Trimmed Christmas trees were first used in the United States apparently during the American Revolution, when Hessian soldiers softened their homesickness with them. In a description of Christmas festivities at Fort Dearborn, Ill., in 1804 mention is made of a Christmas tree.

The idea and the tradition spread widely through the young land: We read that people in Cambridge, Mass., put up Christmas trees in 1832; in Philadelphia, 2 years later; Cincinnati, in 1835; Rochester, N. Y., 1840; Richmond and Williamsburg, in Virginia, 1846; Wooster, Ohio, 1847; and Cleveland, 1851.

At first, the trimmings, if any, consisted mostly of small tufts of cotton and strings of popcorn and cranberries. Other decorations were flowers, replicas of foodstuffs, paper ornaments, and the like—no factory-made ornaments, tinsel, electric lights, or baubles.

Some historians trace the custom of lighting the Christmas tree to Martin Luther (1483–1546). The story is told that he was strolling through the countryside alone one Christmas Eve under a brilliant starlit sky, and his thoughts turned to the nativity of the Christ Child. He was awed by the beauty of the heavens and the wintry landscape: The blue light on the low hills outside Weimar, and on the evergreens, the snow flakes sparkling in the moonlight. Returning home, he told his family about it and attempted to reproduce the glory of the outdoors. To a small evergreen tree he attached some lighted candles so as to portray the reflection of the starry heaven.

Apparently candles did not come into wide use at once. Mention of the Christmas-tree custom in Strasbourg a century later did not include lights. In fact, at first, the use of lights on a tree was considered ridiculous and referred to as “child’s play.” For two centuries following Luther, the Christ-
mas-tree custom appears to have been confined to the Rhine River district. From 1700 on, when the lights were accepted as part of the decorations, the Christmas tree was well on its way to becoming an accepted custom in Germany, and during the Revolution the tradition of the Christmas tree bridged the Atlantic.

Finland is said to have accepted the custom in about 1800, Denmark 1810, Sweden 1820, and Norway about 1830. From the Scandinavian countries the custom spread to France and England about 1840. Records show that 35,000 Christmas trees were sold in Paris in 1890.

Some persons trace the origin of the Christmas tree to an earlier period. Even before the Christian era, trees and boughs were used for ceremonials. Egyptians, when they observed the winter solstice, brought green date palms into their homes as a symbol of "life triumphant over death." When the Romans observed the feast of Saturn, a part of the ceremony was to raise an evergreen bough. The early Scandinavians are said to have done homage to the fir tree. To the Druids, sprigs of evergreen in the house meant eternal life; to the Norsemen, they symbolized the revival of the sun god Balder. To the superstitious, the branches of evergreens placed over the door would keep out witches, ghosts, and the evil spirits.

This does not mean that our present Christmas-tree custom might perforce have evolved from paganism, any more than did some of the present-day use of greenery in rituals. Trees and branches can be made purposeful as well as symbolic. The decorated Christmas tree has become an accepted tradition during yuletide, and Christmas would be incomplete without it.

Through the years the tradition has become so well established that two-thirds of all American homes now follow the custom. The Christmas tree is a symbol of a living Christmas spirit and brings into our lives the fragrance and freshness of the forest.

Just how Christmas-tree decorations other than lights developed is vague. It may be that tufts of cotton and strings of popcorn were used on the branches as a substitute for snow in the manner Martin Luther used candles to represent lights on the snow-flecked evergreens. Fruit, such as apples, was easy to attach to the trees and provided color, as did strings of cranberries. Pictures or models of food-stuffs, such as hams and bacons, were once used as substitutes for the real items too heavy for slender branches.

The suggestion has been made that the idea of decorating trees is an outgrowth of a practice adopted by early dwellers of the forest. Certain food-stuffs were hung in trees to get them out of reach of prowling animals. On the other hand, trees were worshiped by many, and gifts of food were often hung in the branches as offerings or sacrifices to the deities. Such giving was a Christian trait; thus the gifts were hung in "Christian trees"—or Christmas trees.

The fir seems to be the tree most commonly mentioned in reviewing the evolution of the Christmas tree. The fact that the twigs of the balsam fir resemble crosses more than do other evergreens may have had something to do with it. On the other hand, it may be that the word "fir" was used to designate a number of evergreens before botanical nomenclature was well known, for even today many people, unable to identify the various evergreens, speak of them as "firs."

Also, it seems that extracts from the fir, especially balsam fir, were used for medicinal purposes; probably for that reason it was widely sought after and used. Certainly the perfume of the balsam is one of its outstanding features. At any rate, if the fir tree predominated as the early Christmas tree, then our forefathers selected wisely, for the fir is the favorite of today.

Many people are troubled about cutting evergreens for Christmas trees. President Theodore Roosevelt, as a conservationist, felt so keenly about the
matter, for example, that he used to forbid their use in the White House. He called it wasteful. One year, however, his sons Archie and Quentin smuggled one in and set it up in Archie’s room. The President’s friend and advisor on conservation measures, Gifford Pinchot, assured him that the supervised and proper harvesting of Christmas trees was good for the forests. From then on the White House had a tree.

Those who object to the cutting of Christmas trees might well remember that forestry looks not only to the perpetuation but also to the wise use of woodlands. By careful selection of trees to be cut, it is possible to obtain evergreen trees without harming the forest—often, indeed, with positive benefit to it, just as it is possible to thin out stands of young trees for fuel and obtain faster growth and greater returns in saw timber from the remaining trees. Actually, if properly directed, there is no reason why the joy associated with the Christmas evergreen may not be a means of arousing in the minds of children an appreciation of the beauty and usefulness of trees; and keen appreciation of the beauty and usefulness of trees is a long step toward the will to plant and care for them.

Living Christmas trees, fittingly decorated and lighted, can become the center of outdoor community interest and seasonal celebrations. Smaller spruces, firs, or hemlocks planted in tubs or similar containers make excellent living Christmas trees for homes. They especially appeal to children and, because they remain alive, keep the fire hazard to a minimum. Then the planting of the live Christmas tree near the home on New Year’s Day (if weather and soil permit) serves as a fitting ceremony to end the holiday week. If kept watered and reasonable care is taken in transplanting, the tree is almost sure to grow. In fact, the same tree may be used for two or more successive Christmases before it grows too large to be easily handled.

When its purpose is served, the tree should be disposed of properly. A Twelfth Night ceremony, in which the Christmas trees, wreaths, and boughs are collected from the several homes and burned in a blaze of glory, is observed in some American cities—a fitting end for a tree of tradition and sentiment and much better than discarding it on a backyard trash heap.

The basis for the custom may derive from the time when the early Christians celebrated the feast of the Nativity of Christ for 12 days, placing special emphasis on the last or Twelfth Day. The community burning of the trees, which appears to have originated in Germany, was instituted to commemorate the light of the Star of Bethlehem, which guided the Three Wise Men to where the infant Christ lay in the manger. Through the centuries various peoples have observed the custom in various ways; often rites to insure better crops were involved.

Arthur M. Sowder, after graduation from the University of Idaho, School of Forestry, was employed as a logging engineer and logging-camp foreman. Before joining the Department of Agriculture as an extension forester, he taught forestry subjects, including logging, at the University of Idaho.