

HISTORY & FOLKLORE

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Christmas Traditions

by Kevin Ladd

The customs and traditions that constitute our Christmas holidays have been with us for a very long time, although probably not nearly as long as one might expect. They have a lot to do with the original Prince Albert of England, a beloved British novelist, one of the greatest cartoonists of all times, and a few other influential figures.

PRINCE ALBERT, CHARLES DICKENS & OTHERS

Queen Victoria of England, who reigned from 1837 to 1901, remained a beloved symbol to folks in the British Empire for almost seven decades. Her beloved husband, Prince Albert, was German. This marriage brought the English and, hence, the remainder of the English-speaking world a unique means for celebrating Christmas.

In the early 1840s, Albert borrowed from an old

German custom and set up a Christmas tree for his family. Albert's tree was decorated with hand-blown glass ornaments and this would cause quite a sensation. A lithograph depicting the royal family gathered around this tree was circulated widely in newspapers across Britain, the United States and Canada.

This single event seems to have popularized decorated Christmas trees on both continents. Trees were initially decorated with candies, fruits, pinecones, cookies and homemade ornaments. This custom was later extended into actually tying the presents onto the tree itself, and in time, the trees were adorned with lighted candles. The latter led to some notable disasters with some trees catching fire while others simply toppled onto the floor to create disastrous fireballs. This led to a new custom, keeping a couple of full pails of water

nearby to guard against such an eventuality.

The beloved British novelist Charles Dickens added immeasurably to the holiday, first by writing a new Christmas story each year, which was always published in both British and North American newspapers. One of his most popular books, "A Christmas Carol," remains a classic today. In a case of life imitating art, this Dickensian view of the holiday season was gladly adopted in the New World and the Old. Many a Dickens Christmas tale, along with a ghost story or two, were read or told during the nineteenth century.

One school of thought credits the Santa Claus story to Washington Irving, another New Yorker, and one of the more celebrated figures of American literature. In 1808, Irving, writing under the pseudonym of Diedrich Knickerbocker, published a satiri-

cal volume known as "Knickerbocker's History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty." Irving tossed a lot of interesting characters into the work, including a St. Nicholas character that was decidedly Dutch. This figure was based on the Dutch legend of "Sinter Klaas," which was based somewhat upon the actual St. Nicholas, who lived a saintly life in Turkey and died there in the year 350.

Irving's St. Nick rode happily over the treetops in a horse drawn wagon "dropping gifts down the chimneys of his favorites." Irving described Santa as a jolly Dutchman who smoked a long stemmed clay pipe and wore baggy breeches and a broad brimmed hat. It was in this work that the phrase, "laying his finger beside his nose," first made its appearance.

The figure of St. Nicholas or Santa Claus developed gradually in terms of Christmas celebrations, but it has become a modern iconic image through the variety of different individuals. Much of the initial credit for this falls upon Clement C. Moore (1779-1863), a native of New York, who was a scholar of Oriental and Greek literature at the General Theological Seminary.

From 1821 until 1850, he wrote extensively on politics, theology, and literature. At the age of 30, Moore came out with a massive work called the "Compendious Lexicon of the Hebrew Language." He was 43 when he wrote "A Visit from St. Nicholas," which he seems to have penned purely for the entertainment of his own children. The story goes that his wife was baking turkeys for the poor of New York on Christmas Eve. She decided that she needed an extra turkey and sent the good Reverend after the bird. While traveling on a sleigh down the crowded streets, the sound of the jingling bells worked their magic on him, and he came home with the turkey and the poem.

The poem might have remained as a private pleasure within the Moore family, but a friend intervened. Miss Harriet Butler of Troy, New York, a long-time friend of the family, without obtaining permission sent the poem to Orville L. Holly, editor of a local newspaper. Holly

published it for the first time in the Troy Sentinel on December 23, 1823, with attribution.

It was not until he was 65, in 1844, that he first acknowledged that he was the author of the famous verses by including the poem in a small book of his poetry entitled "Poems" which he had published at the request of his children. The celebrated poem described St. Nicholas a "jolly and plump, a right jolly old elf." Clement C. Moore is remembered today for none of his other great writing, but is celebrated primarily for this one poem. He is an altogether unlikely creator for Santa. Forty years after Moore, the legendary cartoonist Thomas Nast would create a vivid series of drawings that depicted a somewhat melancholy St. Nicholas. This image would take hold of popular imagination in North America.

REPUBLIC OF TEXAS CELEBRATIONS

Celebrations of Christmas in the days of the Republic of Texas seemed to involve both guns and liquor. Gustav Dresel, a German came to Texas on business in 1837 and remained here for almost five years. The Christmas of 1839 found him four miles outside of Montgomery, where he was staying as a guest of a fellow immigrant referred to only as "Old Stoner."

"Christmas Eve was very simply spent with Stoner," Dresel wrote. "We spoke a great deal about Germany and I read German poems to him. In my thoughts, I was with my parents and brothers and sisters on the Rhine. They no doubt thought of me, but could they guess how and where I spent this joyful family festival?"

By the next day, Dresel was ready to seek less cultured and livelier pursuits, "I designed a plan to prepare new enjoyments for these backwoods people. I did not want to wallow on the buffalo skin, wallow in melancholic reveries, while all Germany, jubilating, dancing, drinking, and

kissing, rejoiced at having safely got over another year."

Joined by a friend, Dresel rode the four miles over to Montgomery and purchased as much bad whiskey as they could safely load into their saddlebags. Back in the settlement, they gathered all of the men along with a healthy supply of gunpowder and weaponry. After several toasts to some worthy causes, the men passed a jug and fired their weapons into the night air. Determining to spread their Yuletide cheer with others less fortunate, they moved en masse to neighboring homes and fired their guns, an event that set dogs to barking and families bolting out of bed. In each case, Dresel announced the purpose of the celebration and invited the man of the house out for a drink. In such a manner a sizable crowd of men eventually arrived at the home of Samuel L. Benton, their representative to Congress.

Dresel loudly proposed three volleys – one in honor of the representative, one for his valiant military service and a third for his beautiful young daughter. Benton came outside amid barking dogs and eight startled children ranging from the object of Dresel's affections on down to toddlers. "We then accepted his invitation and stood under his hospitable roof, 15 of us. The fire was stirred, and really, by the glare of the pinewood, the gathering looked so motley, wild and romantic that all were placed into a merrily enthusiastic mood."

A ham was fetched. The young daughter prepared a "maize cake." The bad whiskey was combined with a dozen eggs, a good dose of sugar and hot water sufficient to produce what Dresel described as "reasonably fair" eggnog. Everyone spent the night in "the merriest of moods" and stumbled home early the next morning.

If this celebration was representative of other Christmas holidays on the frontier, it was certainly time for some new traditions.



From Illustrated Press of Liberty County, Thursday, December 14, 1961 – Luke Walker shows the nutria he and a friend, Jim Hubert, killed with a stick at the front door of Dayton State Bank Tuesday morning this week. The large rodent closely resembles a wood rat. Dayton has been seen close-in presence of several wild animals lately: timber wolf, bobcat, fox and now nutria on Main Street downtown.

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