Whether the custom began in Scandinavia or with Native Americans, topping out parties are today an important custom in the steel construction industry.

How did the topping out ceremony originate? More than a dozen readers wrote responses to that question in Modern Steel Construction’s August 1995 editorial.

One of the most detailed responses came from James A. Newman, fabrication division vice president with AISC-member Art Iron, Inc., who sent an article that appeared in The Ironworker (December 1984) and an excerpt from which follows:

“No one seems to know exactly when or how it started, but the tradition of ‘Topping Out’ has become a cherished custom of Ironworkers whenever the skeleton of a bridge or building is completed. Topping Out is a signal that the uppermost steel member is going into place, that the structure has reached its height. As that final beam is hoisted, an evergreen tree or a flag or both are attached to it as it ascends.

“The nice thing about Topping Out is that no two ceremonies are exactly alike. For some, the flag signals a structure built with federal funds, but for others it suggest patriotism or the American dream.

“We do know that as early as 621 B.C. the Romans celebrated the completion of the Pons Sublicus over the Tiber River by throwing human beings into the water as sacrifices to the gods. In ancient China, the ridgepole of a new structure was smeared with chicken blood, as substitute for human blood, in hopes of fooling the gods. It was widely believed that evil spirits may have occupied the structure, and that is why, through the Middle Ages, the local priest or rabbi had a special blessing for new homes, ships, churches and public buildings.

“By 700 A.D. in Scandinavia, the custom of hoisting an evergreen tree atop the ridgepole was a popular way of signaling the start of a completion party. The roots of this custom may also be mixed in with fertility symbols. Saplings, eggs, flowers and sheaves of corn are long-standing customs in European home building, presumably as a wish to the newlyweds for a productive and long life together. While the Teutonic tribes may have tried to appease the tree spirits for killing trees and using up that lumber, the Germans in the Black Forest seem to have invented the Christmas tree custom to celebrate the nativity of Jesus Christ, and hardly a structure goes up in Germany without an evergreen to signal the birth of a new building. The Swiss, also, lay claim to the custom of a fir tree to signal Topping Out.

“As iron and steel replaced timber as primary building materials, ironworkers naturally would carry on the custom of Topping Out. Strangely enough, none of the early photoengravings of ironworkers show the evergreen in Topping Out ceremonies. Perhaps, due to the exceedingly high fatality rates, such a symbol would not be appropriate.

“When the last strands of cable were laid for the Brooklyn Bridge a hundred years ago, the wheel operated by the ironworkers was decorated with American flags. By 1920, ironworkers were again draping their work with American flags, this time while driving the first rivet on the Bank of Italy in San Francisco. By the end of the decade, the tradition of flags in Topping Out was fully established.

“Why an American flag? Probably because the so-called “American Plan” launched in 1919 did not include unions. In fact, the single largest potential employer of ironworkers, Elbert Gary, chairman of U.S. Steel, contended: ‘The existence and conduct of labor unions, in this country at least, are inimical to the
best interests of the employees, the
employers and the general public.’
The American Plan—promising the
destruction of unions, starvation
wages, deadly hours, hopeless safety
conditions and the dreaded ‘yellow-
dog contract’ swearing never to join a
union—suggested that unions were
somehow un-American during the
post-war Red Scare. Thus, the
American flag became a natural sym-
bol to protest the American Plan and
to demonstrate the ironworker’s loy-
alty to flag and country.

“The two traditions of flag and
evergreen converged only a couple of
decades ago, perhaps to balance out
the final beam.”

Going back another decade, The
Ironworker reported the following in
December 1974 issue:

“The symbol is rooted in an old
Scandinavian custom. The Norsemen
venerated the evergreens—cedars,
spruces and pines. The trees were
plentiful throughout the frozen
reaches of northern Europe and thus
provided building materials and fire-
wood for the inhabitants of those
wintry regions. In addition, the ever-
greens retained their color through-
out the years and provided welcome
relief from the dull hues cast by snow
and ice.

“Those hardy Vikings challenged
the seas of Europe and the New
World in long ships of seasoned
spruce, with tall masts carved from
towering pines and steering oars of
cedar. Returning from a particularly
successful raid on hapless southern
neighbors, Viking chieftains often
constructed huge homes—called mead
halls. Upon completion, these chief-
tains hoisted an evergreen tree to the
ridge-pole in celebration. So, when
the topping out beam rises aloft with
its customary symbols, the flag and
the tree, it offers a link with history.”

Persian Origins on Bridges

Scott A. Bustrum, field operations
manager with AISC-member Junior
Steel Co. provided information from
his company records that he says
originally came from Bethlehem
Steel. In addition to talking about
early Chinese and Roman customs,
his data adds: “Bridges posed special
problems and goaded the fears and
superstitions of the ancients. Xerxes,
the famed Persian military leader,
blamed recalcitrant river gods for the
collapse of a pontoon bridge over the
Hellespont. To punish and shackle
these gods, the water was given 300
lashes and a pair of manacles was
thrown into the river.”

Concerning the Scandinavian
roots of the topping out ceremony,
Junior Steel’s information included
that “In later times in these same
Scandinavian countries, and also in
the Black Forest, it was customary to
fasten a sheaf of corn to the gable.
The corn was believed to serve as
food for Woden’s [the chief Norse
god] horse and as a charm against
lighting. In more recent times, gar-
lands of flowers or sheaves of corn
were duplicated in wood, stone or
terra-cotta on Gothic buildings. Such
agrarian decoration is perhaps a sur-
vival of the ancient custom.”

Many others wrote in with similar
answers. Curt Zeigler of Stewart-
Amos Steel, Inc. and Ron Montes of
Bay Drafting Service, both cited Why
Do Clocks Run Clockwise? And Other
Imponderables, a wonderful book by
David Feldman, which contains
essentially the same explanations pre-
sented in The Ironworker. Three
readers, Adam S. Bangs, P.E., of Spars
Engineering in in Houston, Erol J.
Aydar, P.E., of Hanover Engineers in
Mechanicsville, VA, and Eric
Bjorklund of Freese-Nichols in Fort
Worth, TX, referenced Jack C.
McCormac’s “Structural Steel
Design”, which states:

“The ancient European tradi-
tion of tying a fir tree to the
top of a newly completed
roof lives on among
American steelworkers.
Either a small tree or a flag is
tied to the completed frame
when it reaches its top. At
the Empire State, the first
topping out ceremony was
photographed when the
main building frame was
completed at the 86th floor.”

Photo and caption from Building the
Empire State, edited by Carol Willis,
courtesy of The Skyscraper
Museum, New York City, www.sky-
scraper.org.
The Christmas tree is an old North European custom used to ward off evil spirits. It is also used today to show that the steel frame was erected with no lost time accidents to personnel.

Thomas C. Schaeffer, P.E., of Structural Design Group in Nashville quoted from Reader's Digest, which, in turn, was quoting from the book Ever Wonder Why?

“In ancient times, people would attach plants thought to be inhabited by good spirits to the top of their new structures. Builders still observe this superstition in a custom called topping out of the new building.”

Kim Stanfill-McMillan, P.E., with the USDA Forest Service, wrote: “The Christmas tree atop the last beam is an old timberframer’s tradition (sorry). Here is a quote from Tedd Benson’s book entitled Building the Timber Frame House–The Revival of a Forgotten Craft: To signify a safe and successful raising, to pay respect to the wood that has given life to the frame, a traditional pine bough is attached to the peak of the building. Some of the old-timers mark this occasion further by breaking a bottle of rum at the ridge and delivering a few lines of verse composed for the occasion.”

“Usually a dance is held on the floor after the frame is raised, a tradition that also continues to this day. Steel erectors and others have borrowed the tradition of a pine bough, but since the scale of these buildings is often larger, the pine bough has evolved into a Christmas tree, which is more readily seen.”

Renaissance Roots

A variation on the ancient theme was submitted by Sheila Shaw, former marketing director with Bread Loaf Construction, a design/build firm in Middlebury, VT. “The first known ceremony with the use of a tree wag in the Third Dynasty, about 2700 B.C., in Egypt. This first appeared when the first stone building of Egypt, the Step Pyramid of King Zoer at Sakkara, was completed. The slaves placed a live plant on the top of the Pyramid for those slaves who had died during the construction so they too might have an eternal life.

“It later appeared in the early Renaissance Era, during the period of the Gothic Cathedrals. An evergreen tree was placed on the highest point to signify the completion of the building. A large festival, lasting sometimes for weeks, was held in the town for this honor. From the Italian Renaissance, it was carried through the countries of France England, and Spain, as they, too fell into the Renaissance Era.”

Bread Loaf’s account then adds information about Scandinavian and German traditions.

Gordon Wright, senior editor at Building Design & Construction magazine, sent along a copy of an article from Morse/Diesel’s newsletter, which printed the history of topping out as presented by Scioto Erectors Inc. of Columbus, OH:

“Scandinavian mythology suggests that man originated from a tree and that the soul of man returned to the trees after death, giving each tree a spirit of its own. Man began constructing his shelter with wood. Before cutting a tree, he would formally address the forest, reminding it of the consideration he had always shown toward the trees and asking the forest to grant use of a tree for construction of his home. When the house was complete, the topmost leafy branch of the tree would be set atop the roof so that the tree spirit

Workers raise the topping out flag on the completed mooring mast of the Empire State Building (March 18, 1931).

Photo from Building the Empire State, edited by Carol Willis, courtesy of The Skyscraper Museum, New York City (www.skyscraper.org).
would not be rendered homeless. The gesture was supposed to convince the tree spirit of the sincere appreciation of those building the home.

“As time passed, the early conception of tree worship gradually changed. The individual tree spirits merged into a single forest god who could pass freely from tree to tree. Trees were no longer placed atop the home to appease the spirits, but rather to enlist the blessings of the forest god. The tree branches on top of the home insured fertility of the land and the home. Gradually, ribbon, colored paper, painted eggs and flowers were added to the tree as a symbol of life and fertility.

“The custom of placing a tree on a completed structure came with immigrants to the United States and became an integral part of American culture in barn raisings and house warmings.”

Carpenter’s Tradition

A similar explanation was presented by Frank Lundy, P.E., of Lundy Construction in Williamsport, PA, who explained, “This tradition may spring from the Carpenter’s tradition of nailing a free tree branch to the ridge (rafter) board to entice the “wood spirits” to bestow good fortune on a house. If you look in the attic of older house s, you may find such a feature.” Blair Hanuschak of Walter P. Moore and Associates in Atlanta sent along a similar explanation from the program given out during the topping out ceremony of the Florida Aquarium. And Robert J. Susz, building science engineer with Healthy Homes in Caledonia, NY, gave much the same explanation but added, “I believe the flag was first used when steel framing became popular. It was in dedication to good old U.S. made steel beams. The signing of the last beam or girder by the laborers has similar traditional roots.”

Native American Origins

Some people offered different interpretations, however. Barry P. Chepren, of Frederic R. Harris in Carver, MA, wrote:

“At my first topping out party for a 10-story building in Tampa, FL, I asked the same question when a large pine tree was hoisted to the top of the building. The answer that I was given was that the tradition originated around the time when high-rise construction became necessary in most major cities. During this time, many of the contractors employed many American Indians on their construction crews. According to my source, American Indians believed that no man-made structure should be taller than a tree. This belief became enough of an issue at the time to prompt someone to place a tree at the top of a topped-out building. This practice caught on and is still performed today at most high-rise building projects.

“During the Vietnam War, many people perceived construction workers as unconditional supporters of U.S. government policies in Southeast Asia or “hawks” as they were called. This impression was made popular when the news media broadcast footage of clashes between war protesters and construction workers during a rally in New York City. Many construction workers as well as police officers began to wear the American flag on their hard hats and uniforms to show support for American soldiers in Vietnam. It is around this time I am told that American flags became popular at topping-out events.

Several other writers supported the Native American origins of the topping-out ceremony. The final word, however, may be a novel interpretation from Harvey G. Johnson at Bittner Engineering, Inc. in Escanaba, MI: “During World War II it was a custom for a submarine returning from a mission with all of its torpedoes used to tie a broom to the periscope to signify a “clean sweep” or completion. How, or if, this ever translated to the tree/flag, I have no idea.”

This article has been reprinted from the October 1995 issue of Modern Steel Construction. We have updated titles of persons quoted in this article wherever possible.
Christmas Trees in Sweden Most people buy Christmas trees well before Christmas Eve, but it's not common to take the tree inside and decorate it until just a few days before. Evergreen trees are decorated with stars, sunbursts, and snowflakes made from straw. Other decorations include colorful wooden animals and straw centerpieces.

Christmas Trees in Spain A popular Christmas custom is Catalonia, a lucky strike game. A tree trunk is filled with goodies and children hit at the trunk trying to knock out the hazel nuts, almonds, toffee, and other treats. Christmas Trees in Italy In Italy, the presepio (manger or crib) represents in miniature the Holy Family in the stable and is the center of Christmas for families. We decorate Christmas trees at home in December, but why do we have Christmas trees & where does the tradition originate from? Read the Christmas tree history.

We earn a commission for products purchased through some links in this article. Why do we have Christmas trees? Find out where the wonderful tradition originated from. By Lisa Walden. Dec 25, 2019. Mark Scott. For decades, many of us have been decorating Christmas trees in our homes with baubles, lights and lovely ornaments, but why do we have Christmas trees? And where does this tradition originate from? Bringing evergreen trees indoors has traditionally been used to celebrate winter festivals both by Pagans and Christians for thousands of years. Christmas trees are a strange tradition, if you think about it: Every December, people in regions around the world head to the nearest forest, chop down a tree, drag it into their homes, adorn it with lights, baubles, and tinsel, then unceremoniously drag it to the curb in January. But evergreen boughs have been essential seasonal decor since ancient times as part of pagan winter solstice celebrations.

But while Christmas trees appear around the world, their origins are traced to regions with abundant evergreen forests—especially those in northern Europe. Here's a look at how the Christmas tree evolved into a modern icon and inspired new customs along the way. The Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree stands lit in New York. The 75-foot tall Norway spruce is lit by more than 50,000 LED lights. A Christmas tree is a decorated tree, usually an evergreen conifer, such as a spruce, pine, or fir, or an artificial tree of similar appearance, associated with the celebration of Christmas, originating in Germany associated with Saint Boniface. The custom was developed in medieval Livonia (present-day Estonia and Latvia), and in early modern Germany where German Protestant Christians brought decorated trees into their homes. It acquired popularity beyond the Lutheran areas of Germany and the Baltic Other early Christmas Trees, across many parts of northern Europe, were cherry or hawthorn plants (or a branch of the plant) that were put into pots and brought inside so they would hopefully flower at Christmas time. If you couldn't afford a real plant, people made pyramids of woods and they were decorated to look like a tree with paper, apples and candles. Sometimes they were carried around from house to house, rather than being displayed in a home. It's possible that the wooden pyramid trees were meant to be like Paradise Trees.