Chrismons—Significant Ornaments for Christmas

One way to make a Christmas tree truly significant is to decorate it with Chrismons.

Chrismons—the word is a compound of Christ and monograms—were originated by the early Christians as symbols of their faith: the triangle, the fish, the circle, the cross.

Use of these Christian symbols as meaningful ornaments for the traditional Yule tree was the inspiration of Mrs. Harry W. Spencer of Danville, Virginia.

Mrs. Spencer volunteered in 1957 to create appropriate ornaments for the Christmas tree in her church, the Lutheran Church of the Ascension. Her minister accepted the offer, and the result was the first Chrismon tree.

“I realized Christmas was the birthday of the Christ Child,” recalled Mrs. Spencer. “Suppose it had been the custom in that day and time to decorate birthday cakes for children.” She had thought: “How would Mary have decorated a cake for her son, Jesus?”

While searching in her reading for the answer, Mrs. Spencer discovered some drawings of designs called Chrismons.

“Carved or drawn by some of the earliest Christians, they were found in many places—some on jewelry and utensils, others on doors or in catacombs, and others on buildings.”

“From a merely artistic viewpoint, the designs were quite beautiful. I saw that they would make lovely Christmas tree decorations. More than that, though, it occurred to me that by using these early symbols of our faith to decorate the tree, we would bring out distinctly the real reason we celebrate this day of the year.”

A Danville, Virginia, Church Member’s Inspiration Has Spread Around the World

This was the 1965 Chrismon tree at the First Christian Church in Birmingham, Alabama.
Using her handicraft skill and Styrofoam, beads, wire, foil, and other trimmings, Mrs. Spencer made 120 Chrismons for the church’s 15-foot cedar tree the Christmas of 1957. Besides the Chrismons there were only tiny white lights on the tree. It was a splendid and fitting display.

The Church of the Ascension will decorate its 10th Chrismos tree this Christmas. Mrs. Spencer and the members of the congregation have made dozens of new Chrismons since 1957. And the idea of the Chrismos tree has spread so far and wide that the church now has a standing committee to answer the ever-growing volume of requests for Chrismos patterns and information.

“It’s spread around the world and back to us,” said Mrs. Spencer. “There have been Chrismos trees from the Azores to Australia. We’ve sent instructions, on request, to all the continents except one—Antarctica: the penguins aren’t yet interested. Saudi Arabia and Sweden, India and Newfoundland, Vietnam and Argentina, and Japan and Ethiopia are among the countries that have requested and used our instructions. There are Chrismos trees, too, in every one of the United States.

“Each in his own way makes these ornaments to celebrate the Nativity of our Lord. Over 6,000 churches of all denominations have asked for and received our patterns. Many more individuals have been reached and inspired by the story the Chrismos tell. And many use the idea to decorate their home trees.”

The Chrismos Committee of the church prepared instruction and pattern books for series of Chrismons. Chrismos are not for sale, and the idea is copyrighted by the Danville church, which will give any church or nonprofit institution wanting to make proper use of the idea a release of that copyright. The three pattern books the church has compiled cost $1.50 each.

Mrs. Spencer is pleased whenever she hears a new report of where her Chrismos tree idea has been. And there are many such reports.

When President Johnson and West Germany’s Chancellor Ludwig Erhard worshipped together in a Texas church during the Christmas season in 1963, white and gold Chrismos decorated the church’s tree.

Last year in Atlanta the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation had a tree in the sanctuary for the first time in its 84-year history—because it was decorated with Chrismos, which were made by a visiting sister of one of the church’s members.

And in Vietnam, U.S. soldiers last Christmas shared a similar set of ornaments on a tree in a candlelight carol service.

Said Mrs. Spencer, “What others have done and can do through the Chrismos is, we feel, the most interesting aspect of the Chrismos program.”

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began to merge into one. A society based on strict law and a powerful religion developed. From roughly 200 B.C. to 800 A.D., this society attained a cultural level equal to the Etruscans.

Worship of the sun was basic to early Mexican religion. Around 100 A.D. the city of Teotihuacan was built in the Valley of Mexico—a city that occupied more than 40 square miles and contained dozens of small pyramids and temples. Dominating the scene was the great Pyramid of the Sun, which soared 216 feet into the air and overlooked its smaller companion, the Pyramid of the Moon. These gigantic stone structures are tourist meccas today, and engineers marvel at the accuracy of the dimensions of the mounds. The great pyramid, laid out hundreds of years before the surveyor’s transit was invented, is only 6 inches out of perfect square at its base! The Teotihuacans also developed a calendar more accurate than our present one.

This city lasted more than 1,000 years; then was destroyed.

In 1325 the Aztecs, a violent and warring tribe, conquered the peaceful Toltec and began the construction of Tenochtitlán—now Mexico City—on an island in a broad lake. As the city grew, the lake was drained; so the present city of Mexico is built on this old lakebed. The soft soil of the lakebed acts as a cushion against earthquakes, but many older buildings are slowly sinking because of inadequate foundations and footings.

Present-day Mexico City is sometimes called the Paris of the West, but this term is inaccurate to a great degree. The city could just as well be called the Madrid of the West, or even the New York of the South. Indeed, elements of all these world metropolises are found—but Mexico City blends and absorbs these elements into a substance peculiar to itself.

Even its people are of many origins. About 80% of the Mexicans are mestizo, or people of mixed Indian and European stock. The remainder are of Spanish, French, Swiss, German, Negro, or North American ancestry. The language is basically Spanish, but has many words taken from more than 90 Indian tribal languages. For instance, the Mayan language is still spoken in Yucatán, and its influence spreads to the spoken language of the mestizo in Mexico City.

But everyone is Mexican and fiercely proud of his heritage. It is a city on the go, and its forward momentum has everyone excited and enthusiastic. Talk with a Mexican businessman and he will set your head swirling with facts and figures of economic development, industrial expansion, and financial growth. The city is growing at a rate that, if sustained, will put it ahead of New York City by 1970.

Mexico City is a treasure trove of delightful experiences. Hotels are so new that few in the United States can compare. A short walk in almost any direction—maybe only one or two blocks away—and you find one of many colorful markets jammed with merchandise, vegetables, meats, woven-work, second-to-tenth-hand household articles, and people. By all means visit the Straw Market, only a five-minute stroll from the main shopping center.

Nearby is Thieves’ Market, which used to be just what its name says. Mexicans, it is said, have long shrugged their shoulders at the idea of spending good pesos for household insurance—if you are robbed on Saturday night, you can buy back your property in Thieves’ Market later on for much less than the cost of an insurance policy.

The great cathedral on the Zocalo is one of the largest and most beautiful in the world. Around the Zocalo you will find the National Palace, headquarters of the Mexican Government. Nearby is the famed Shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a great cathedral erected in testimony of a vision seen by a Mexican peasant.

Chapultepec Castle, on the far side of the city from the downtown area, was the home of Maximilian and Carlota, and is now a national museum filled with lovely art treasures the ill-fated emperor and his empress brought back from France. Below the castle lies Chapultepec Park, with one of the finest zoos anywhere. The new National Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology houses one of the most important collections of native art in the world. Built at a cost of $12 million dollars, this spectacular contemporary structure houses the famed Calendar Stone and hundreds of relics of the noble and mysterious Mayan civilization. Downtown again you must see the Palacio des Bellas Artes with its 60-ton tiffany glass curtain and its wonderful performances of the Folklorico Ballet. The lobbies of the Palacio are decorated throughout with some of the finest murals of Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros, and Tamayo.

A drive down the broad and beautiful Paseo de la Reforma, the main thoroughfare of the city, emphasizes the contrasts between the old city and the new. Magnificent buildings form a glittering string of steel, concrete, aluminum, and glass. On one side you can see the world’s highest A-frame, a 416-foot tower containing 24 office floors topped by an observation deck that holds a 47-bel carillon. The open sides of this A-frame are covered with bronze-colored plate glass.

Sunday is the day to visit the Floating Gardens of Xochimilco. It is also the day to see a bullfight.

Mexico City after dark lives up to its name, La Ciudad de Luz. Ablaze with light, its streets and shops are jammed with shoppers and strollers. For fashionable Mexicans the dinner hour is never prior to 9 p.m., and by 10 p.m. the better restaurants, cocktail lounges, and hotels are filled with chic and beautifully dressed men and women.

Mexico has wonderful restaurants, many specializing in the finest dishes of French, Spanish, Swiss, Chinese, Polynesian, and German gourmet menus. The Villa Fontana, featuring delicious food and a corps of strolling violinists, is highly popular. El Paseo has superb food and an intimate atmosphere made more delightful by the songs and piano playing by its owner. Atop the Latino-American Tower, on the 43rd floor, is as fine a restaurant as can be found anywhere. From the tables across La Ciudad de Luz to the dim snowcovered mountains to the west is beyond description.

Throughout the rest of the city, but especially in the Geneve Hotel area, can be found smaller, less expensive, but equally excellent cafes and dining rooms. You should have at least one dinner at Fonda El Refugio, on Calle Liverpool. This is where the Mexican elite take their guests for dinner. American visitors to the city tend to regard Sanborn’s House of Tiles as their common meeting place and favorite restaurant. Sanborn’s, across a broad plaza from the Palacio de Bellas Artes, serves American food—seasoned just enough to bite the tongue of Americans but not so hot as to burn his stomach. Too, it offers a complete menu of American foods, and it is one place in Mexico where you can get an old-fashioned U.S.A. hamburger.