

# gateway

Wednesday, December 8, 1982

Christmas is the time  
of year when  
everyone's smiling...

...and wondering what  
everyone's up to.



## The spirit and legend of Christmas

*Of all the festivals of the year, religious as well as secular, Christmas is at once the most important. During the dead season, when Nature sleeps beneath its snowy mantle; when the harvest has been gathered in, and tillage time has not yet come round; when the days are shortest, and the nights long and dreary; when the scattered members of the family are for the nonce re-assembled round the glowing hearth: this is the season for mirth and jollity in cottage and in hall.*

*-The Customs of Mankind*

by Gilbert Bouchard

The early Christians celebrated the nativity of Christ on various dates, some celebrations took place in April, or May, and some in January. All of these dates made as much sense as any other since no evidence to the actual birthdate of the Christ child exists in the New Testament. So how come our Christmas celebrations take place on dreary December 25?

Quite simply, practical and political motives rather than religious inspiration led to the standardization of the holiday. Remember that the early Christians were a small minority in a huge pagan majority, and most of the early Christians were reformed pagans still clinging to pagan beliefs. The early church had a great deal of difficulty keeping its people in line.

The greatest feast in almost any pagan's calendar was the winter solstice. December 27,

the shortest day of the year, the time of the celebration of the rebirth of the sun. The Druids, the Slavics, the Nordics, the Greeks, the Romans the Egyptians, all celebrated the solstice with feasts and wild abandon.

The Romans in particular went hogwild about this time of year, they called their feast the Saturnalia, and it lasted seven days ending on December 24th. The 25th was the birthday of the unconquered sun (Natalis Solis Invicti). Slaves were freed for the festivities, everybody spoke freely, work and school were interrupted, gifts were exchanged, and feasting and drinking marked the hour. Most of the early Christians were citizens of the Roman empire and heavily influenced by Roman day to day life.

Now, these early Christians, like you or I, were not ones to pass up a good party, so the clergy decided that the only way they could distract their congregations from the pagan revelry was to create a parallel celebration. So in 336 A.D. the feast of the unconquered sun became the feast of the birthday of Christ, the sun of righteousness. Not only did the Christians lift the date of the pagan feast they also "borrowed" many pagan customs to aid their own celebrations.

Even to this day we still decorate our homes with evergreen, holly, laurel, and mistletoe. All of this greenery could have been found in any druid hut or roman villa at this time of year.

The druids sent out sprigs of holly and mistletoe a few days prior to their great winter feast both as a peace offering and as a reminder to decorate (a custom carried over to this day as

some people mail off a tiny sprig of mistletoe with every Christmas card they mail). The mistletoe was the property of Thor, Baldr and later the goddess Frigg, and evergreens were thought to house woodland spirits who would keep the inhabitants warm till the following spring.

The Romans saw the mistletoe as the symbol of truce and peace, and would lay down their arms beneath this holy greenery (hence the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe).

As for the holly, myth has it that the crown of thorns that wounded Christ's brow was a branch of holly, and its berries were stained red with his blood.

And that other touch of green on Christmas morning, the Christmas tree, has its origins in the Roman Saturnalia, when pine trees were dragged indoors and decorated with candles and images of Bacchus.

The modern Christmas tree was introduced to England by the Prince Consort after his wedding to Queen Victoria, and later appeared in America thanks to German immigrants who imported the custom over to the colonies. The Xmas tree is the symbol of eternal life, hope and faith.

And perhaps as you sit under your Christmas tree, sipping eggnog and feeling Christmassy, your neighbourhood might just be serenaded by wandering carollers.

The first carollers in early Christian times were poor people who took to the street singing old pagan hymns, but to the glory of the new deity, and they were rewarded by their audience with food and drink (hence our customs of not

only singing door to door, but also feeding carollers). The first Canadian carol was written by Father Brebeuf and is called the 'Huron Carol'.

Christmas cards on the other hand are very recent. The old English tradition of yelling greetings from the windows on Christmas morning gave way to writing congratulatory letters on religious and feast day. These letters were taken one step further by William Egley who in 1842 designed and mailed one hundred copies of the first Christmas card to his dearest and closest friends. Louis Prang, a German emigrant printer, introduced the Christmas card to America in 1875, a fact that Hallmark is eternally grateful for.

Other customs like the Yule log and the baking of Christmas cookies are much older, and much more pagan. The Yule log is named after the Scandinavian festival of the winter solstice (the yul) and dedicated to the god Thor. And those innocent little Xmas cookies date back again to the Romans who gave baked goods and other confections to their Senators during Saturnalia.

And to top it off we came really close to losing Christmas altogether. The puritans thought the whole holiday was rather sinful and conned Parliament into banning the feast from 1642 to 1652. And for those ten years poor old Santa Claus was unemployed and had to resort to chimney cleaning to make ends meet.

And speaking of the fat old guy himself, his origins are sort of muddled. No one really knows how a fourth century Russian bishop

*continued on page 2*