

## THE ORIGIN OF CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

As everyone is well aware, Christmas is the most celebrated and most commercialized holiday currently known to man. Thankfully, most people still realize that the birth of the Christ-child is the event being celebrated Christmas.

### When Was Jesus Really Born?

- First century Christians were not concerned with the birth date of Jesus Christ. They did however observe His resurrection every week (being on Sunday) and the Passover.
- **Jesus** may have been born in the late Fall (late September) during the Jewish festival of Tabernacles or in late December, depending on when Zacharias' priestly course (Abia) took place and when "and after those days" transpired and Elizabeth conceived.
- It should be noted that the Bible does not emphasize the birth of Jesus, only the death.

***\*\*The Bible focuses on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, rather than on his birth.\*\****

- **Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days:**  
**Colossians 2:16**
- **One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth thanks; and he that eateth not, giveth God thanks.**  
**Romans 14:5-6**

### December 25

- **Saturnalia**- Ancient Romans celebrated the god Saturn (the god of agriculture) throughout a weeklong holiday called Saturnalia, during the week of December 17-24. Leading up to *Sol Invictus*: "The Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun" on December 25.
  - Courts were closed.
  - No one was punished for crime.
  - Gift giving.
  - Human sacrifice.
  - Public intoxication.
  - House to house singing naked.
  - Consuming human-shaped biscuits. (which became gingerbread men)



- By the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, Christianity imported the Saturnalia festival hoping to bring its many pagan adherents into Christianity.
  - In 350 AD, Pope Julius I chose December 25. It is commonly believed that the church chose this date to adopt and absorb the traditions of the pagan Saturnalia festival. First called *the Feast of the Nativity*, the custom spread to Egypt by 432 and to England by the end of the sixth century. By the end of the eighth century, the celebration of Christmas had spread all the way to Scandinavia. Today, in the Greek and Russian orthodox churches, Christmas is celebrated 13 days after the 25<sup>th</sup>, which is also referred to as *the Epiphany* or *Three Kings Day*. This is the day it is believed that the three wise men finally found Jesus in the manger.
- The Puritans banned the Christmas festivals in Massachusetts between 1659 and 1681 due to its pagan origins.
  - In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, a wave of religious reform changed the way Christmas was celebrated in Europe. When Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan forces took over England in 1645, they vowed to rid England of decadence, and as part of their effort, cancelled Christmas. By popular demand, Charles II was restored to the throne, and with him came the return of the popular holiday.
  - The pilgrims, English separatists that came to America in 1620, were even more orthodox in their Puritan beliefs than Cromwell. As a result, Christmas was not a holiday in early America. From 1659 to 1681, the celebration of Christmas was actually outlawed in Boston. Anyone exhibiting the Christmas spirit was fined five shillings. By contrast, in the Jamestown settlement, Captain John Smith reported that Christmas was enjoyed by all and passed without incident.
  - After the American Revolution, English customs fell out of favor, including Christmas. In fact, Christmas wasn't declared a federal holiday until June 26, 1870.

### **The Origins of Santa Claus**

- St. Nicholas was born in Turkey in 270 AD and later became bishop of Myra. He died in 345 AD on December 6<sup>th</sup>.
- He was among the most senior bishops who convened the Nicaea Council in 325 AD to canonize the New Testament.
- After his death, stories begin to develop of his kindness and miracle working ability. The most popular being how he rescued three damsels from a disreputable life by secretly tossing them purses of gold for their dowries through their window. One of the bags of coins landed in a stocking. The tradition of giving gifts begins.
- Vladimir, Duke of Russia, visits Constantinople in 1003 AD and returns to Russia with Nicholas as his country's patron saint. Nicholas becomes

associated with an arctic landscape and may have begun to morph with the Russian winter folk spirit Father Frost. Father Frost has a long white beard, dresses in animal skins, and drives a sleigh pulled by reindeer. Nicholas is still a popular saint in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

- About 1400 AD, St. Nicholas was also adopted northwestward from Turkey and Rome, into northern Europe (primary Holland). The Dutch emphasized St. Nicholas as a gift giver. St. Nicholas began to morph with the Norse god Odin. Odin wore a full white beard, had a magic cloak, and dispensed gifts to children. Odin rode a flying horse that crossed through the heavens each autumn. Children placed their shoes and hay (for the horse) near the fireplace.
  - (In Germany, people honored the pagan god Odin during the mid-winter holiday. Germans were terrified of Odin, as they believed he made nocturnal flights through the sky to observe his people, and then decide who would prosper or perish. Because of his presence, many people chose to stay inside.)
- The Dutch rendering of St. Nicholas is *Sinter Klaus*.
- Santa Claus was made the saint of the City of New York in 1773. This is the Catholic immigrant influence in the young Americas.
- By 1804, the Dutch tradition of St. Nick being a gift giver was well established.
- In 1809, novelist Washington Irving (author of *Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*) wrote a satire on Dutch culture and its influence on New York City. The book included many references to a white-bearded, flying-horse-riding St. Nick, called by his Dutch name, Santa Claus. The book was a huge hit.
- Dr. Clement Moore, a Union Seminary professor, read Irving's book. He was inspired to write a poem. In 1822 he published his poem based on Irving's satirical Santa Claus. The opening line: "Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house."
- Artwork abounds after the poem catches on.
- Between 1862 and 1886, cartoonist Thomas Nast drew more than 2,200 images of Santa for Harper's weekly. Nast gave Santa a home at the North Pole, a workshop full of elves, and a list of good and bad children. But no red outfit.
- In 1931, Coca-Cola hired a Swedish artist to create a Coke-drinking Santa. The Swede modeled his Santa after a cheerful, chubby-faced friend. Coca-Cola insisted that Santa's fur-trimmed suit be bright, Coca-Cola red.
- *Santa Claus is Comin' to Town* was written and first sung on the radio in 1934.

### **Christmas:**

The name Christmas comes from the 13<sup>th</sup> century Old English *Cristes Masse* or Christ's mass.

### **Christmas Tree:**

Germany is credited with starting the Christmas tree tradition as we now know it in the 16th (1570) century when devout Christians brought decorated trees into their homes. Some built Christmas pyramids of wood and decorated them with evergreens and

candles if wood was scarce. It is a widely held belief that Martin Luther, the 16th-century Protestant reformer, first added lighted candles to a tree. Walking toward his home one winter evening, composing a sermon, he was awed by the brilliance of stars twinkling amidst evergreens. To recapture the scene for his family, he erected a tree in the main room and wired its branches with lighted candles.

Most 19th-century Americans found Christmas trees an oddity. The first record of one being on display was in the 1830s by the German settlers of Pennsylvania, although trees had been a tradition in many German homes much earlier. The German settlements in Pennsylvania had community trees as early as 1747. But as late as the 1840s, Christmas trees were seen as pagan symbols and not accepted by most Americans.

In 1846, the popular royals, Queen Victoria and her German Prince, Albert, were sketched in the *Illustrated London News* standing with their children around a Christmas tree. Unlike the previous royal family, Victoria was very popular with her subjects, and what was done at court immediately became fashionable—not only in Britain, but with fashion-conscious East Coast American Society. The Christmas tree had arrived.

By the 1890s Christmas ornaments were arriving from Germany and Christmas tree popularity was on the rise around the United States. It was noted that Europeans used small trees about four feet tall, while Americans liked their Christmas trees to reach from floor to ceiling.

The early 20th century saw Americans decorating their trees mainly with homemade ornaments, while the German-American sect continued to use apples, nuts, and marzipan cookies. Popcorn joined in after being dyed bright colors and interlaced with berries and nuts. Electricity brought about Christmas lights, making it possible for Christmas trees to glow for days on end. With this, Christmas trees began to appear in town squares across the country, and having a Christmas tree in the home became an American tradition.

### **Candy Canes:**

1670, in Cologne, Germany, the choirmaster at Cologne Cathedral, wishing to remedy the noise caused by children in his church during the Living Crèche tradition of Christmas Eve, asked a local candy maker for some sweet sticks for them.

In order to justify the practice of giving candy to children during worship services, he asked the candy maker to add a crook to the top of each stick, which would help children remember the shepherds who paid visit to infant Jesus.

In addition, he used the white color of the converted sticks to teach children about the Christian belief in the Jesus. From Germany, the candy canes spread to other parts of Europe, where they were handed out during plays reenacting the Nativity.



### **Yule:**

- Yule is a term of Scandinavian origin.
- Yule is the Scandinavian celebration of the winter solstice.
- This ancient celebration commemorates the lengthening of days as the earth continues its cycle around the sun. Until this day, usually marked on December 21<sup>st</sup>, the days grow shorter and shorter.
- The ancient Norsemen believed the sun was a giant wheel of fire that rolled away from the earth (not a good thing for them) and then began to roll back to the earth beginning at the winter solstice.

### **Yule Log:**

- The Yule log was a way in which pagans celebrated the Yule, or the return of the sun.
- A giant tree was cut down and hauled into the home. The log was set ablaze, adding much needed light to the home, and festivities and celebration ensued for as many days as the log burned.
- The log would burn throughout the night, then smolder for 12 days before it was ceremonially extinguished.
- Ash is the traditional wood of the Yule log. It is the sacred world tree of the Teutons, known as Yggdrasil.
- According to Norse mythology, Yggdrasil was a huge ash tree located at the center of the earth, with three roots, one extending to Niflheim (the underworld), one to Jotunheim (land of the giants), and one to Asgard (land of the gods).
- Once the log had burned to ashes, the ashes were spread throughout the house to ward off evil spirits.

### **Wassailing:**

- A practice associated with pre-Christian fertility rites.
- Only in those ceremonies, villagers traveled through their fields and orchards in the middle of winter, singing and shouting to drive away any spirits that might inhibit the growth of future crops.
- As part of this, they poured wine and cider on the ground to encourage fertility in the crops.
- This has evolved into caroling.

### **Mistletoe**

Baldur, grandson of the Norse god Thor, woke up one morning certain that each and every plant and animal on earth wanted to kill him. His mother consoled him. His wife consoled him, but all to no avail. As Baldur cowered in his room, half-wild with fear, his mother and wife decided to ask every living thing to leave their poor Baldur in peace. They begged the kindness of the oak tree, the pig, the cow, the crow, the ant and even the worm. Each agreed. Then, as Baldur paused to celebrate his release from torment,

he felt a pain in his chest. So Loki made an arrow tip of the mistletoe, gave to the blind god of winter, Hoder, who shot it, striking Balder dead. He had been stabbed and killed by an arrow made from the wood of a mistletoe plant. Mistletoe was the one species on earth his wife and mother had failed to notice.

Baldur died, but a lesson was learned: Never forget about the mistletoe. Mistletoe would come to hang over our doors as a reminder to never forget. We kiss beneath it to remember what Baldur's wife and mother forgot. At least that is one version of the origin of our relationship with mistletoe.

The story ends with a decree that who should ever stand under the humble mistletoe, no harm should befall them, only a kiss, a token of love.

What could be more natural than to translate the spirit of this old myth into a Christian way of thinking by accepting the mistletoe as the emblem of that Love which conquers Death? Its medicinal properties, whether real or imaginary, make it a just emblem of that Tree of Life, the leaves of which are for the healing of the nations, thus paralleling it to the Virgin Birth of Christ.

### **Poinsettia**

Poinsettias didn't arrive in the United States until the 19th century.

- The plant is named for the first U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Dr. Joel Roberts Poinsett, who introduced America to the poinsettia in 1828, after discovering it in the wilderness in southern Mexico.
- Dr. Poinsett, who dabbled in botany when he wasn't politicking between nations, sent cuttings of the plant back to his South Carolina home.
- While it wasn't initially embraced, it caught on over the years, and by the 20th century it was a holiday mainstay.
- In fact, National Poinsettia Day is celebrated on Dec. 12, honoring both the plant and the man who brought it to America [source: University of Illinois].
- So what does a poinsettia have to do with Christmas? One interpretation of the plant is as a symbol of the Star of Bethlehem, the heavenly body that led the three magi, or wise men, to the place where Christ was born. A Mexican legend tells of a girl who could only offer weeds as a gift to Jesus on Christmas Eve. When she brought the weeds into a church, they blossomed into the beautiful red plants we know as poinsettias, known as *Flores de Noche Buena* in Mexico (Spanish for "flowers of the holy night").