



The Christmas Pickle is a charming Christmas tree decorating holiday tradition. The Christmas Pickle, or Die Weihnachtsgurke, is one of the strangest modern customs of disputed origins. It was thought to be from Germany, since the Christmas tree originated there. So what's the 'dill'? The Christmas pickle tradition is largely unknown in Germany even though beautiful glass pickles have been made there for centuries.

One story comes from Berrien Springs, Michigan, the pickle capital of the world, with a Victorian era tale of St. Nicholas saving two Spanish children who were caught by a mean innkeeper and trapped them in a barrel of pickles. Being caught by a wicked innkeeper and trapped in a barrel is a good illustration of being 'in a pickle', that's for sure!

A more credible tale comes from Camp Sumter during the American Civil War of a soldier named John C. Lower. Born in Bavaria in 1842, he and his family left their home in Germany and emigrated to the U.S.A. John Lower had enlisted in the 103rd Pennsylvania Infantry, but was captured in Plymouth, North Carolina, in April of the year 1864 and taken to prison in Andersonville, Georgia. The Camp Sumter military prison at Andersonville was one of the largest Confederate military prisons during the War. In the 14 months the prison existed, more than 45,000 Union soldiers were imprisoned. Of these, almost 13,000 died. Today, Andersonville National Historic Site is a memorial to all American prisoners of war throughout the nation's history. The words "Death Before Dishonor" appear on a third of the state monuments at Andersonville. This phrase is the motto of the Union Ex-Prisoners of War association, and representational of the stalwart devotion of Union POWs to their country.

The story goes... On Christmas Eve, near death of starvation, his spirit broken, John Lower begged the guard for something to eat before resigning to his own death. The guard having mercy on John, found a pickle to give him. The pickle not only revived his spirit but gave John the mental and physical strength to live on. After being liberated and reuniting with his family once again, he began the tradition of hiding a pickle in the Christmas tree every year, thus creating one of the earliest purely American Christmas traditions.

While this is a family narrative that cannot be easily verified, Private John Lower was a soldier in the American Civil War and prisoner in Andersonville, that much is for certain. No matter what you want to believe about the pickle on the tree, an old tradition from Germany or a memorial to the powerful grace of mercy and the fortitude of the human spirit, it is a tradition worthy of remembrance.

Whether you call it good luck or great timing, pickles represent extending the warm feelings of the season. The one who finds the humble fruit amongst the tree boughs gets good fortune for the year and a special gift or treat. The gift I like to give to the finder is usually something we can all join in and play with or share- a football to play catch, a card game, a movie, a box of chocolates or a board game.

On Christmas Eve, place the pickle ornament next to the plate with Santa's cookies before the children go to sleep. Santa hangs the pickle in it's hiding place on the tree and leaves the extra gift on the empty plate. On Christmas morning after breakfast I remind everyone it's time to look for the hidden fruit. I like to hide it on a branch right up against the trunk to make it tricky to find! Inevitably it becomes a hide the pickle game and we give everyone a chance to 'hide 'n seek' the pickle.

If you have very young children participating you might want to hide the pickle in a more forward position on the tree branch, or play the hot/cold game as they get nearer or further away from finding it. Some families like to start with a large sized pickle and replace it with an increasingly smaller sized pickle every year to make it more and more difficult to find. If you want to play without having an extra gift, the finder gets to open the first present, light a candle, or some other privilege. Or you can give the finder an actual pickle!

However you interpret and celebrate this tradition, we hope you have fun incorporating the Christmas pickle into your holiday season.

