

The Christmas Pickle

Is hanging this tree ornament a German, American or German-American tradition?

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Every year around Christmas time, there are Internet notes, articles, and comments about the *Weihnachtsgurke* (Christmas Pickle). Various stories have been told regarding its possible origins. The litmus test, however, is historical documentation rather than hearsay. There are three stories that are most often told.

One story is that it was a marketing ploy developed by the American "dime store" entrepreneur F.W. Woolworth (1852-1919). John K. Winkler's biography: *Five and Ten: The Fabulous Life of F.W. Woolworth* (1948) was based in large part on Woolworth's autobiography. Winkler writes that in 1880 Woolworth began acquiring Christmas tree ornaments from an importing firm in Philadelphia (Meyer and Schoenaman). They sold exceptionally well, and were gone in two days, so the next year Woolworth placed a large order. He also ordered Christmas tree ornaments from a factory in Philadelphia run by Bernard Wilmsen.

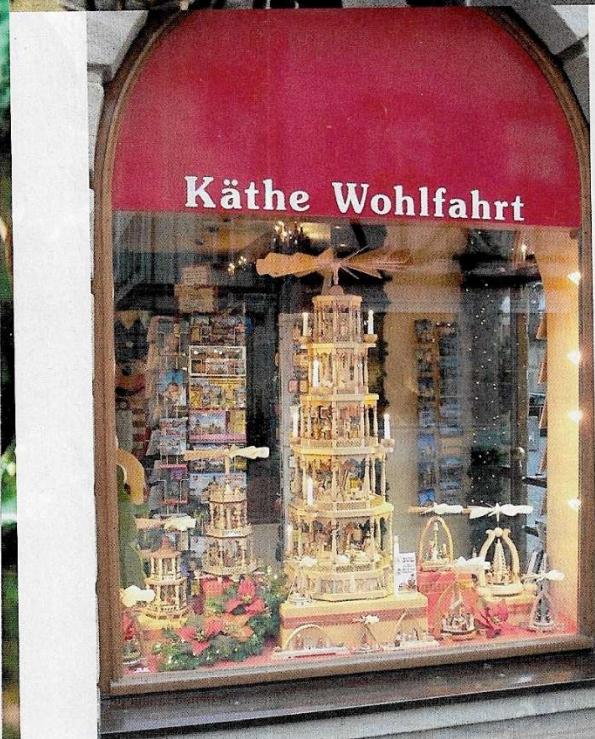
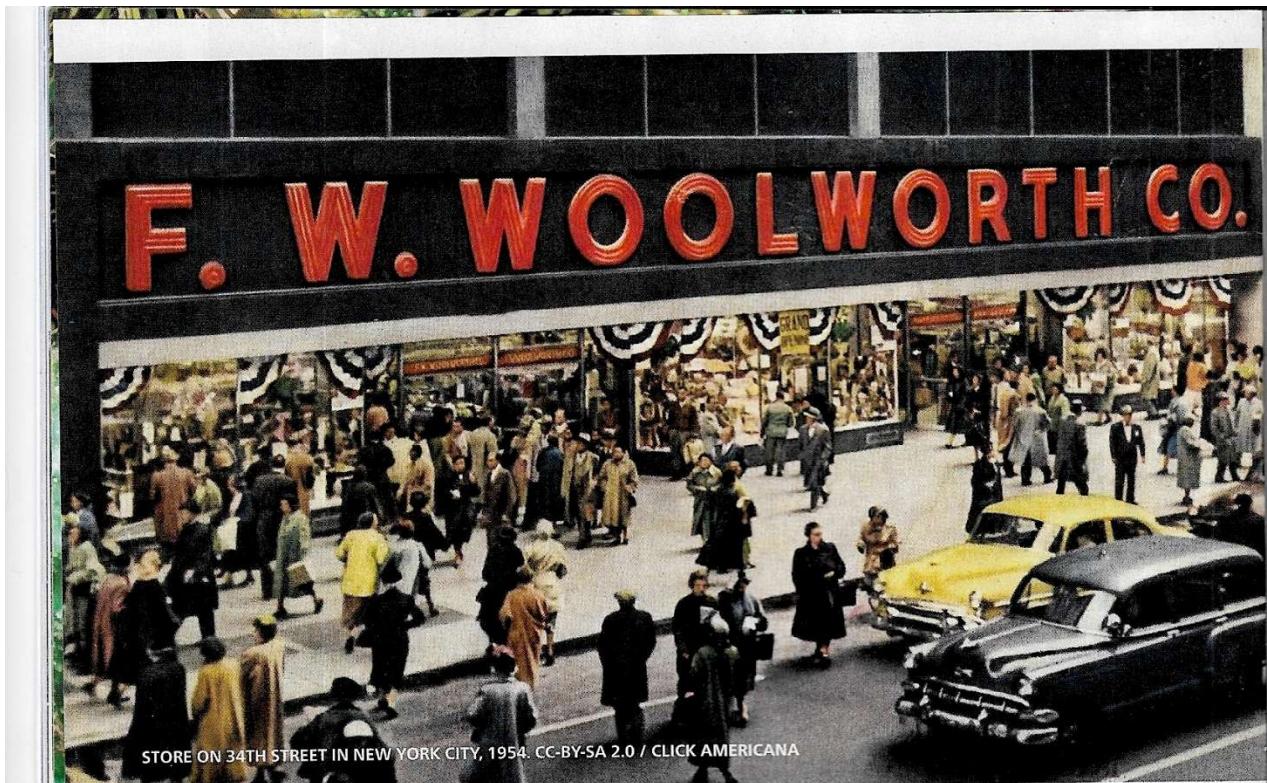
In 1890, Woolworth traveled to Europe and acquired Christmas tree ornaments in Lauscha, a town in Thuringia that is well known for the ornaments produced there. In Sonneberg, a town also in Thuringia, he acquired more ornaments. Woolworth also encouraged the production of ornaments in the U.S. According to Winkler: "Woolworth backed an American manufacturer in successful experiments to duplicate the foreign process, and soon millions of 'made in the

U.S.A.' tree ornaments were being turned out." However, no mention is made of the Christmas Pickle.

In addition to Winkler's biography, databases of historical newspapers were searched for references to Woolworth and the Christmas Pickle. No such references could be found, so there are no published sources supporting the notion that Woolworth was behind the Christmas Pickle story—none. That story can be eliminated, as it cannot be verified.

Another story asserts that the Christmas Pickle came from Germany. So, where to look for historical documentation? Books were searched dealing with Christmas in Germany, but nothing was found regarding the Christmas Pickle. Works on German folklife were also consulted, including: *Wörterbuch der deutschen Volkskunde*, but nothing was found about the Christmas Pickle.

So, next on the checklist was the German version of Wikipedia (Wikipedia.de). It does have an entry on the *Weihnachtsgurke* which includes a reference to an advertisement for a Christmas Pickle ornament in a 1909 catalog from Prenzlau in Brandenburg, a state in the northeast corner Germany. It was in the Christmas section of a catalog of Lyra Fahrrad-Werke, a bicycle manufacturing company. Since reference was made to Prenzlau, I contacted the Stadtarchiv in Prenzlau, inquiring about the advertisement. It responded that it had no information about it, nor did the Kulturhis-



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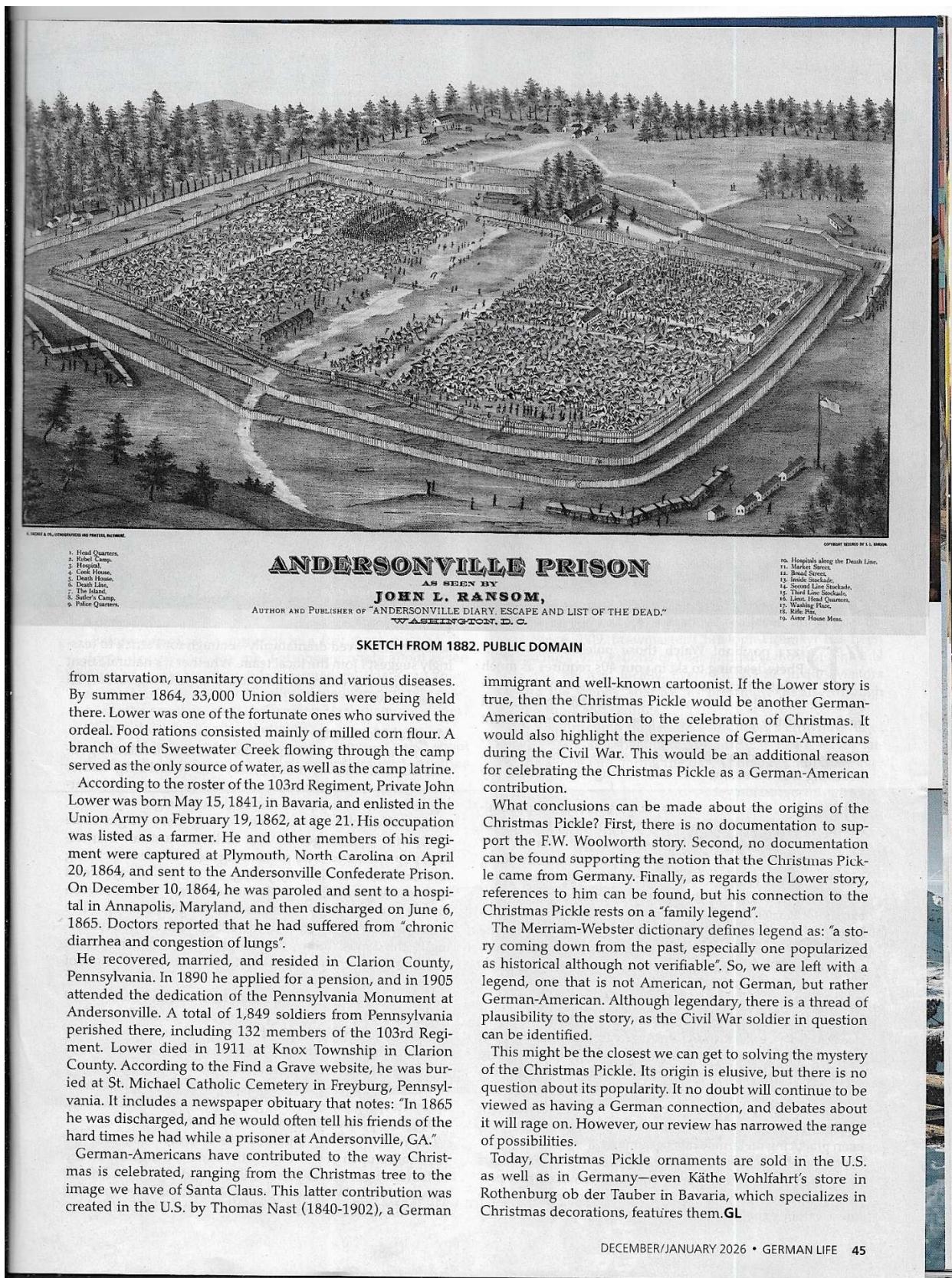
torisches Museum in Prenzlau. However, the advertisement indicates that the Christmas Pickle was a known ornament by that time.

Wikipedia.de also reports that in 2016 a public opinion survey was done in Germany about the Christmas Pickle by YouGOV, an institute researching public opinion. It found that 91% of Germans had not heard of the Christmas Pickle and only 2% of those who knew of the custom practiced it!

Like the Woolworth story, the story about German origins appears to be unfounded, as it cannot be verified. This leaves one more story, that is often mentioned: the notion that it might be of German-American origin centered on the experience of a Civil War soldier.

This story refers to a Private John Lower (Lauer), a Bavarian-born immigrant who served in the 103rd Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment during the Civil War. I found a reference to this soldier in Robin Redmon Dreyer's *Christmas Traditions, Legends, Recipes from around the World: Making New Traditions and Renewing the Old* (2016). Dreyer writes about John Lower who was born in Bavaria and notes that "according to family lore, John Lower was captured and sent to prison in Andersonville, Georgia ... In poor health and starving, he begged a guard for just one pickle; the guard took pity on him and found a pickle for John Lower ... According to family legend—John said that the pickle—by the grace of God—gave him the mental and physical strength to live on. Once he was reunited with his family, he began a tradition to hide a pickle on or in the depth of the Christmas tree. The first person to find the pickle on Christmas morning would receive a year of good fortune."

The Confederate prison camp at Andersonville was a swampy and muddy place, filled with vermin and lice. An estimated 13,000 Union soldiers who were confined there died



SKETCH FROM 1864. PUBLIC DOMAIN

from starvation, unsanitary conditions and various diseases. By summer 1864, 33,000 Union soldiers were being held there. Lower was one of the fortunate ones who survived the ordeal. Food rations consisted mainly of milled corn flour. A branch of the Sweetwater Creek flowing through the camp served as the only source of water, as well as the camp latrine.

According to the roster of the 103rd Regiment, Private John Lower was born May 15, 1841, in Bavaria, and enlisted in the Union Army on February 19, 1862, at age 21. His occupation was listed as a farmer. He and other members of his regiment were captured at Plymouth, North Carolina on April 20, 1864, and sent to the Andersonville Confederate Prison. On December 10, 1864, he was paroled and sent to a hospital in Annapolis, Maryland, and then discharged on June 6, 1865. Doctors reported that he had suffered from "chronic diarrhea and congestion of lungs".

He recovered, married, and resided in Clarion County, Pennsylvania. In 1890 he applied for a pension, and in 1905 attended the dedication of the Pennsylvania Monument at Andersonville. A total of 1,849 soldiers from Pennsylvania perished there, including 132 members of the 103rd Regiment. Lower died in 1911 at Knox Township in Clarion County. According to the Find a Grave website, he was buried at St. Michael Catholic Cemetery in Freyburg, Pennsylvania. It includes a newspaper obituary that notes: "In 1865 he was discharged, and he would often tell his friends of the hard times he had while a prisoner at Andersonville, GA."

German-Americans have contributed to the way Christmas is celebrated, ranging from the Christmas tree to the image we have of Santa Claus. This latter contribution was created in the U.S. by Thomas Nast (1840-1902), a German

immigrant and well-known cartoonist. If the Lower story is true, then the Christmas Pickle would be another German-American contribution to the celebration of Christmas. It would also highlight the experience of German-Americans during the Civil War. This would be an additional reason for celebrating the Christmas Pickle as a German-American contribution.

What conclusions can be made about the origins of the Christmas Pickle? First, there is no documentation to support the F.W. Woolworth story. Second, no documentation can be found supporting the notion that the Christmas Pickle came from Germany. Finally, as regards the Lower story, references to him can be found, but his connection to the Christmas Pickle rests on a "family legend".

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines legend as: "a story coming down from the past, especially one popularized as historical although not verifiable". So, we are left with a legend, one that is not American, not German, but rather German-American. Although legendary, there is a thread of plausibility to the story, as the Civil War soldier in question can be identified.

This might be the closest we can get to solving the mystery of the Christmas Pickle. Its origin is elusive, but there is no question about its popularity. It no doubt will continue to be viewed as having a German connection, and debates about it will rage on. However, our review has narrowed the range of possibilities.

Today, Christmas Pickle ornaments are sold in the U.S. as well as in Germany—even Käthe Wohlfahrt's store in Rothenburg ob der Tauber in Bavaria, which specializes in Christmas decorations, features them. GL