

Origin of Santa Claus

The origin of Santa Claus can be traced back approximately 1,600 years to the City of Lycia, in Asia Minor.

In the latter part of the third century, a boy called Nicholas, was born in that city to wealthy parents. Orphaned young and left a considerable fortune, Nicholas was imbued with two great interests—a deep admiration for Jesus Christ and a desire to imitate Him in deeds of kindness and charity.

Nicholas was to be so respected by his fellow-citizens that, at the age of 19, he was elected Bishop of Myra. Persecuted by the Emperor Diocletian, Nicholas was thrown into prison and released shortly before his death in 343 A. D.

Canonized by Church

Nicholas was later canonized by his church and eventually became the patron saint of children, sailors and bankers.

The many deeds of kindness and charity which St. Nicholas carried out during his lifetime have become legendary.

One story tells how he overheard a destitute merchant say that he planned to sell his three daughters because he had no money to provide suitable dowries for them.

Nicholas set out for the merchant's house and threw a purse of gold through the bedroom windows of the oldest and the second-oldest daughters. When he came to the window of the youngest daughter, however, he found that it was closed.

Refusing to admit defeat, Nicholas scaled the roof and dropped a purse of gold down the chimney. The purse fell into a stocking hung over the fireplace to dry, and it is from this action of Nicholas that the custom of hanging-up stockings on Christmas Eve is derived.

The legend of St. Nicholas gradually travelled northward, through Russia to Lapland. Not having any horses, the Laplanders transferred St. Nicholas from his traditional white horse to a reindeer-drawn sleigh. The Laplanders also furnished him with a fur coat to combat the excessively cold climate of his new surroundings.

From the Laplanders, the story of St. Nicholas was eventually passed on to the Scandinavians, who though Christianized, had not forgotten the tales of their traditional god, Thor.

According to legend, Thor, dressed in a red coat, is reputed to have ridden through the sky in a chariot drawn by two goats, in order to make an appearance at the traditional Feast of the Yule.

These goats subsequently gave way to reindeer, while Thor's red coat became trimmed with white fur.

Christmas Man Substituted
During the Reformation in Europe, the Feast of St. Nicholas was abolished in many countries. In place of the Saint, a "Christmas Man" was substituted.

Throughout this period of history, only a trace of the traditional Christmas Saint remained.

In England, for instance, the "Boy Bishop" was honoured.

During this ceremony, the outstanding boy of the local school was chosen and garbed in a bishop's robes. Wearing his miter and carrying a crozier, he would ride through town on a white horse and all were subject to his rule from December 5 to December 28.

This custom was abolished by Henry VIII in 1542, reinstated by Mary and finally ended by Elizabeth I.

In Holland, however, the people stubbornly clung to the tradition of St. Nicholas, although in that country he was known as Sinter Klaas.

Sinter Klaas, accompanied by his servant, Black Peter, usually rode into town on a white horse, visiting every house in much the same way as Santa Claus does today.

The character of Black Peter originated during the Spanish occupation of the Netherlands. At that time, gentlemen were invariably accompanied by Moorish or African servants wherever they went.

Similar practices were observed for a time in Germany. However, in that country, Black Peter was known as Knecht Rupert, who went from house to house prior to the visit of Santa Claus, scolding children for various mis-

deanours. He generally concluded his scoldings by intimating that Santa would be merciful this time, but might not be so lenient next Christmas.

When Martin Luther rose to prominence in Germany, however, he swung the Northern part of the country away from St. Nicholas and substituted Christkindlein, who brought gifts secretly to homes on Christmas Eve.

This custom crossed the Atlantic to North America when William Penn brought German settlers to his new colony of Pennsylvania. These settlers eventually became known as the Pennsylvania Dutch and the Christ Child as Kris Kringle.

Carried to North America

The story of St. Nicholas was carried to North America by the Dutch colonists, who bought Manhattan Island from the Indians in 1626 and founded New Amsterdam or, as it later became, New York.

As thousands of English settlers poured into North America, these newcomers found the kindly and generous character of Sinter Klaas more appealing than their "Christmas Man" and they adopted the former as their own.

Later, Swedish settlers added their traditions of the reindeer coming through the sky and of the red coat trimmed with fur.

In 1880, the respective celebrations were combined into one and observed on December 25.

The characters of "Black Peter" and the white horse, however, disappeared. Black Peter was abolished because

of the widespread disapproval of anything connected with slavery that existed in the northern American states at that time; in the case of the white horse, it was felt that reindeer added more of a magical touch to the Christmas tradition.

With the wide variations in the legend of Santa Claus, it became necessary for someone to co-ordinate them, and this was done in 1822 by Dr. Clement Moore, a professor of Divinity at the New York Theological Seminary.

While on his way home one evening after having distributed gifts to poorer members of his congregation, Dr. Moore met an old, red-faced Dutchman, smoking a white clay pipe. During their subsequent conversation, this old man told Dr. Moore about some of the legends surrounding St. Nicholas.

As Dr. Moore hurried home, he thought to himself that the old man could well be Santa Claus himself.

While his children were eating supper, Dr. Moore sat down and wrote "The Night

Before Christmas." After having read the poem to them Dr. Moore threw it into a wastepaper basket.

Noticed Poem

The next day, however, a lady visitor to Dr. Moore's home noticed the poem in the wastepaper basket and was so intrigued by it that she sent a copy to the Troy, New York, Sentinel. The paper published the poem the following Christmas and it instantly became part of traditional Christmas folklore.

It remained only for somebody to draw a picture of Santa Claus, and this was done by Thomas Nast, the creator of the Republican elephant and the Democratic donkey.

Prior to Nast's drawing, Santa Claus had been described as small and elf-like, and it was Nast who drew him into the familiar jolly figure we know today.

So popular did Santa Claus eventually become, that he returned across the Atlantic during the second-half of the 19th century and became known as Le Pere Noel in

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