

*Dreisbach-Dresbach Family Association*  
*Christmas Newsletter*

© December 2023

**C**hristmas traditions and memories have always been important. We don't know how our Dreisbach-Dresbach ancestors celebrated Christmas but we can be certain they had family celebrations. We also know that Simon, Martin and young Henry (1743 to 1756 immigrants) had large families who lived relatively close together so they could help each other – and could celebrate with each other.

The Christmas traditions of our immigrant ancestors were closely related to the Christmas customs of Wittgenstein, the place where they were born. Those traditions were deeply connected to Christian belief but also reached back to celebration of the winter solstice and the beginning of the new cycle of life. Many of these customs traveled to Pennsylvania and formed the basis of Pennsylvania German traditions. Amazingly, many of these went on to become part of mainstream American Christmas celebrations! But not all of the traditions of Wittgenstein made the transition to Pennsylvania.

**The Christmas market, Weihnachtsmarkt,** is a tradition that was lost. They were and still are held in towns and large villages throughout Germany. Simon, Martin and Henry probably had a holiday tradition of going to the Christmas market. They may have gone to the closest one, and occasionally to the larger ones that were a farther away. Many of these Christmas markets survive today. One such is held in the city of Siegen.



**Siegen Christmas market:** In wonderful winter weather, Karl-Heinz Althaus was able to capture the Siegen Christmas market at the Lower Castle. With thanks to Fotocommunity of Germany, where you can exchange and exhibit photos.

<https://www.fotocommunity.de/photo/weihnachtsmarkt-siegen-karl-heinz-althaus/40530781>,

<https://www.fotocommunity.de/>

These winter markets served many purposes: socializing, selling and trading goods and wares, meeting prospective partners, drinking and eating.

Below is a map of part of Wittgenstein. The black arrow shows one of the roads to Cologne which is 50 miles to the west. The red arrows show Siegen and Hilchenbach, towns that continue to have beautiful and large Christmas markets. The green arrow is the location of Feudingen which has its own Christmas market. Simon Dreisbach's home, the very small village of Oberndorf, is nearby. Martin's birthplace in Raumland is just south of Bad Berleburg (blue arrow). Both Bad Berleburg and Bad Laasphe as well as Erndtebrück have long-standing Christmas markets. These, and other small towns throughout Wittgenstein host their own Weihnachtsmarkt, making the whole season of Advent a wonderful time to discover local foods, crafts and customs.



The Christmas market in Hilchenbach has been going on for hundreds of years and in addition to offering food, drink, entertainment and crafts, it also hosts a nativity play that harkens back to the Middle Ages. Ten actors, in costume, reenact the Christmas story speaking in Middle High German (an antique form of modern German).



*Left: Aerial view of Hilchenbach Chresdachsmärtche (local dialect for Christmas market). Photo by Scheinmeier, [CC BY-SA](#), TVSW e.V. Below, Three Wisemen in the Middle Ages Nativity pageant at the Christmas market. Photo by Kerstin Broh, [CC BY-SA](#), Stadt Hilchenbach*





The Christmas Market apparently did not survive the trans-Atlantic trip, no doubt for several reasons. Foremost, in the areas where Simon and Martin lived, there were not enough people living close to each other to be able to support a traditional village Christmas market. In more heavily settled areas near Philadelphia, not too far from where Henry lived, there may well have been small Christmas markets, however they never became a strong Pennsylvania German tradition. In addition there was a significant population of nearby English-speaking Quakers who frowned upon this kind of celebration. In the case of the Scotch-Irish settlers, Christmas was just another workday. Without friends and family who shared a similar view of Christmas and who had known the festive Weihnachtsmarkt, the tradition evaporated.

**Christmas trees:** The indoor Christmas tree is a tradition, still found in Wittgenstein, which DID survive the trip to Pennsylvania. Decorated Christmas trees are documented as early as the 1500's in Germany. The idea of bringing "evergreens" into the house in midwinter originated in pagan times and continued, in one form or another for thousands of years. It is well established that German immigrants, no doubt including our ancestors, brought the tradition of an indoor, decorated Christmas tree with them although the first documented picture of a Christmas tree dates from 1821.<sup>1</sup> These early trees were small enough to be set up on a table and decorated with handmade ornaments such as cookies, dried fruits, hand carved wood figures, and ornaments made of straw or hay. The tradition was to bring home a small fir tree on December 24<sup>th</sup> and to keep it until the last day of Christmas called Epiphany, traditionally celebrated on January 6<sup>th</sup>.



*Earliest known depiction of an indoor Christmas tree, drawn by Lewis Miller (1796-1882)*

*The drawing appears to depict the family of blue dyer Seifert with their Christmas tree in 1809.*

*It is unknown when Miller drew the picture. While possibly not the earliest drawing of a Christmas tree in the U.S., it may have been the earliest to have been drawn by an eyewitness account.*

*Source: Wikipedia, public domain*

<sup>1</sup> Shoemaker, Alfred L. *Christmas in Pennsylvania, a Folk-Cultural Study*, pub 2009 by Stackpole Books, p. 45.

**The Belsnickel/Belznikel:** There are many other Christmas traditions that made the transition from Wittgenstein to Pennsylvania only to disappear in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among them is the scary figure called the Belsnickel (or Belznikel in Pennsylvania Dutch/German). Generally played by a young man from the neighborhood, he was dressed in rags and animal skins and either blackened his face with charcoal or wore a kind of mask or headdress. Always wearing rags of some kind, he might also have deer horns attached to his hat or head. He was a scary figure and he went house to house, on December 6th.



*Belsnickel at Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center at Kutztown University in Berks County, PA. Photo by Marcus Schneck*

Sometimes the Belsnickel peeked in the window and rapped on the windowpane so the children would see the frightening figure – but it was also the figure they were expecting. Then he would bang on the door with a big stick and the parents, knowing who it was, would open the door and invite him in. In he would stomp, carrying a sack that had small candies, but also sometimes small rocks. The Belsnickel would ask the children if they had been good, and if they could recite a Bible verse. Those who were brave enough to stay “Yes, I’ve been good” and who knew a Bible verse by heart, would get praise and those who could not say they’d been good (their parents were listening of course) and who couldn’t recite a Bible verse would get whacks with the big stick or chased around the room with it! It all ended well though, with the Belsnickel scattering candies on the floor as he made his exit to go to the next house.

My mother had visits from the Belsnickel when she was growing up in the early 1900’s, but by the time my sister and I were little, in the 1930’s and 1940’s, the Belsnickel was no longer found where we lived. He hadn’t totally disappeared. He still made his rounds in the Pennsylvania Dutch/Pennsylvania German countryside (we lived in a town). There he was found until the 1950’s or later, with a few pockets deep in the countryside where he might still make an appearance.

The Belsnickel had his origins deep in German/Wittgenstein pre-history. There he was known as Krampus and thought to have been part of pagan rituals for the winter solstice. According to legend, he is the son of Hel, the Norse god of the underworld. The Krampus figure was assimilated into Christianity sometime in the middle ages and given an association with St. Nicholas. He had a role in Christmas celebrations all over present day Germany and our ancestors almost certainly knew about him, and brought the tradition with them to Pennsylvania.

**Lebkuchen: a tradition that still survives:** Another tradition, brought by German immigrants, and certainly known to our ancestors, was the making and eating of Lebkuchen, the most famous German Christmas Gingerbread Cookies! German Gingerbread is soft and pliable, unlike the better known, crisp gingerbread cookies of Scandinavia and elsewhere. It is made with nuts and a special spice mixture called Lebkuchen spice that gives them their unique flavor. Even after baking, the Lebkuchen are soft and moist and can be made weeks before Christmas and kept in a cookie tin in a dry and cool place! Bakers noticed that honey-sweetened dough would undergo fermentation when stored in a cool location, creating air bubbles that would improve the quality of the bread. *Lebkuchen* was started in November and baked in December after undergoing this fermentation period.

*Lebkuchen* was invented by monks in Franconia, Germany, in the 13th century and were recorded as early as 1296 in Ulm, and 1395 in Nürnberg (Nuremberg). The latter is the most famous exporter today of the product known as *Nürnberg Lebkuchen* (Nuremberg Lebkuchen).

Lore indicates that the cookie became widespread when in 1487, Emperor Friedrich III presented the city's 4000 children with cookies bearing the printed image of his portrait. Now, the cookie, *Elisenlebkuchen*, (possibly named after the daughter of the local gingerbread maker) is by law only permitted to be made within the bounds of the city.

**Baking for our Dreisbach ancestors:** In their first homes, log cabins about 18' x 18', the fireplace occupied one end. Initially it was just a fireplace. Baking was done on a flat griddle or in a "Dutch oven". Later improvements added ovens to the fireplace. These might be built on the side and have their own fire beneath or be to the side and use heat from the main hearth. They used techniques that are lost to us, but they could produce both bread and baked goods like cookies, although cookies were a very rare treat.

To bake cookies, they had to buy sugar which was only for sale in the larger towns. We know of one document showing an immigrant Dreisbach, Jost Dreisbach, purchasing sugar (and coffee!). Jost built his first log cabin in 1747. By 1765, when this transaction took place, Jost probably had either built a new and larger dwelling or extended the original one. The record of his purchases is from the account books of the Moravian Store in Bethlehem, Northampton County in what is now Pennsylvania. Below we see that in the fall of 1768 Jost owed the store 3 Pounds, 2 Shillings and 0 Pence for previous purchases. He then bought 4 pounds of sugar and ¼ pound of coffee for 8 Pence. Later he repaid his debt either with interest or with money left over for subsequent purchases. We do not know how 'relatively expensive' the sugar and coffee purchases were. But it is interesting to see that Jost had a large account at the Moravian Store since he, most definitely, was not Moravian. He was a miller though and he was so well thought of by the tight-knit Moravian community that they allowed him to make purchases from their store. Only a few non-Moravians were so honored.



Bethlehem was a closed Moravian community but it had a Store that sold items mostly to Moravians but also to a few neighbors, including the Simon Dreisbach family. All sales and payments were recorded.

**Wishing you all a Lovely Christmas and a Happy and Healthy New Year!**

**Marcia Dreisbach Falconer, Editor, DDFa Newsletter, 20 December 2023**



## Recipe from:

<https://kitchenfunwithmy3sons.com/lebkuchen-german-spice-cookies/>

## Ingredients

- ½ cup **honey**
- 1 cup dark brown sugar
- ¼ cup unsalted butter cut into cubes
- 1 large egg beaten
- 2 tsp lemon zest
- 1 ¾ cups **all-purpose flour**
- 1 cup ground almonds
- 1 tbsp **lemon juice**
- 1 tsp **baking powder**
- ½ tsp **baking soda**
- 2 tsp **ground cinnamon**
- ½ tsp fine sea salt
- ½ tsp ground allspice
- ½ tsp **ground ginger**
- ¼ tsp ground cloves
- ¼ tsp grated nutmeg

## Instructions

- In a glass bowl, mix the honey and sugar and heat in the microwave for 30 seconds. Stir together well until sugar dissolves (heat another 15-30 seconds if needed).
- Immediately add the butter and lemon zest and stir until the butter melts.
- Stir in the baking powder, soda, salt and spices and egg.
- Add the flour and ground almonds. Mix until you have a soft and slightly sticky dough, adding a little lemon juice as needed. Be careful not to add too much because you will be rolling the dough, just enough to where it's not dry.
- Spray your hands with cooking spray and gather the dough into a ball.
- Cover the mixing bowl with a towel and leave to rest for at least an hour or even overnight at room temperature.
- Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Meanwhile prepare the glaze.



## Glaze Ingredients

- 1 cup **powdered sugar**
  - Juice of 1 lemon
  - 1 tsp **vanilla extract**
  - 1 tsp rum optional
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- Mix together all the glaze ingredients in a small bowl until you have a thin glaze.
  - Divide the dough into thirds. Roll the dough on a silicone baking mat to ¾ of an inch thickness to right under 1 inch.
  - Cut out circles using a cookie cutter.
  - Space the cookies out on the silicone mat and bake for 12 minutes.
  - Repeat with remaining dough, gathering up any scraps and rolling out again and bake in batches.
  - Transfer the cookies carefully to a wire rack and brush with the glaze while they are still a little warm using a pastry brush.
  - Allow the glaze to dry and add a second layer (if desired).