

O Tannenbaum: The German origins of the Christmas Tree

Over 25% of Indiana’s residents claim German ancestry, and German immigrants have contributed heavily to the arts, sciences, businesses, manufacturing, agriculture, and architecture of Indiana, and all the Midwest. When it comes to the Winter Holidays, very few customs or celebrations were practiced in this area until German immigrants came to our area in large numbers in the mid-late 1800s. There are many German holiday traditions that we have incorporated into our modern celebrations, but none is more honored and cherished than the Tannenbaum, or, “Christmas Tree”.



Evergreen foliage has been a symbol of winter and winter solstice celebrations in Germanic lands since antiquity, and decorating trees with candle lighting is attested to in pre-Christianized Europe, during the very dark days around the Winter Solstice. There is evidence of evergreen adorned wreaths celebrating the Jul in Northern Germany dating to the 700s AD, and adorning trees with apples (Paradise Trees) to celebrate Adam and Eve’s feast day occurred as early as the 1400s in Catholic areas of Europe. However, the first recorded articles of an indoor decorated Tannenbaum that would truly qualify as any sort of “Christmas Tree” comes from 1605 in Strasbourg, Alsace, which was in the Rhineland at that time. By the mid-1700s, decorating trees for the Christmas holiday was commonplace throughout German lands, particularly in Evangelisch (Lutheran) households and churches.

Christmas Trees became widespread in America by two concurrent circumstances in the mid-1800s. Prior to 1840, finding a Christmas Tree in the Midwest was scarce occurrence. Most settlers to our area were descended from either English or French descendants, and many were influenced by a religious dogma that considered audacious Christmas celebrations to be unseemly at best, blasphemous at worst. That changed when Germans immigrated to the Midwest in large numbers beginning in the early 1850s, bringing with them their more vibrant holiday traditions, including their Tannenbaume. Concurrently, English Queen Victoria’s marriage to Prince Albert of Saxony-Coburg brought German Christmas traditions to the English monarchy in the 1840s. In 1848, a famous painting of Victoria, Albert, and their family celebrating around their Tannenbaum was published in the *Illustrated London News*. The image was reprinted in numerous American news sources, including the *New York Times* and *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, a publication of significant influence in domestic circles. These publications, along with Germans coming to the Midwest by the thousands over the next decades, made the Christmas Tree the most common and recognizable symbol of the Christmas and Winter holidays in the United States by the turn of the century.



“O Hoosier Tannenbaum” has several key symbolic features, including authentic, traditional ornaments from modern Germany, antique ornaments from German immigrants to the area in the late 1800s, and those symbolizing elements of German-American culture. There are numerous examples of wooden cut art ornaments, and baumschmuck—blown glass ornaments. Our Tannenbaum is also adorned with 120 hand-made Fröbelsterne: ribbon folded into stars—very traditional décor for a German Tannenbaum. O Hoosier Tannenbaum also includes candle-mimicking lights in tin holder clamps—in traditional days, Tannenbaume were lighted with real candles in tin holders such as these. Note also that O Hoosier Tannenbaum displays the state flags of all 16 states on modern Germany, along with the tri-color national flag of Germany and the German-speaking nations of Switzerland and Austria.



Our Tannenbaum exhibit also includes the “Maibaum”, or Maypole. This is a “mini” version of the Maypole raised in German Park over the Edelweiss Biergarten each spring during May Day celebrations. The pole raised in the park is 20 feet tall. The Maibaum branches display the logos of the individual German Cultural Societies of Indianapolis.

Homemade Fröbelsterne, state flags, and wood cutout ornaments made possible by a donation from AMANTRA baking, Carmel, IN, specializing in authentic German and American desserts and bakery made from time-honored family recipes. “making life sweeter...one bite at a time.” Contact Amy Jerde at amantrabaking@att.net; 317-441-6949

Seven Indianapolis-based German cultural societies sponsored this year's O Hoosier Tannenbaum, with generous donations. Each focus on a enhancing a different element of German-American culture in the area.



Indiana German Heritage Society (IGHS): The mission of the IGHS is to understand, promote, and celebrate the contributions of German-speaking immigrants and their descendants to the multi-cultural heritage of the state and the nation. We are guided by a commitment to learn and an obligation to share our knowledge with accuracy, integrity, and respect for all heritages. The vision of the Indiana German Heritage Society is to be the catalyst for the preservation and celebration of the state's German-American heritage, and to support groups and communities in activities that coincide with our mission. <https://www.ighs.org/>
Facebook: @IndianaGermanHeritageSociety



The German American Klub of Indianapolis (GAK): German-American focused Social and Cultural club, in Historic German Park at 8602 South Meridian Street. Home to Indy's GERMAN Oktoberfest—the largest and most authentic Oktoberfest in Central Indiana. GAK also is home to the spring festival known as "Frühlingsfest" during May Day weekend including the raising of the Maibaum, a Hunter's Feast (Jägerfest), and the southside brewers tasting "Südzfest". GAK is home the Edelweiss Restaurant, serving authentic German food since 1974, and is home to Indy's only German folk dance group, die Fledermäuschen Tanzgruppe. <https://indianapolisgak.com/> **Facebook: @TGAKIndy**



Indianapolis Liederkranz and Damenchor: For over 145 years, the Indianapolis Liederkranz has continued to preserve this part of German culture in the Holy Cross area of Indianapolis. The purpose of the Indianapolis Liederkranz is the cultivation and perpetuation of German culture, primarily through song and music, as well as the cultivation and promotion of other cultural activities for its members and the community at large. Indy Liederkranz and Damenchor perform in several concerts throughout the year, and hosts several German-themed events including Sommerfest in German Park and Bockfest. <https://indyliederkranz.org/> **Facebook: @IndianapolisLiederkranz**



The Carmel Christkindlmarkt: An open-air Christmas market in traditional German style since 2017, the Markt attracts a half-million visitors to experience authentic holiday products sourced from Germany and other German-speaking European countries. The Markt offers traditional German foods and gifts being sold from small wooden huts, and the market surrounds a beautiful outdoor ice-skating rink. The Markt displays the unforgettable Glühwein Pyramid, the first of its kind in the USA. As the premier offering in Indiana, the Markt was named USA Today's No. 1 Holiday Market in the country. When you visit, be sure to experience the Kulturecke German Holiday museum and the Kinderecke, featuring German woodworkers from the Erzgebirge region. www.carmelchristkindlmarkt.com **Facebook: @carmelchristkindlmarkt**



The Athenaeum Foundation: Built in 1892 as the cultural center for Indy's German immigrants and originally known as "Das Deutche Haus", the Athenaeum preserves and enhances this historic German-American tradition to advance the "Sound Mind in a Sound Body" values of its founders. It was awarded the National Historic Landmark designation in 2016. The "A" hosts numerous German and non-German themed events each year, including Germanfest, Karneval, St. Nikolas Festival and many arts and music exhibits and performances. The A also hosts YMCA and the Rathskeller German restaurant and Keller bar. www.athenaeumfoundation.org **Facebook: @AthenaeumIndy**



The IUPUI Max Kade German-American Center: The mission of the IUPUI Max Kade German-American Research and Resource Center is to support German-American Studies through scholarly research, teaching, and service and the community by offering presentations and events on all aspects of German-American culture. The Center funds several outstanding scholarships to local students for college / university studies and international study abroad programs. In addition, the Center's outstanding faculty publish regular articles and books on various aspects of German and German-American history and culture, and hosts archives of valuable information for learners of all types. <https://liberalarts.iupui.edu/maxkade/> **Facebook: @mkgaciupui**



The Indianapolis-Cologne Sister City Partnership Committee strives to foster international relationships between people and places in Indy and Cologne. This committee meets once a month at the Athenaeum to discuss various activities concerning the ongoing relationship between Indianapolis and Cologne. The Sister City funds several exchange programs including students, firefighters, librarians. **Facebook: @IndianapolisCologneSisterCityPartnership**