

# The true story of Santa Claus

by Tom Regan

You see him everywhere this time of year. Talking to children in department stores, riding in parades, making appearances in commercials of every sort and kind. Yes, Santa Claus is a very busy man at Christmas time. But did you ever pause to wonder where Santa really comes from? Even merry old Kris Kringle must have roots of some sort.

Well, he most certainly does have roots and they are almost as interesting and lively as the old man himself. The *Gazette* went to Father Joe Hattie, Roman Catholic chaplain at Dal, and Dr. Thomas Sinclair-Faulkner to ask them if they could help us trace back the story of the man who has come to represent Christmas to so many people around the world.

Santa's real name is Nicholas, Saint Nicholas to be precise. Nicholas was a Christian who lived in the late part of the 3rd century and the early part of the 4th century A.D. in Myra, an Ionian Greek city in Asia Minor, which is now part of Turkey. He came from a fairly well-to-do family and could have lived in

comfort his whole life. Instead, he gave up all his wealth to join the church and become a priest. He later went on to become bishop of Myra.

There are many legends about Nicholas but the one that stands out above all the rest ties in directly to Christmas.

One day Nicholas was walking through the streets of Myra when he heard the sound of weeping coming from a house. He crept up to the window and saw three small girls crying bitterly. The girl's father had lost all of his fortune and the girls now faced the prospect of being sold into slavery or child prostitution.

The three girls were so poor that they could only afford one pair of stockings. As a result, they had to wash them each night and then hang them by the fireplace to dry.

According to the legend, Nicholas decided to take some action. One night, as the girls were sleeping, he

entered their house and put some gold into their stocking. Next morning when the girls awoke, they found the gold. They were able to pay their father's debts and were not sold away.

Thus we have Santa's connection to the tradition of giving gifts. But how did the bishop of a city in Asia Minor come to be the rolly-polly figure in red that we know today.

This is the one point that Father Hattie and Dr. Sinclair-Faulkner disagreed on. Father Hattie said it was the Crusaders who were responsible for bringing the legend of Saint Nicholas to Europe. As the Crusaders travelled throughout the Middle East and Asia, they came across the stories of Nicholas and were very impressed. When they returned home they started the tradition of giving gifts on his Saint's Day which is today, December 6th.

It is interesting to note that when gifts were originally given on December the 6th, it was with the idea of giving them to people that needed them the most, a practice that we seem to have misplaced in these days of electronic chess games and dolls who do seven different things all at once.

Dr. Sinclair-Faulkner said the tradition of Saint Nicholas came to Europe as a result of the spread of the Church. Most people were familiar with the stories of the lives of the saints. As a result, it was easy to fit Nicholas into his role as gift giver.

Once the legend of Nicholas reached Europe it took several forms. In England it was Father Christmas who would come around and give gifts on Christmas Eve to all good boys and girls. In Holland Saint Nicholas goes about on the 6th of December and gives presents to all boys and girls who have behaved. Saint Nicholas is accompanied by Black Peter, who has the job of chastising the children who have misbehaved. We shall see more of this Saint Nicholas later.

In Germany there was no Saint Nicholas legend. Instead, there was the Krister Kinder (The Christ Child). The Krister Kinder, who was a little girl, would go around on Christmas Eve giving out gifts

to deserving children. She was followed round by an orge who would eat bad children. It is from the Krister Kinder that we get the corrupted Kris Kringle.

Now, we move on to America. When European immigrants came to America they brought their traditions of Christmas with them. The Germans brought the Christmas tree; the English, the Yule Log and Christmas carols; and the Dutch brought the story of Sinter Nicholas, which when translated by the Americans became Santa Claus.

It was left to Clement Moore, a professor of divinity in New England to put the final touches on Santa. Moore wrote an article for the *New England Record* in 1822 called 'A Visit from Saint Nicholas.' We now know it as 'The Night Before Christmas'. Moore and his illustrator, a man named Nash, came up with the figure of a jolly little man in red clothes, who could slide up and down chimneys and had eight tiny little reindeer. Many of these ideas are Scandinavian in origin.

Dressed in the red snow suit, he resembles Odin, a Norse god and the reindeer, who had eight feet, probably came from the legend of Odin's horse, Sleipner.

So Santa Claus is really a man of international flavour. Does he really exist? Well for the answer to that we have to go to a letter to the editor that appeared in the *New York Sun*



Gerard Walsh

on September 21, 1997. It read: "Dear Editor: I am eight years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says that if you see it in the Sun, it's so. Please tell me the truth; is there really a Santa Claus? signed Virginia O'Hanlon."

The editor (Francias Pharcellus Church) replied: "Virginia your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the scepticism of a

sceptical age. . . Not believe in Santa Claus? You might as well not believe in fairies. . . No Santa Claus? Thank God he lives and he lives forever. A thousand years from now, nay, ten thousand years from now, he will continue to live in the heart of childhood."

So there you have it. And remember if the *Gazette* says that Santa Claus is real, like Virginia's father said about the Sun, you can believe it.

## CKDU proposal

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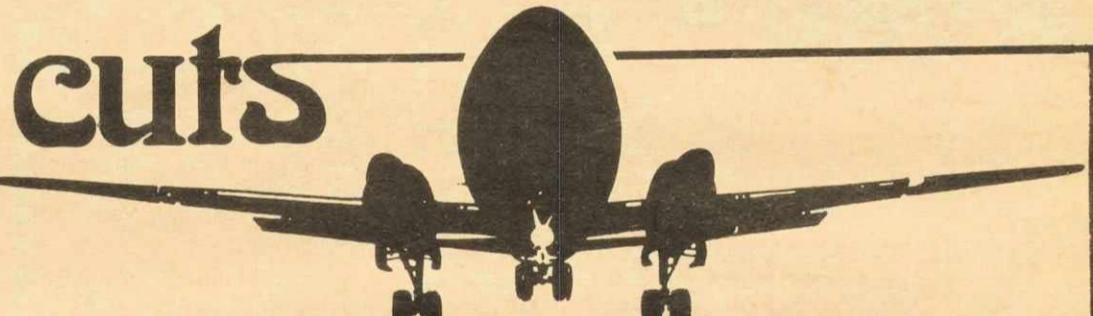
"Since we've had the equipment up there for ten years and its life span is just about ended, and we're spending ten thousand dollars a year on a radio station that is heard here in the Student Union Building and only in parts of Howe Hall, Shirreff Hall and Fenwick Place, and if we're going to be spending more money in the future to replace equipment, then the point has come where either CKDU makes itself heard to a much larger audience than it has right now or it gets closed down.

We're faced with that kind of a choice. . . ."

A member of Student Council who did not want to be identified said the preliminary presentation of the proposal seemed to be well received at the Council meeting last Sunday, but the issue won't be decided until Council meets in January to vote on the proposal.

If approved, the proposed FM station would cover most of the Metro area, and could be heard by an estimated 90 percent of the Dalhousie student body.

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