



Celebrate! Holidays In The U.S.A.

Christmas Day

(December 25)

Christmas is a joyful religious holiday when Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. The Christmas story comes from the Bible. An angel appeared to shepherds and told them that a Savior had been born to Mary and Joseph in a stable in Bethlehem. Three Wise Men from the East (the Magi) followed a wondrous star which led them to the baby Jesus to whom they paid homage and presented gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

To people all over the world, Christmas is a season of giving and receiving presents. In some European countries, Father Christmas, or Saint Nicholas, comes into houses in the night and leaves gifts for the children. Saint Nicholas is represented as a kindly man with a red cloak and long white beard. Another character, the Norse God Odin, rode on a magical flying horse across the sky in the winter to reward people with gifts. These different legends passed across the ages to make the presentday Santa Claus.

Immigrant settlers brought Father Christmas to the United States. Father Christmas' name was gradually changed to Santa Claus, from the Dutch name for Father Christmas, which is Sinter Claas. Although he has origins in Norse and pre-Christian mythology, Santa Claus took shape in the United States. Americans gave Santa Claus a white beard, dressed him in a red suit and made him a cheery old gentleman with red cheeks and a twinkle in his eye.

Most children believe that Santa Claus lives at the North Pole. All year he lists the names of children, both those who have been good and those who have been bad. He decides what presents to give to the good children. He oversees the manufacturing and wrapping of the presents by his helpers.

Santa Claus supposedly gets his list of toys from the millions of children who write to him at the North Pole. Children also find Santa Claus at shopping malls across the country. They sit on his lap and tell him what they want for Christmas. Of course, their parents are probably nearby listening in as well.

On December 24, Christmas Eve, Santa hitches his eight reindeer to a sleigh and loads it with presents. The reindeer pull him and his sleigh through the sky to deliver presents to children all around the world, that is, if they had been good all year.

Several American towns maintain the spirit of Santa Claus. The New England state of Connecticut has a Christmas village where "Santa" and his elves give out gifts. In New York, a small town called the North Pole was designed for Santa Claus. There is a post office, a church and a blacksmith shop, to repair the shoes of the reindeer.

Santa Claus exists only in our imaginations. But he, Saint Nicholas, and Father Christmas are spirits of giving. Christmas has been associated with gift giving since the Wise Men brought gifts to welcome the newborn Jesus Christ.

In anticipation of Santa's visit, American children listen to their parents read "The Night Before Christmas" before they go to bed on Christmas Eve. Clement Moore wrote the poem in 1823.

Christmas Cards

Another important custom of Christmas is to send and receive Christmas cards, which are meant to help express the sentiment of the season. Some are religious in nature; others are more secular. Americans begin sending Christmas cards early in December to friends, acquaintances, and

co-workers. The post office advises customers to mail early in the season and avoid the Christmas rush. Some people heed the advice; others wait until the last minute and then are upset when their loved ones have not received the greeting card or the present which they sent.

It seems that nearly every family has its own unique Christmas observances. Many people are especially proud of Christmas traditions brought to the United States from their countries of origin. The wonderful diversity of foods, music and songs, prayers and stories all make Christmas the holiday of holidays in the United States.

One custom in Texas and other parts of the American Southwest warmly welcomes Christmas visitors. People cut designs out of the sides of paper bags. Then they put enough sand in the bottom of the bag to hold a candle. They line their walkways with the bags, and light the candles after dark. Guests can easily find their friend's walkway and follow the candles up to the door.

In San Antonio, these "luminaries" are placed all along the River Walk, a paved walkway alongside the San Antonio River, and an old custom called "Las Posadas" is acted out.

"Las Posadas" represents the journey that Mary and Joseph took from Nazareth to Jerusalem on a winter night 2000 years ago. Mary was about to give birth to Jesus on their way to be counted in the census. The inns were full and the only place they could find to rest was a barn. Jesus was born there and was placed in a manger, or wooden bin for feeding animals.

Two young people are chosen to play the roles of Mary and Joseph. They follow the luminaries up to a house and knock on the door. Joseph asks the owner if they can stay there for the night. The owner refuses to let them in, because the house is full. They knock at several more houses until finally someone lets them come in to stay the night. The house where the couple is invited was chosen before the celebration, and has a doll in a manger, representing Jesus. When the couple arrives at the house, they and the people who have followed sing Christmas carols and eat the food provided by the "innkeeper."

Home for the Holidays

Going home for Christmas is a most cherished tradition of the holiday season. No matter where you may be the rest of the year, being at "home" with your family and friends for Christmas is "a must." The Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays are the busiest times of the year at airports, train stations and bus depots. It seems that all America is on the move and Americans are on their way to spend the holidays with their loved ones.

This means that the house will be full of cousins, aunts and uncles that might not see each other during the year. Everyone joins in to help in the preparation of the festivities. Some family members go to choose a Christmas tree to buy and bring home. Others decorate the house or wrap presents. And of course, each household needs to make lots of food!

On Christmas Eve, there are evening church services. Attention is focused on the nativity scene, while all join in singing carols. On Christmas Day, there are other religious ceremonies at churches which families attend before they make their rounds to visit friends and relatives.

The Christmas table looks much like a Thanksgiving feast of turkey or ham, potatoes and pie. No Christmas is complete without lots of desserts, and nothing symbolizes Christmas more than baked breads and cookies hot from the oven. Many American traditional desserts, like other Christmas customs, were started long ago in other parts of the world. Guests bring English fruit cake or plum pudding as presents to their hosts. "Crostoli," a fried bread spiced with orange peel, is made in Italian-American communities. As an ending for the Christmas banquet, Americans of German background eat "Pfeffernuesse," a bread full of sweet spices. Doughnuts are a holiday offering in many Ukrainian-American homes. Norwegian "Berlinerkranser" is a wreath-shaped cookie, dozens are

made, but few are left by Christmas morning! Candy doesn't remain for long, either, during the holiday weeks. Hard candies such as peppermint candy canes and curly green and red ribbon candy are traditional gifts and goodies.

At Christmas Eve gatherings adults drink eggnog, a drink made of cream, milk, sugar, beaten eggs and brandy or rum. Plenty of eggnog or hot cocoa is on hand in colder climates for carolers, or people who go from house to house to sing Christmas carols to their neighbors.

Long ago, each child hung a stocking, or sock, over the fireplace. Santa entered down the chimney and left candy and presents inside the socks for the children. Today the tradition is carried on, but the socks are now large red sock-shaped fabric bags still called stockings. Each child can't wait to open his or her eyes to see what Santa has left in the stocking.

Giving gifts is a Christmas tradition. However, in recent years, more and more people have complained that Christmas is too commercialized especially in large cities. Store owners begin advertising and decorating very early in hopes of selling more goods. Children demand more and more from Santa Claus because manufacturers and retailers saturate television with advertising. Some people believe that the origin of Christmas has been lost. Commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ is the very reason for Christmas and should be central to the celebration.

Every year human interest newspaper articles remind readers of the origin of Christmas. Shelters for the homeless and hungry appeal through the newspaper to send money or gifts to those who are less fortunate. Members of organization such as the Salvation Army dress up as Santa Claus and stand on the sidewalks outside stores to collect money for their own soup kitchens. City police forces supervise a "Toys for Tots" donation, in which people contribute new or used toys for children in hospitals and orphanages. Employees give a small part of their paychecks as a donation to a favorite charity. Such groups and organizations try to emphasize the true message of Christmas— to share what you have with others.

Embassy of the United States of America