

Cultural Traditions: Christmas

December, the month of the birth of our Lord, is full of traditions, as are the early weeks of the month of January. We thought that we would share with you several traditions that are not necessarily of a religious nature, but nevertheless, still a part of our culture.



ST. NICHOLAS. The beginnings of today's Santa Claus probably are founded in the stories and legends surrounding St. Nicholas. We have included in this article some of the more interesting tales related to this great man. He was born in Asia Minor to a father who was a very wealthy bishop and to a mother who was an extremely holy woman. From his infancy miraculous stories are told of manifestations of his extreme holiness. As a boy he devoted his interests to the study and understanding of the Scriptures.

Nicholas was greatly concerned over the wealth of his parents, so as soon as they died, he decided to secretly give away all his money. A story is told of his hearing of a man who had three marriageable daughters but no dowry for them. One night Nicholas quietly went to the home of the poor father and dropped a bag of gold in the open window. Soon after... the eldest daughter was married. On a second night the second daughter received an anonymous dowry. The father decided that he would catch the giver of these dowries and waited each night for the benefactor to appear. When he discovered it was Nicholas, Nicholas asked him to keep his secret. A variation of this story relates that the bag of gold was dropped down the chimney. One of the girls had been expecting it and so she had hung a stocking in the fireplace to receive the bag of gold.

There are many stories of Nicholas' deeds many of seemingly miraculous nature. He was a champion of the populace and courageously preached to them of the Lord and the Scriptures. He refused to worship the statues of emperors, and was persecuted by them for this. Nicholas would have preferred to live a quiet life in his uncle's monastery but the voice of God told him to "**Go On. Live among men, for yours shall not be a life of quietness!**" He was to be made Archbishop of Myra. St. Nicholas died on December 6, about 343 AD. His death greatly increased his fame as a worker of miracles. Russia adopted St. Nicholas as their patron saint some six hundred and sixty years after his death. This same honor was bestowed upon him by various other countries.

SANTA CLAUS. It was the Dutch settlers that brought to the United States a much-changed St. Nicholas. His transformation was such that his pale face was now like a rosy apple, the lean ascetic was now a fat jolly old fellow, more humanist than saint. No longer did he wear his canonical robes and miter and carry a staff. Instead his attire was

an ermine-trimmed red cap and suit. He had also traded his gray mule for reindeer and sleigh. The New World St. Nicholas (*Santa Claus*) gave us his own day and took December 25, Christ's birthday.

The person responsible for best immortalizing the New World's St. Nicholas was Clement Clarke Moore. Several nights before Christmas in 1822 he read to his daughters his poem "*The Visit of St. Nicholas*". A friend copied the poem down and sent it to the editor of The Troy Sentinel and it was published on December 23, 1823. Moore was much relieved that his name was not on the poem. Being a Professor of Divinity at the New York Theological Seminary, Doctor Moore felt it beneath his dignity. However, in 1844 he included the poem with some other poetry he published.

Santa Claus received his name from the Dutch who Americanized St. Nicholas to Santa Nikalaus and then shortened it to Santa Klaus. Which then became further Americanized to Santa Claus. Whatever name he goes by he has become a secular symbol of the spirit of Christmas. A time for giving of ourselves to those we love and those in need.



CHRISTMAS TREE. Since very early times the bringing of evergreens indoors at Christmas time has been a way of giving the home a festive air. William Auld says that the custom has its roots in a profound reverence the Ancients had for all natural phenomenon. To them nature was alive, everywhere. This indicates that evergreens were not used originally for decorative value but in order to bring the world of nature indoors. The use of trinkets on the tree could be dated to early Roman days when little masks of

Bacchus were hung upon trees and vines to impart fertility.

One story relating to the history of the Christmas tree involves Martin Luther. One starry Christmas Eve Luther was wandering the woods and became enamored with the wonder of the night and the star-filled sky. He cut a small, snow-laden fir tree and took it home for his children. The tree was illuminated with numerous candles to represent the stars of the heavens.

The appearance of the first Christmas tree in literature was in Strassburg in 1644. It is thought that the use of the Christmas tree in Germany spread from Strassburg and the Christmas tree has always been the center of the German Christmas.



HOLLY. There are many legends concerning holly, here are just a few. Some believe the name is a form of the word "*holy*" because of its association with Christmas. This legend is not necessarily true. We know early writers gave it the name of Holin, Hollin, or Holm. The Druids

admired the holly because the leaves were evergreen which meant the sun never deserted it and thus it must be sacred. A fifteenth century carol tells of the contest between the holly and the ivy. It is finally settled that the holly is superior because of its red berries and attractiveness to birds.

Perhaps the most famous legend concerning holly is that it was used to plait the Crown of Thorns. Before the Crucifixion the berries were white but turned crimson red like drops of blood after the Crucifixion of Christ.

MISTLETOE. Legends say the word "*Mistletoe*" comes from the missel thrush, a messenger of the gods who brought the plant to earth. Actually all birds are fond of the berries and are responsible for their distribution. Mistletoe is a semi-parasite plant, which grows on trees. The Druids considered the plant sacred and picking the Oak tree that held the most mistletoe would be cut by the Arch-Druid as a prize. The mistletoe was not allowed to touch the ground but the priest would break off twigs for each of his followers and bless them that each who received a piece would find divine favor and a blessing from nature.



In the language of flowers, Mistletoe means, "*give me a kiss*". This is based on a Scandinavian myth evolved around Frigga, the goddess of love and beauty. When having her son returned to her after a fatal injury in a battle from a Mistletoe dart, Frigga wept and her tears became white berries on the mistletoe. Grateful for the return of her son, she decreed the plant would never be used as an instrument of mischief and she bestowed a kiss upon anyone who passed under the Mistletoe.



CHRISTMAS CARDS. It was reputed that the first Christmas Card was sent in 1845 by W. C. Dobson, one of Queen Victoria's favorite painters. They were lithograph copies sent to friends. The following year Sir Henry Cole commissioned John Calcott Horsley, Royal Academician, to design a card for him. Being himself too busy to send cards to his friends, the cards were lithographed and then hand colored. Louis Prang was the first to begin to mass-produce cards in Roxbury, MA. in 1874. He perfected a lithograph process, which employed as many as twenty colors.