

MEMO FROM THE MAYOR

SUBJECT: A Retelling of How the Evergreen Became an Important Symbol of Christmas

Germany: 24 December 722

Long ago there lived an Anglo-Saxon priest in the Germanic regions of the Frankish Kingdom. His name was Boniface, which means “good fortune”, and he felt fortunate—blessed, actually—to have found the strangest looking dog he had ever encountered. A mutt, he concluded, resembling a sausage.

“Careful, Chip!” Father Boniface cautioned as the mutt attempted to move the priest’s all-purpose tool. “You might slice off your paw with that sharp blade.” Pleased to have made such a fine ax, Father Boniface modeled it after the local tribe’s francisca throwing ax. Always kept razor sharp, it helped the priest to remain ever ready for any forest encounter.

Father Boniface discovered Chip exactly one year before, Christmas Eve, 721 AD. Hearing mournful whimpering outside his forest cabin after evening prayers, he carried his ax and a lighted beeswax candle and carefully opened his cabin door. There, in a pile of wood chips made when the priest chopped his fire wood, he found the sorriest, saddest looking reddish-brown creature he ever encountered. He knew instantly what he would call it, all covered from nose to tail in wood chips and tree moss. Boniface would call him “Chip the Wonder Dog”. Indeed, he thought it a wonder that the mutt still lived, pondering the freezing temperature.

Boniface thought it perfectly natural that an Anglo-Saxon cleric should preach the Good News to the Germanic pagans. They saw him as no threat—provided he stayed out of their business. Yet, that proved to be the rub. Their business consisted of war, religion, and a little farming—when war and religion didn’t interfere. The local tribesmen made it clear to the monk they had no use for his God. They had lots of gods: Woden, the chief; Tyr, god of war; Thor, god of thunder and lightning; Balder, god of light; Freyja, goddess of love; Frigg, goddess of motherhood and art—and that didn’t include the grave gods. Germanic pagans claimed to get great advice through them.

When it came to ritual, they laughed at Father Boniface’s so-called “Lord’s Supper”. What? A piece of stale flatbread and a sip of wine? Some meal, there. Yet, when it came to ritual and sacrifice, they really knew what was what—or so they thought. They sacrificed the old-

fashioned way, the way the gods intended. They slaughtered animals *and* humans, especially young children. Sometimes even babies.

Times were tough for these Alemanni pagans in the Rhineland. The weather had turned bitterly cold and the summer was too wet for many crops. People were hungry. Their sacrifices always seemed to bring them victory. Would they also bring food, various village chieftains wondered?

“Come Chip,” Father Boniface commanded. “The snow is starting again and the sun is bedding down for the night. I want to get to the village house church before dark. I have your favorite bread in my pack!” With a bounding leap, Chip jumped like a roe fawn clearing a fallen tree, landing perfectly on the monk’s left shoulder where he would ride as the priest trekked in his primitive snow shoes through the deep, newly frozen snow. It’s truly a wonder Chip can do that, Boniface thought.

As they approached a clearing, Boniface stopped. Staying in the shadows behind a tree line, he observed a circle of men chanting and dancing around an oak tree with a young boy tied up.

“This is not good, Chip. The oak tree is sacred to those pagans. I fear they intend to sacrifice the boy.”

Chip swallowed hard as Boniface started for the group after offering a petition for protection. Hearing the crunch of the crusted snow made by Boniface approaching the circle, the chanting stopped and the village chieftain, named Gonzar, turned in a menacing crouch towards the pious monk and his mutt.

“Come to tell us about your dead God on a Roman cross, have you priest?” growled Gonzar.

“Not at all, Chief Gonzar,” answered Boniface. “I have come to proclaim that you will commit a most grievous sin by killing this young boy.”

“Why, you hypocritical pig,” Gonzar spat. This is my son. I can sacrifice him if I want. Even your God sacrificed his son. I do this for my village and the glory of Woden, Most High.”

“Woden his no power, Chief Gonzar. Only the Creator of us all has power. I will prove to you.”

“How will you do that, priest?”

“With one swing of this francisca, I will cut down this oak. Untie the boy,” commanded Boniface.

“You are mad, priest. If you fail, YOU will sacrifice the boy. Or we will sacrifice YOU!”

Chip swallowed hard again. He could tell by the chieftain’s tone that he and Boniface were in grave danger. Seeing what Boniface was about to do, Chip stood on the priest’s shoulder, placing his forepaws on Boniface’s head. Just as Boniface swung the ax, Chip jumped, somersaulted and kicked the wooden handle just below the ax head to give it an extra thrust. With one swing, the might oak fell, and Chip plopped unceremoniously into three-feet of snow.

As if Boniface’s Chip-assisted swing was not a miracle enough, within seconds the most beautiful fir tree Boniface had ever seen sprang from the stump of the oak.

“There, Gonzar. There is your proof,” a relieved Boniface announced.

“Now, take this fir tree inside your hut and cease worshipping your dead gods at oak trees. This evergreen symbolizes the everlasting life the true God’s only son provides through His once-and-for-all sacrifice. Meditate on my words, Gonzar. Trust the God of the Universe to provide for you, not false gods of Nordic myths.”

“Keep the boy, priest,” Gonzar growled as the villagers left.

“Come boy,” Boniface said, digging Chip out of his snowy grave. “Let’s find another fir tree. We will place my candle on top to symbolize the Light of the World having come this very night, long ago.”

Merry Christmas, to all!