

The Cherry Tree Carol #1

Informant/Performer:
William Wooton
Hindman, Knott County, KY, 1917

Source:
Cecil J. Sharp and Maud Karpeles, eds.
*80 English Folk Songs from the
Southern Appalachians*
Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968

When Jo - seph was a young man, A young man was he
He court - ed Vir - gin Ma - ry, The Queen of Ga - li - lee,
He court - ed Vir - gin Ma - ry, The Queen of Ga - li - lee.

2. As Joseph and Mary
Were walking one day,
There were apples and cherries,
A-plenty to behold.
3. Then Mary spoke to Joseph
So meek and so mild:
Joseph, gather me some cherries
For I am with child.
4. Then Joseph flew in angry,
In angry he flew.
Let the father of the baby
Gather cherries for you.
5. Lord Jesus spoke these few words
All from his mother's womb:
Bow low down, you cherry tree,
Let my mother have some.
6. The cherry tree bowed low down,
Low down to the ground,
And Mary gathered cherries
While Joseph stood around.
7. Then Joseph took Mary
All on his right knee,
Crying: Lord have mercy on me
For what I have done.
8. Then Joseph took Mary
All on his left knee.
Pray tell me, little baby,
When your birthday will be?
9. On the fifth day of January
My birthday will be,
When the stars and the elements
Do tremble with fear.

Background Information

"The Cherry Tree Carol is really a ballad and widely current in European folklore, bearing traces of its early antecedents in the legend from the apocryphal gospel of pseudo-Matthew in which the tree, true to local colour, is a date-palm. In European versions it becomes apple and cherry. This exquisitely meditative tune from Kentucky is a solo-type folk ballad of outstanding beauty, the simple parable a quaint and touching instance of the domestic scene as envisaged through the eyes of simple folk and applied to the Holy Family. The allusion in stanza 9 to Christ's birthday is in keeping with the song's antiquity. 25 December was appointed by the Roman emperor Aurelian in A.D. 274 as the festival in Rome of the unconquered sun (natalis solis invicti), celebrations of the winter solstice that were transformed by the Christian church into the festivals of Christmas and Epiphany in which various pre-Christian elements survived.

The date of Christ's birth, near to the Feast of the Passover, is unknown. The first mention of the Feast of the Nativity as being on 25 December occurs in a Roman almanac for Christians of A.D. 354, although Christmas had been celebrated on that date in Rome since at least eighteen years earlier. In the eastern part of the Roman empire the birth and the baptism of Jesus were celebrated on 6 January, the day on which Christmas is still observed by the Armenian Church. In the course of the fourth century the celebration of Christmas on 25 December was adopted in the east except by Jerusalem. In the west its observance on that date spread from Rome to become general in the sixth century, the two great Christian festivals of winter remaining closely linked in the Twelve Days of Christmas."

Elizabeth Poston