern Christmas ornament elf. It's said that his journey into ornament making began as a result of a family Christmas incident in the 1980s, when he accidentally caused his family's 12-foot tree to topple, breaking his grandmother's antique glass and handmade ornaments. Determined to discover the types of ornaments his grandmother remembered from her childhood, he searched for replacements.

On a trip to Poland, Radko found an individual interested in reviving the art of hand-blown glass ornaments. Using antique molds and sketches, the man produced several dozen glass ornaments. Since that first collection of 65 ornaments, the Christopher Radko® Company has created over 10,000 ornament designs. His company has grown from one man interested in reviving his great-grandfather's passion, to more than 3,000 artists in workshops throughout Poland, Germany, Italy, and the Czech Republic.

today's ornaments—anything goes

Today, anything goes when it comes to ornaments and the trees they're on. The thing they have in common is that they all have significance for the individuals who place them on their trees.

Apparently **Carolyn Soper** has enough Christmas ornaments to decorate her entire block. On Christmas Eve, she and her husband David—MidAtlantic Farm Credit (MAFC) customers and owners of a Christmas tree farm in Mt. Airy, Maryland (profiled in an earlier issue of the *Leader*, Volume 12, Issue 4)—select from their abundant supply to decorate their tree with ornaments they've had for generations, many made by Carolyn's now 92-year old mother-in-law in the 1950s and 1960s. "It's a family tree," she says, a tree covered with ornaments that hold special memories. Her favorite ornament is a simple white and silver Christmas ball from the tree she and David had in 1961, the first year they were married. "It's very special to me," she says, "and every year I worry about it."

Some families find themselves with a collection of a certain type of ornament, and as a result, they keep the decoration of their tree to one theme. Jackie Kennedy brought this idea of a themed Christmas tree to the White House in 1961, using ideas from the *Nutcracker Suite* ballet by Tchaikovsky to create her nutcracker tree. Today, the current First Lady selects a theme and invites American artists to create it.

Members of the MAFC family have brought the concept of themed trees into some of the MAFC offices. Every year **Charmayne Busker**, area manager for MAFC in the Delmarva Region, creates a farm-related tree in MAFC's Denton, Maryland office.

Charmayne began the tradition in 1997 while at the MAFC Georgetown, Delaware office. When she moved to the Denton office in 2001, the tradition came with her—for a time she decorated trees in both locations. With help from her family, Charmayne decorates the tree the weekend after Thanksgiving, with everything from cows, pigs, chickens, and red and green tractors, and finishes it with strings of chicken lights. Originally the tree was covered mainly with cows, "but I got some grief for that" she says with a smile, "so I expanded to represent all the

commodities" served by MAFC. She says she is one of those people who "may be a little Christmas crazy," and she enjoys sharing her cheer with others.

Have you ever heard of a Halloween tree? **Linda Moore**, MAFC director from Maryland's eastern shore, has a unique way of decorating for Halloween, trimming a four-foot tree in her home with witches, ghosts, and strings of purple lights, topped with a black witches hat. "I love Halloween and I love Christmas, and I'm a collector of fun, unusual items," she says; this tree let's her pull all of that together. Her Halloween tree comes down around November first, replaced by a Christmas tree adorned with many of her favorite ornaments, from her Snowbabies and Annalee Doll ornament collections, to glass ornaments bought on trips taken in years past. Others may buy jewelry or a t-shirt to remember a trip, but Linda buys ornaments; "That's my souvenir," she says.

No matter the ornament, or the history behind it, ornaments make every tree magical and come to life. Be sure to turn off the lights and enjoy the memory you and your family will create this year.



A guide to ornament symbolism:

- ★ Fruit and vegetable shapes symbolize the harvest
- ★ Birds represent love and peace and are symbols for good luck and good fortune
- ★ Pickles signify luck
- ★ Fish shapes are an early Christian symbol for Jesus
- ★ Reflectors ornaments (ornaments with geometric concave indentations) were often called witches eyes and were placed on the Christmas tree to fend off evil spirits
- ★ Star shapes represent the Star of Bethlehem

