

CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

Santa Claus



The original Santa Claus, St. Nicholas, was born in Turkey in the 4th century. He was very pious from an early age, devoting his life to Christianity. He became widely known for his generosity for the poor. But the Romans held him in contempt. He was imprisoned and tortured. But when Constantine became emperor of Rome, he allowed Nicholas to go free. Constantine became a Christian and convened the Council of Nicaea in 325. Nicholas was a delegate to the council. He is especially noted for his love of children and for his generosity. He is the patron saint of sailors, Sicily, Greece, and Russia. He is also, of course, the patron saint of children. The Dutch kept the legend of St. Nicholas alive. In 16th century

Holland, Dutch children would place their wooden shoes by the hearth in hopes that they would be filled with a treat. The Dutch spelled St. Nicholas as Sint Nikolaas, which became corrupted to Sinterklaas, and finally, in Anglican, to Santa Claus. In 1822, Clement C. Moore composed his famous poem, "A Visit from St. Nick," which was later published as "The Night Before Christmas." Moore is credited with creating the modern image of Santa Claus as a jolly fat man in a red suit.

The Christmas tree



Ancient people revered evergreens for their ability to stay alive during the cold winter months. Often considered magical, they came to symbolize good luck and prosperity. Greenery often adorned the inside and outside of homes during the Winter Solstice Festivals.

A legend tells of Martin Luther, the founder of the Protestant religion, walking through the woods late one night. As it was clear, many stars were shining through the branches of the trees giving the impression of twinkling lights. Luther was so inspired by the beauty of the sight that he cut down a small evergreen and brought it home. He recreated the stars by putting candles on the tree's branches.

The use of a Christmas tree indoors appears to have begun in Germany. German Christians would bring trees into their homes to decorate. From there the tradition spread all over the world.

Mistletoe and Holly

Two hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Druids used mistletoe to celebrate the coming of winter. They would gather this evergreen plant that is parasitic upon other trees and used it to decorate their homes. They believed the plant had special healing powers for everything from female infertility to poison ingestion. Scandinavians also thought of mistletoe as a plant of peace and harmony. They associated mistletoe with their goddess of love, Frigga. The custom of kissing under the mistletoe probably derived from this belief. The early church banned the use of mistletoe in Christmas celebrations because of its pagan origins. Instead, church fathers suggested the use of holly as an appropriate substitute for Christmas greenery.

Poinsettias

Poinsettias are native to Mexico. They were named after America's first ambassador to Mexico, Joel Poinsett. He brought the plants to America in 1828. The Mexicans in the eighteenth century thought the plants were symbolic of the Star of Bethlehem. Thus the Poinsettia became associated with the Christmas season. The actual flower of the poinsettia is small and yellow. But surrounding flowers are large, bright red leaves, often mistaken for petals.

The Candy Cane

In the late 1800's a candy maker in Indiana wanted to express the meaning of Christmas through a symbol made of candy. He came up with the idea of bending one of his white candy sticks into the shape of a Candy Cane. He incorporated several symbols of Christ's love and sacrifice through the Candy Cane. First, he used a plain white peppermint stick. The color white symbolizes the purity and sinless nature of Jesus. Next, he added three small stripes to symbolize the pain inflicted upon Jesus before His death on the cross. There are three of them to represent the Holy Trinity. He added a bold stripe to represent the blood Jesus shed for mankind. When looked at with the crook on top, it looks like a shepherd's staff because Jesus is the shepherd of man. If you turn it upside down, it becomes the letter J symbolizing the first letter in Jesus' name. The candy maker made these candy canes for Christmas, so everyone would remember what Christmas is all about.

Christmas stockings

The tradition of hanging stockings from the fireplace originated from one of the most famous Christmas stories of St. Nicholas.

The story comes from the 1800's, when the father of three young maidens could not afford a dowry for his daughters to be married. From his castle, St. Nicholas heard of the poor misfortune of the maidens, and secretly threw three bags of gold coins down their chimney. It is said that the gold coins landed in the girls' stockings, which were hanging in the fireplace to dry.

Candles

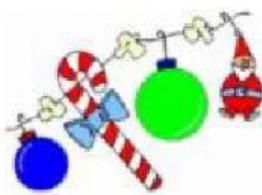
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In the time of darkness surrounding the winter solstice, in the long cold month of December, candles were an important source of light and heat. Ancient Romans lit candles to ward off evil, and to convince the sun to shine again.

In Victorian times, candles came to represent good will for those less fortunate during the holiday season. Candles were often placed in windows during the Christmas season as a sign to passersby that shelter and warmth could be found within.

Christmas ornaments



When German immigrants came to America, they brought with them the tradition of hanging small toys, candies and other goodies on the Christmas tree. Between 1800 and 1920, blown-glass ornaments called kugles were sent to the United States, where they were eventually popularized by dime store chains.

Gingerbread house



Gingerbread has been a holiday tradition for thousands of years. It was originally eaten during Winter Solstice Festivals. But the tradition of the house made of Gingerbread originated in Germany.

It is believed that in the early 1800's, Germans began shaping their Gingerbread into festive holiday creations. Gingerbread Houses soon became very popular, and remain so today. The Gingerbread House has now become a favorite Christmas tradition all over the world.

Christmas cards



The tradition of sending Christmas cards is thought to have originated in the mid-1800's, when a few people began designing handmade cards to be sent to friends and family. But a man named John Calcott Horsley is often credited as being the first Christmas card creator.

Horsley printed his Christmas card in 1843 for Sir Henry Cole, the friend who had given him the idea. The card depicted a typical English family enjoying the holiday, as well as scenes of people performing acts of charity, an important part of the Victorian Christmas spirit. The card was inscribed, "Merry Christmas and A Happy New Year to You."

A thousand copies of the card were printed, selling for one shilling a piece. This is reportedly the first Christmas card to be produced and sold to the public.

Answer the questions.

1. Do you celebrate Christmas? How do you celebrate?

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2. Do you give presents? To whom?

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3. Which of the above traditions do you follow?

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4. Have you ever put on a Santa suit to surprise your children?

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5. Have you ever hired a Santa?

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6. Do you go to a mass on Christmas Eve?

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7. Do you read Christmas stories to your children or do you watch Christmas movies?

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8. Do you have a special meal? What do you eat and drink?

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9. Are there different Christmas traditions in your country? Speak about them.

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10. Are you stressed out after Christmas? Why? Why not?

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