



# A Christmas Reference

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# The Names

## “Christmas”

The word Christmas comes from the words Cristes maesse, or "Christ's Mass." Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus for members of the Christian religion. Most historians peg the first celebration of Christmas to Rome in 336 AD.

## “Xmas”

According to the book *Did you ever Wonder...* by Jeff Rovin, the word for Christ in Greek is Xristos. The use of the shortened form Xmas became popular in Europe in the 1500's.

## “Yuletide”

According to the book *The Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* by William and Mary Morris, “Yuletide for Christmastime’ is a term derived from the Yule log, which in olden days was a huge log used as the foundation of the holiday fires. Bringing the Yule log in was, as recently as the nineteenth century, as much a part of the pre-Christmas festivities as putting up an evergreen tree today. Yule can be traced back to the Middle English Yollen (cry aloud) and is thought to date from early Anglo-Saxon revels in celebration of the discovery (after the Winter Solstice, December 22) that nights were becoming shorter.”

## “Merry Christmas”

“Merry Christmas” was a prominent phrase in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. We’ve been wishing each other that sentiment ever since the book was published in 1843.

Czech	Veselé Vánoce
Danish	Glædelig Jul!
Dutch	Prettige Kerstdagen
Esperanto	Felican Kristnaskon
Finnish	Hyvää joulua!
Flemish (Belgium)	Zalig Kerstmis!
French	Joyeux Noël
Gaelic (Ireland)	Nollaig Shona
German	Frohe Weihnachten!
Hungarian	Kellemes karácsonyi ünnepeket
Icelandic	Gleðileg jól
Italian	Buon Natale
Latin	Pax hominibus bonae voluntatis
Latvian	Priecīgus Ziemsvētkus
Manx (Isle of Man)	Nollick ghennal as blein vie noa
Norwegian	God Jul
Polish	Wesołych Świąt

Portuguese	Feliz Natal!
Romanian	Sarbatori Fericitate
Russian	S Rozhdestvom Khristovym
Scottish Gaelic	Nollaig Chridheil
Serbian	Sretan Bozic
Spanish	Feliz Navidad
Swedish	God Jul
Welsh	Nadolig Llawen

## “Happy New Year”

Czech	Stastny Novy Rok
Danish	Godt Nyttår!
Dutch	Gelukkig Nieuwjaar
Esperanto	Bonan Novjaron
Finnish	Onnellista uutta vuotta!
Flemish (Belgium)	Zalig Nieuw Jaar!
French	Bonne Année
Gaelic (Ireland)	Blian nua faoi mhaise duit
German	Ein glückliches neues Jahr!
Hungarian	Boldog új évet
Icelandic	Farsælt komandi ár
Italian	Felice Anno Nuovo
Latvian	Laimīgu Jauno gadu!
Norwegian	Godt Nytt År
Polish	Szczesliwego Nowego Roku
Portuguese	Feliz Ano Novo!
Romanian	La Multi Ani
Russian	S Novym Godom
Scottish Gaelic	Bliadhna Mhath Ur
Serbian	Sretna Nova Godina
Spanish	Feliz Año Nuevo
Swedish	Gott Nytt År
Welsh	Blwyddyn Newydd Dda

## The Three Wise Men

- Caspar
- Balthazar
- Melchior



## Their Gifts

- Gold
- Frankincense
- Myrrh



## The Dates

### **Advent (starting between Nov 27 and Dec 3, through Christmas)**

Advent (from the Latin *adventus* meaning coming/arrival) is a time of expectant waiting and preparation for both the celebration of the Nativity of Christ at Christmas and the return of Christ at the Second Coming. Advent commences on the fourth Sunday before Christmas — the Sunday nearest to St. Andrew's Day (30 November).

### **Immaculate Conception (Dec 8)**

The term "immaculate conception" is often misused. The Immaculate Conception has nothing to do with either the conception of Jesus or a virgin birth. It is a specific dogma of Roman Catholicism decreeing that the Virgin Mary was preserved free from original sin by divine grace from the moment of her own conception. Although this dogma had been argued since the twelfth century, it was not made official until 1854 by Pope Pius IX. Since then December 8 has been observed as a Roman Catholic feast in commemoration of the Immaculate Conception.

### **Saturnalia (Dec 17)**

Until the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, Saturnalia was a popular pagan holiday in Rome. It celebrated the winter solstice – the passing of the shortest day of the year – and was done with an emphasis on light-hearted fun, social satire and role reversals. When the celebration of Christmas began to supplant Saturnalia, many of the Saturnalia traditions were simply transferred to Twelfth Night.

### **Winter Solstice (Dec 22)**

The winter solstice occurs when the Earth's orbit places it the farthest away from the Sun (at "apogee"). It is the day of the year with the longest night. See *Yuletide*, under *The Names*, above.

### **Christmas Eve (Dec 24)**

Many people begin celebrating Christmas with festivities that lead up to a midnight mass.

### **Birth of Christ (Dec 25?)**

No one really knows if December 25th is the day Jesus was born. What is known is that Christian leaders in 336 AD set the date to December 25th in an attempt to eclipse a popular pagan holiday in Rome (Saturnalia) celebrating the winter solstice. Originally, the celebration of Christmas involved a simple mass, but over time Christmas has replaced

a number of other holidays in many other countries, and a large number of traditions have been absorbed into the celebration in the process.

### **Christmas Holiday (Dec 25)**

Christmas is both a holiday and a Holy Day. In America, it is the biggest event of the year (especially for kids), and for members of the Christian religions it is an important day on the religious calendar. The federal government, all state governments, all schools, colleges, universities and the vast majority of businesses in America give employees one or two days off at Christmas, making it an important holiday. In the Roman Catholic calendar, Christmas is one of 6 holy feast days celebrated in America, the others being: Circumcision (New Year's Day), Ascension, Assumption (Mary's Assumption into heaven, August 15), All Saints (November 1), and the Immaculate Conception (December 8).

### **Boxing Day / Feast of Stephen (Dec 26)**

The celebration of Boxing Day, which takes place on the feast of St. Stephen, is a part of the holiday season unique to the British (in Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.). Traditionally, it is on this day that the alms box at every English church is opened and the contents are distributed to the poor. Also, this is the day that servants traditionally got the day off to celebrate with their families. It became traditional for working people to break open their tip boxes on this day.

### **Hogmanay (Dec 31)**

In Scotland, they celebrate Christmas rather somberly and reserve their merriment for New Year's Eve which is called Hogmanay. This word is derived from a kind of oat cake that was traditionally given to children on New Year's Eve.

### **First Footing (Jan 1)**

Also in Scotland, the first person to set foot in a residence in a New Year is thought to profoundly affect the fortunes of the inhabitants. Generally, strangers are thought to bring good luck. Depending on the area, it may be better to have a dark-haired or fair-haired stranger set foot in the house. This tradition is widely known as "first footing." (A current Christmas tradition for many is to have the guest with darkest hair light the dinner table candles for good luck.) In England, it is said that a stranger coming through the door carrying a lump of coal will bring good luck.

### **Twelfth Night / Epiphany (Jan 6)**

The 12 days of Christmas are the 12 days that separate Christmas day on December 25 from Epiphany, which is celebrated on January 6. Depending on the church, January 6th may mark Christ's baptism (the Catholic tradition), or it may

mark the day that the wise men visited the baby Jesus with their gifts. In the past there was a tradition of giving gifts throughout the 12 days, rather than stacking them all up on the morning of December 25.

**Now Christmas is past,  
Twelfth Night is the last  
To the Old Year adieu,  
Great joy to the new**

Twelfth night is a traditional day for taking down the Christmas decorations. This is also a traditional day for wassailing apple trees (see *Other Ancient Traditions*, below) and playing a game called Snapdragon. Traditional Twelfth Night foods served in England include anything spicy or hot, like ginger snaps and spiced ale.

One of the Saturnalia (Dec 17) traditions to survive the transfer to Twelfth Night was that of baking a good luck bean inside a cake. Whichever celebrant found the bean was declared Master of the Revel. As this activity evolved in different countries, the good luck bean might have been a white bean, a black bean, a pea, a dried lima bean, a small china doll or sometimes even amulets and fortune-telling trinkets, or a combination. In Italy, the beans were hidden in focaccia rather than a cake. In France, a special thin cake is cut into pieces numbering one more piece than the guests, with the extra piece being set aside for the first person to come through the door. In Portugal, the bolo-Rei cake is ring-shaped, and whoever finds the dried lima bean in that one not only becomes the King of the revel but is also responsible for baking next year's bolo-Rei. In England, the Twelfth Night cake is usually a rich and dense fruitcake.

The man who finds the lucky piece of cake is usually free to choose his own queen consort (or vice versa). Then, as the royal pair direct the rest of the company in merriment, they might assign the revelers ludicrous tasks or require them to behave in ways that were contrary to their usual roles. In France, every action of the royal pair is commented upon and imitated with mock ceremony by the entire company, who shout "the Queen drinks," "The King laughs," "The Queen drops her handkerchief!"

### **St. Knut's Day (Jan 13)**

In Scandinavian countries, this is the traditional day for taking down the Yule decorations. In Norway, the greeting, "Glaedelig jul," is used up to and on this day. Sleigh races are held in some rural communities. In Sweden, this day is celebrated with a dance and then the dismantling of the Christmas tree. The tree is usually chopped up and burnt.

Sometimes known as the Twentieth Day (Tvendedagen), some authorities believe the name

Knut comes from the Laws of Canute the Great, written between 1017 and 1035, who decreed that there should be no fasting between Christmas and the Epiphany Octave.

## **Santa Claus**

### **Saint Nicholas**

According to tradition, Saint Nicholas was born in the ancient Lycian seaport city of Patara, and, when young, he traveled to Palestine and Egypt. He became bishop of Myra soon after returning to Lycia. He was imprisoned during the Roman emperor Diocletian's persecution of Christians but was released under the rule of Emperor Constantine the Great and attended the first Council (325) of Nicaea. After his death he was buried in his church at Myra, and by the 6th century his shrine there had become well known. In 1087 Italian sailors or merchants stole his alleged remains from Myra and took them to Bari, Italy; this removal greatly increased the saint's popularity in Europe, and Bari became one of the most crowded of all pilgrimage centers. Nicholas' relics remain enshrined in the 11th-century basilica of San Nicola, Bari.

Nicholas' reputation for generosity and kindness gave rise to legends of miracles he performed for the poor and unhappy. He was reputed to have given marriage dowries of gold to three girls whom poverty would otherwise have forced into lives of prostitution, and he restored to life three children who had been chopped up by a butcher and put in a brine tub. In the Middle Ages, devotion to Nicholas extended to all parts of Europe. He became the patron saint of Russia and Greece; of charitable fraternities and guilds; of children, sailors, unmarried girls, merchants, and pawnbrokers; and of such cities as Fribourg, Switz., and Moscow. Thousands of European churches were dedicated to him, one as early as the 6th century, built by the Roman emperor Justinian I, at Constantinople (now Istanbul). Nicholas' miracles were a favorite subject for medieval artists and liturgical plays, and his traditional feast day was the occasion for the ceremonies of the Boy Bishop, a widespread European custom in which a boy was elected bishop and reigned until Holy Innocents' Day (December 28).



After the Reformation, Nicholas' cult disappeared in all the Protestant countries of Europe except Holland, where his legend persisted as Sinterklaas (a Dutch variant of the name Saint Nicholas). Dutch colonists took this tradition with them to New

Amsterdam (now New York City) in the American colonies in the 17th century. Sinterklaas was adopted by the country's English-speaking majority under the name Santa Claus, and his legend of a kindly old man was united with old Nordic folktales of a magician who punished naughty children and rewarded good children with presents. ("Nicholas, SAINT", Britannica CD. Version 97. Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1997.)

### Other Names for Santa Claus

- **Weihnachtsmann** in Germany for "Christmas man"
- **Kris Kringle** from the southern Germany Christkindle, meaning "Christ child." This mutated in some areas of the world into a name for Santa Claus.
- **Pere Noel** in France
- **Papa Noel** in many Spanish speaking countries
- **Sinter Claus** (or Sinterklaas, Sinte Klaas) in the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam (now New York City)
- Other variations of his name range from Sant Nikolaas to Sante Klaas
- The Italian **Befana** is a similar figure as is Russia's grandmotherly **Babouschka**.
- Russians also have a **Ded Moroz** ("Grandfather Frost")
- In Denmark he's called **Julemanden** ("Christmas Man")
- **Joulupukki** ("Yule Buck"), evolved from the "Christmas Goat" used to frighten children in Finland. **Korvatunturi** (Mount Ear, near Polar Circle) is often portrayed as his home. The children see Santa and he asks if they have been good.
- **Nicholas of Bari**
- **Nicholas of Myra**

### Santa's Suit

The red and white suit came, actually, from the original Saint Nicholas. Those colors were the colors of the traditional bishop's robes.

### Santa's Sleigh, Rooftops, and Chimneys

All of these aspects of the Santa Claus mystique were invented in his poem "The Night Before Christmas". (See additional information on the poem under *Christmas Literature*, below.)

### The Reindeer

- Dasher
- Dancer
- Prancer
- Vixen
- Comet
- Cupid
- Donder (not Donner)
- Blitzen



### Santa's Workshop

Between 1863 and 1886, *Harper's Weekly* (a popular magazine of the time) ran a series of engravings by Thomas Nast. From these images come the concepts of Santa's workshop, Santa reading letters, Santa checking his list and so on. Coca-cola also played a role in the Santa image by running a set of paintings by Haddon Sundblom in its ads between 1931 to 1964.

### Santa's Elves

Modern folklore tells of diminutive elves with pointy ears assisting Santa from a secret village in Lapland, Finland. They are likely cousins of the "house gnomes" of Scandinavia.

- **Shinny Upatree** – Father Christmas's oldest friend and cofounder of the secret village in Lapland
- **Bushy Evergreen** – Inventor of the magic toymaking machine
- **Wunorse Openslae** – Designed the sleigh, maintains it for top performance, and cares for the reindeer.
- **Pepper Minstix** – Guardian of the secret of the location of Father Christmas's village.
- **Sugarplum Mary** – Head of Sweet Treats, and assistant to Mrs. Claus.
- **Alabaster Snowball** – Administrator of the Naughty & Nice list.

## Christmas Correspondence

### Letters to Santa

Some children who write letters to Father Christmas listing their requests, don't drop them in the mailbox. Instead, the letters are tossed into the fireplace. The draught carries the letters up the chimney and Father Christmas reads the smoke.



### Christmas Cards

John Callcott Horsley (1817-1903, London) was a painter who designed the first Christmas Card in 1843 for his friend, Sir Henry Cole. It showed a family party and with the legend, "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You." One thousand cards were made, all hand colored.

### Christmas Postage

The first two Christmas-themed commemorative postage stamps in the world were issued in 1937 by Austria. Only a handful of other countries followed suit, sporadically, until the early 1960's. The first



Christmas stamps issued by the US Postal Service appeared in 1962.

## Christmas Seals

The world's first Christmas Seal (non-postage stamp) was issued in Denmark in 1904. It bore the likeness of the Danish Queen (Louise of Hesse-Kassel) and the word "Julen" (Christmas). Over 4 million were sold in the first year at DKK 0.02 per seal, with the proceeds going to fight tuberculosis, a greatly feared disease at the time that seemed particularly cruel for its harmful effects on children.

# Christmas Gifts

## Presents Under the Tree

Gifts are opened Christmas morning. In some households, the younger children will awake very early in the morning to find a stocking at the end of their bed and some presents on the floor. Later, the family will gather together to open all the presents that have been left under the Christmas tree.



The tradition of gifts seems to have started with the gifts that the wise men (the Magi) brought to Jesus. As recounted in the Bible's book of Matthew, "On coming to the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh."

Although manufactured toys have been advertised commercially in the United States as early as 1767, no one was really in the habit of exchanging elaborate gifts until late in the 1800's. The Santa Claus story, combined with an amazing retailing phenomenon that has grown since the turn of the century has made gift giving a central focus of the Christmas tradition.

**"One of the most glorious messes in the world is the mess created in the living room on Christmas Day. Don't clean it up too quickly." - Andy Rooney**

## Stockings

Some say the custom of hanging stockings comes from England. Father Christmas once dropped some gold coins while coming down the chimney. They would have fallen through the ash grate and been lost if not for a stocking that had been hung out to dry. Since then, children continue to hang stockings in hopes of finding them filled with gifts.

Or, supposedly, the tradition dates back to the actual Saint Nicholas, a bishop in Lycia in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) during the fourth century AD. A poor man with three daughters could not provide a dowry for them to be married, yet a bag of gold mysteriously appeared, tossed in through a window, allowing the eldest daughter to be married off. This happened again with the second eldest. Finally, determined to uncover his benefactor, the father secretly hid each evening by his third daughter's window until he caught the saint tossing in a bag of gold (this time landing in a stocking laid out to dry). Nicholas begged the man to not reveal what he had done, not wanting to bring attention to himself. Word got out anyway, and when anyone received a gift from an unknown source, it was attributed to Saint Nicholas.



Up until lately, it was traditional to receive small items like fruit, nuts and candy in your stocking, but these have been replaced in the last half-century by more expensive gifts in many homes.

## Lumps of Coal

The tradition of naughty children finding lumps of coal in their stockings comes from Italy.

## Christmas Crackers

Christmas crackers are a party favorite in England. Conceived in 1850 by a London confectioner called Tom Smith whilst sitting in front of his log fire. His attention was focused on the sparks and cracks emanating from the flames when suddenly he thought what an added attraction it would be if his sweets and toys could be revealed with a crack when their fancy wrappings were pulled in half. Today's crackers are short cardboard tubes wrapped in colorful paper and traditionally there will be one cracker next to each plate on the Christmas dinner table. When the crackers are pulled, out falls a colorful party hat, a toy or gift and a festive joke. The party hats look like crowns and we assume these symbolize the crowns worn by the three kings.



## Christmas Shopping

In America, the weeks leading up to Christmas are the biggest shopping weeks of the year. Many retailers make up to 70% of their annual revenue in the month preceding Christmas. Therefore, retailers hype the event beyond belief. According to Daniel Boorstin in his book *The Americans*, Christmas was largely a non-event in America until the 1860's. 1867 was the first year that Macy's remained open until midnight on Christmas Eve. 1874 was the year of the first window displays with a Christmas theme at Macy's. It has snowballed from there.

## Presents at the End of a Long String

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a fun tradition was to tie a *long* piece of yarn to a present – then hide the present. The piece of yarn, which is still attached to the hidden present, is then wrapped around chair legs, through stair banisters, over tables, under couches.... Clear around the house. When the family is ready to hunt out the presents, the gift givers need only tell the recipients what color yarn they're to follow.

**I love the Christmas-tide, and yet,  
I notice this, each year I live;  
I always like the gifts I get,  
But how I love the gifts I give!**  
— Carolyn Wells

## Snow Globes

Snow globes are perhaps equally associated with being a tourist's souvenir as with being a Christmas novelty. They go by many different names: Snowdome, Snowglobe, Waterball, Shakies, Water weight, Water Globe, Blizzard-weight, Crystal-shakies, Snowscene, Snowstorm, Snowfall-weight, Water Filled Paperweights, and Waterdome. An outgrowth of paperweights, some say that they date to the 1800's in France – that five manufacturers were shipping them throughout Europe by 1879.

They were supposedly part of the 1870s lifestyle of upper-class Victorian families who had a love of kitsch, knickknacks and souvenirs. Others say the earliest domes weren't made until the 1920s, when the Atlas Crystal Works made them in both Germany and America. No one doubts that plastic snow domes began their current reign in the 1950s.

## Model Trains

Joshua Lionel Cowen came to toy trains almost by accident. At the age of 22, he had perfected a small electric motor, but had not found a practical use for it. The story is that he was standing outside a shop window when he came up with the idea of a powered gondola to carry sale items to attract customers. Cowen rented a shop, and began manufacturing his gondolas in early 1901. People soon became far more interested in the gondolas than the items they carried. Soon, little boys throughout America are waking up on December 25<sup>th</sup> to the excitement of a Lionel no. 2016 shooting around an oval at the base of the Christmas tree.



## Teddy Bears

Our national craze for Teddy Bears supposedly began with a Clifford Berryman 1902 political cartoon about President Teddy Roosevelt; however, Patricia N. Schoonmaker, author of *A Collector's History of the Teddy Bear* concludes, "The success of the teddy bear was not so much due to President Roosevelt, but to the uniqueness of the toy [itself] attributed to soft and silky mohair and fully, jointed appendages."



## Toys For Tots

Since 1947, U.S. Marines have distributed almost half a billion toys to more than 200 million needy children. The program began with one hand-crafted Raggedy Ann doll. Diane Hendricks asked her husband, Bill, to deliver the doll to an organization in Los Angeles, which would give it to a needy child at Christmas. When Bill determined that no such agency existed, Diane told Bill that he should start one.

Bill Hendricks, a Marine Reservist on weekends, was, in civilian life, the publicity director for Warner Brothers Studio. This enabled him to convince a vast array of celebrities to support Toys for Tots. In 1948, Walt Disney designed the Toys for Tots logo. Disney also designed the first Toys for Tots poster used to promote the nationwide program. Nat "King" Cole, Peggy Lee, and Vic Damone recorded the Toys for Tots song written by Sammy Fain and Paul Webster in 1956. Bob Hope, John Wayne, Doris Day, Lorrie Morgan, Tim Allen and Kenny Rogers are but a few of the long list of celebrities who have given their time and talent to promote Toys for Tots. First Ladies Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush both served as national spokespersons.

The Marines used to collect and distribute used toys as well as new ones, refurbishing them on drill weekends during October, November and December, but for various reasons that practice ceased in 1980.

## White Elephant Gift

A white elephant gift refers to a practice by ancient Asian rulers who would "gift" subordinates who displeased them with white elephants. White elephants were considered holy, and it was supposed to be an honor to care for one – an honor that you could not refuse – but elephants were very expensive to keep. So, the kingly gesture would usually put the subordinate into financial ruin.

Supposedly, Ezra Cornell (as in Cornell University), first used the term "white elephant" to describe the recycled gifts that typically showed up at holiday party exchanges. Since a white elephant is a

property requiring much care and expense, and while it may not be of value to its present owner, the object may have value to others. That exactly describes a gift at a white elephant party.

**"It's not how much we give but how much love we put into giving." — Mother Theresa**

## Decorations

### Christmas Trees

The fir tree has a long association with Christianity. It began in Germany almost a 1000 years ago when St Boniface, who converted the German people to Christianity, was said to have come across a group of pagans about to sacrifice a young boy while worshipping an oak tree. In anger, St Boniface is said to have cut down the oak tree and to his amazement a young fir tree sprung up from the roots of the oak tree. St Boniface took this as a sign of the Christian faith. It was not until the 16<sup>th</sup> century that fir trees were brought indoors at Christmas time. In the 1800's, the tradition of a Christmas Tree was widespread in Germany, then moved to England and then America through Pennsylvanian German immigrants.

### Christmas Tree Ornaments

The decorating of Christmas trees, though primarily a German custom, has been widely popular in England since 1841 when Prince Albert had a Christmas tree set up in Windsor Castle for his wife, Queen Victoria, and their children. In those Victorian times, the trees were primarily decorated with candies and cakes hung with ribbon.

Modern spherical ornaments originated from the practice of hanging apples on a Christmas tree to remind us of the Garden of Eden.

In 1880, Woolworth's was the first to sell manufactured Christmas Tree ornaments. They caught on very quickly.

### Christmas Tree Lights



Martin Luther, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, is credited as being the first person to put candles on a tree to represent stars. Because of the danger of fire, an American telephonist, Ralph E. Morris, invented the electric Christmas lights in 1882 (or it might have been 1895). In 1923, Calvin Coolidge ceremoniously lit the first outdoor tree at the White House, starting that long tradition.

### Snowmen

According to Bob Eckstein's book, *The History of the Snowman* (c) 2007, the practice of building snowmen is one of humanity's earliest forms of folk art.



"[They were a downright] phenomenon in the Middle Ages, built with great skill and thought. At a time of limited means of expression, snow was like free art supplies dropped from the sky. It was a popular activity for couples to stroll through town to view the temporary works of chilly art. Some were created by famous artists, including a 19-year-old Michelangelo, who in 1494 was commissioned by the ruler of Florence, Italy, to sculpt a snowman in his mansion's courtyard."

**"It snowed last year too: I made a snowman and my brother knocked it down and I knocked my brother down and then we had tea." — Dylan Thomas, *A Child's Christmas in Wales***

### Holly and Ivy

The hanging of greenery around the house, such as holly and ivy, is a winter tradition with origins well before the Christian era. Greenery was brought into the house to lift sagging winter spirits and remind people that spring was not far away.



According to the book *Extraordinary Origins of Ordinary Things* by Charles Panati, "the church forbade the use of mistletoe in any form, mindful of its idolatrous associations. As a substitute, it suggested holly. The sharply pointed leaves were to symbolize the crown of thorns that Jesus wore when He was crucified and the red berries drops of his blood. Holly became a nativity tradition. The Christian ban on mistletoe was in effect throughout the middle ages. Surprisingly, as late as the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were churches in England that forbade the wearing of mistletoe sprigs and corsages during services."

In the Middle Ages holly was also thought to bring good luck and to have healing powers. It was often planted near houses in the belief that it protected the inhabitants.

### Poinsettias

Poinsettias were attached to Christmas starting in 1828. Joel Roberts Poinsett, then the first Mexican ambassador from the United States, imported the plant from Mexico. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "In warm climates the poinsettia grows outdoors as a winter-flowering leggy shrub about 3 meters (10 feet) high; as a potted plant in northern areas it rarely grows beyond 1 meter. What appear to be petals are actually colored leaflike bracts that surround a central cluster of tiny yellow flowers. A milky latex in the stems and leaves can be irritating



to persons or animals sensitive to it, but the claim that poinsettias are deadly poisonous is greatly exaggerated." ("Poinsettia", Britannica CD. Version 97. Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1997.)

## Wreaths

A wreath is essentially a garland that is joined at both ends. There are several styles used at different occasions. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century it is generally made of evergreens, holly, with pinecones and nuts. They are hung as decorations, for example on a door in Canada, the United States, and northern Europe. In Tudor England, and during medieval times, a wreath of rosemary and bay was served over a boar. The advent wreath has four candles and is a Christian symbol of the four Sundays preceding Christmas. A Christmas wreath is more decorative and is generally made of holly leaves and berries and is a custom of many countries including particularly those listed above.

## Candles

See *First Footing*, under *Calendar*, about having the candles on the dinner table lit by guest with darkest hair for good luck.

## Nativity Scenes

The star, the manger, the swaddling clothes, the shepherds, the angels, the heavenly host and the wise men all come from the books Matthew and Luke in the Bible. However, neither the number of wise men, nor their names are actually specified. Those come from other writings 500 years later.

## The Yule Log

A Nordic tradition of burning the Yule log goes back to medieval times. The Yule log was originally an entire tree, carefully chosen, and brought into the house with great ceremony. The large end would be placed into the hearth while the rest of the tree stuck out into the room. The log would be lit from the remains of the previous year's log, which had been carefully stored away and slowly fed into the fire through the twelve days of festivities. Having the remains of the Yule log in the house throughout the year was thought to give protection against fire and it was considered important that someone with clean hands carry out the re-lighting process.

Up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the custom of burning the Yule Log flourished in England, France, Germany, and among the South Slavs. Out of oak, families carved a heavy, wood block. They placed it into the floor of their hearth. It glowed throughout the year under the flames of household fires. Gradually it became ash.

**"Christmas is the season for kindling the fire of hospitality." – Washington Irving**

## Christmas at the White House

In 1961, Jacqueline Kennedy set the precedent for establishing a theme for the White House decorations for Christmas. The focal point would always be the official White House Christmas tree, which is brought in by horse-drawn carriage on the day after Thanksgiving and then erected, usually, in the Blue Room; although sometimes in the north entrance.

The 1961 theme was Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite ballet. Other notable themes included: 19<sup>th</sup> century gingerbread (Claudia 'Lady Bird' Johnson 1968), state flowers (Pat Nixon 1969), handmade crafts (Betty Ford 1974), a Victorian Christmas (Rosalynn Carter 1980), old-fashioned toys (Nancy Reagan 1983), literary characters (Barbara Bush 1989), Santa's workshop (Hillary Clinton 1997), national parks (Laura Bush 2007), and "Joy to All" and "Gather Around" (Michelle Obama 2012 and 2013).

## Food and Drink

### Leaving Food for Santa



On Christmas Eve, children leave out mince pies, brandy or some similar warming beverage for Father Christmas, and a carrot for the reindeer.

### Wassail

"Wassailing" is an ancient custom that is rarely practiced today. The word "wassail" is derived from the Anglo-Saxon phrase *waes hael*, which means "good health" (literally, "be whole"). Originally, wassail was a beverage made of mulled ale, curdled cream, roasted apples, eggs, cloves, ginger, nutmeg and sugar. It was served from huge bowls, often of silver or pewter for the purpose of enhancing the general merriment of the season. The legend says that a beautiful Saxon maiden named Rowena presented Prince Vortigen with a bowl of wine while toasting him with the words "Waes hael". Over the centuries a great deal of ceremony developed around the custom of drinking wassail. The bowl was carried into a room with great fanfare, a traditional carol about the drink was sung, and finally, the steaming hot beverage was served.

### Eggnog

Eggnog is a sweet beverage made with cream, sugar, and whipped eggs to make it frothy. In England, brandy or wine are often added. In America, it's rum (or whiskey, in a pinch). A sprinkling of ground cinnamon or nutmeg top it off. (When the drink crossed the Atlantic to the colonies

during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, brandy and wine were heavily taxed, but rum from the Caribbean was a cost-effective substitute, and then later on, domestic whiskey.)

Eggnog likely originated in medieval Britain as a derivative of the “posset,” a hot drink of milk curdled with wine or ale. The name, eggnog, might come from it being served in a “noggin,” which is a Middle English term for a small, carved wooden mug. Or, it might come from the word “grog,” which is sailor’s slang for adding rum to water – or, in this case, adding rum to egg as an “Egg-n-Grog.”

### **Fruit Cakes**

According to “The Joy of Cooking” by Irma Rombauere and Marion Becker, “Many people feel that these cakes improve greatly with age. When they are well saturated with alcoholic liquors, which raise the spirits and keep down mold, and are buried in powdered sugar in tightly closed tins, they have been enjoyed as long as 25 years after baking.” No word yet on how they got attached to Christmas...

### **Mince Tarts**

Each mince tart enjoyed during the 12 days of Christmas supposedly ensures one good month in the coming year.



### **Christmas Cake**

English Christmas cake is often served with a slice of good English cheddar cheese.

### **Christmas Pudding / Frumenty**

It’s a once-a-year treat, and still the traditional end to the British Christmas dinner. According to research carried out by Derbyshire-based Matthew Walker – Britain’s largest producer of Christmas puddings – today’s tasty dessert began as something completely different. It originated as a 14<sup>th</sup> century “porridge” called frumenty that was made by boiling beef and mutton with raisins, currants, prunes, wines and spices. This would often be more like soup and was eaten as a fasting dish in preparation for the Christmas festivities.

By 1595, frumenty was evolving into plum pudding, having been thickened with eggs, breadcrumbs, dried fruit and given more flavor thanks to the addition of ale and spirits. Just as it became the customary Christmas dessert, along came the Puritans in 1664, who banned it as a “lewd custom”, describing its rich ingredients as “unfit for God-fearing people.” It was George I who, having tasted and enjoyed plum pudding, re-established it

as part of the Christmas feast in 1714 – despite objections by Quakers, who regarded it as “the invention of the scarlet whore of Babylon.” By Victorian times, Christmas puddings had evolved into something that looked similar to the ones enjoyed today.

Over the years, many superstitions have surrounded this popular festive dessert. It is said puddings should be made by the 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity, prepared with 13 ingredients to represent Christ and His Disciples, and that every member of the family take turns to stir the pudding with a wooden spoon from east to west, in honor of the Three Kings. Although Christmas marks Christ’s birth, some customs associated with the pudding represent the prelude to his death. When you set light to the brandy – or your favorite tippie – that is poured over the pudding, the flame is said to represent Christ’s passion, while a decorative sprig of holly is a reminder of His ‘Crown of Thorns’

Putting a silver coin in the pudding is another age-old custom that is said to bring wealth, health and happiness to whoever finds it. Other items put in the mixture over the years include rings, which mean marriage within a year, and thimbles and buttons, which predict the finders will remain spinsters and bachelors.

In 2000, Matthew Walker estimated that more than 40 million puddings are consumed on Christmas, annually.

### **Candy Canes**

The symbol of the shepherds’ crook is an ancient one, representing the humble shepherds who were the first to worship the newborn Christ. Its counterpart is our candy cane – so old as a symbol that we have nearly forgotten its humble origin.



In 1670, the choirmaster at the Cologne Cathedral handed out sugar sticks among his young singers to keep them quiet during the long Living Creche ceremony. In honor of the occasion, he had the candies bent into shepherds’ crooks. In 1847, a German-Swedish immigrant named August Imgard of Wooster, Ohio, decorated a small blue spruce with paper ornaments and candy canes.

It wasn’t until the turn of the century that the red and white stripes and peppermint flavors became the norm. The body of the cane is white, representing the life that is pure. The broad red stripe is symbolic of the Lord’s sacrifice for man.

In the 1920s, Bob McCormack began making candy canes as special Christmas treats for his children, friends and local shopkeepers in Albany, Georgia. It was a laborious process – pulling, twisting, cutting and bending the candy by hand. It could only be done on a local scale.

## Christmas Music

In the 1950s, Bob's brother-in-law, Gregory Keller, a Catholic priest, invented a machine to automate candy cane production. Packaging innovations by the younger McCormacks made it possible to transport the delicate canes on a scale that transformed Bobs Candies, Inc. into the largest producer of candy canes in the world. Although modern technology has made candy canes accessible and plentiful, they've not lost their purity and simplicity as a traditional holiday food and symbol of the humble roots of Christianity.

### Boar's Head

A boar's head is a traditional Christmas dish. According to a popular story, the unlucky boar whose head began the custom in the Middle Ages was killed by choking to death on a book of Greek philosophy. Supposedly, a university student saved himself from a charging boar by ramming a book of Aristotle's writings down its throat. He then cut off the boar's head and brought it back to his college.

### Gingerbread

Gingerbread was brought to Europe in 992 by the Armenian monk Grégoire de Nicopolis, who taught Gingerbread cooking to the priests in Bondaroy (France).



During the 13th century, it was brought to Sweden by German immigrants. Swedish nuns were known in 1444 to bake gingerbread to ease indigestion. It was the custom to bake white biscuits and paint them as window decorations.

The town of Market Drayton in Shropshire, UK was famous for its gingerbread early on. The first recorded mention of gingerbread being baked in the town dates back to 1793; however, it was probably made earlier, as business records from high street in the 1640s refer to stockpiles of ginger. Gingerbread became widely available in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The tradition of gingerbread houses started in Germany in the early 1800s, inspired by the well-known Grimm's fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel". After this book was published, German bakers began baking ornamented fairy-tale houses of lebkuchen (gingerbread). These became popular during Christmas, a tradition that came to America with Pennsylvanian German immigrants. According to some food historians, the Grimm brothers were speaking about something that already existed.

### Christmas Carolers

In the Middle Ages in England and France, carols were dances accompanied by singing. In the French Midi, for example, the "carol" was a kind of round dance. In time, the word "carol" changed its meaning, referring only to certain kinds of songs. The Anglo-Saxon tradition favored gathering together small choirs on the village green to sing carols and Christmas songs for the pleasure of passers-by.



### The Twelve Days of Christmas

1. Partridge in a Pear Tree
2. Turtle Doves
3. French Hens
4. Calling Birds
5. Golden Rings
6. Geese a Laying
7. Swans a Swimming
8. Maids a Milking
9. Ladies Dancing
10. Lords a Leaping
11. Pipers Piping
12. Drummers Drumming

### Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern

William Sandys (1792 –1874), a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, is most remembered for his 1833 publication, *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern*, a collection of seasonal carols that Sandys had gathered (and also apparently improvised). It included the first appearances of:

- The First Noel
- God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen
- Hark, The Herald Angels Sing
- I Saw Three Ships

### "The Nutcracker Suite"

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) completed his suite from the ballet *The Nutcracker* in 1892. It was first performed on March 19<sup>th</sup>, in St. Petersburg.

### "(I'm Dreaming of a) White Christmas"

The song "White Christmas", written by Irving Berlin for the movie "Holiday Inn" (1942) and sung by Bing Crosby, is one of the best selling songs of all time.

**"Unless we make Christmas an occasion to share our blessings, all the snow in Alaska won't make it 'white'." - Bing Crosby**

## “Rudolf the Red-Nose Reindeer”

The whole story of Rudolf appeared, out of nowhere, in 1939. Santas at Montgomery Ward stores gave away 2.4 million copies of a booklet entitled “Rudolf the Red-Nose Reindeer.” The story was written by a person in the advertising department named Robert May, and the booklet was illustrated by Denver Gillen. The original name of the reindeer was not Rudolf, according to the book *Extraordinary Origins of Ordinary Things* by Charles Panati. The original name was Rollo, but executives did not like that name, nor Reginald. The name Rudolf came from the author’s young daughter! May’s brother-in-law, Johnny Marks, turned the poem into a song (at which point Donner’s name was misspelled as the now familiar “Donner,” probably on purpose because it flowed better). When Gene Autry sang it in 1949, it was a run-away best-seller. The Rudolf song is second only to “White Christmas” in popularity.

## “Jingle Bells”

“Jingle Bells” by John Pierpont was originally intended to be a Thanksgiving song. It was first published in 1857 by Oliver Ditson & Co., with the title “The One Horse Open Sleigh.” In 1859, Ditson reissued it with a new cover, and the title “Jingle Bells, Or the One horse open Sleigh.” The book *Popular Songs of Nineteenth-Century America* (ed. Richard Jackson, Dover, 1976, ISBN 0-486-23270-0) reprints this second edition in facsimile.



## “Frosty the Snowman”

“Frosty the Snowman,” words and music, was written by Steve Nelson and Jack Rollins in 1950.

## Other Traditional Songs

- Away In A Manger
- Carol of the Bells
- The Christmas Song (Chestnuts Roasting On An Open Fire)
- Come All Ye Faithful
- Deck The Halls
- Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas
- Holy Night
- I’ll Be Home For Christmas
- It Came Upon A Midnight Clear
- Joy To The World
- Little Drummer Boy
- O, Little Town of Bethlehem
- Santa Claus Is Coming To Town
- Silent Night
- Silver Bells
- Tannenbaum
- We Wish You A Merry Christmas
- What Child Is This?
- Winter Wonderland

# Christmas Literature

## “A Christmas Carol”

Dickens is one of the greatest English novelists. He was born February 7, 1812 (Charles John Huffman Dickens) in Portsmouth, Hampshire. In 1843 he wrote “A Christmas Carol,” creating a Christmas myth.

**I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year.**

## “The Night Before Christmas”

Clement Moore’s famous poem was originally called “A Visit from Saint Nicholas.” He allegedly wrote it in 1822 for his family and guests, one of whom anonymously sent the poem to a New York newspaper for publication. It was then reprinted in magazines and it spread like wildfire. Moore admitted authorship in 1838, although the claim has been disputed.



## Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus

In 1897, eight-year-old Virginia O’Hanlon wrote a letter to the New York Sun questioning the existence of Santa Claus. Francis P. Church’s famous response first appeared on the editorial page on September 21, 1897 and was reprinted every year until the paper went out of business in 1949.

## “A Child’s Christmas in Wales”

“A Child’s Christmas in Wales” by Dylan Marlais Thomas (1914-53), is a charming and poetic story based partly on Thomas’ memories of his own childhood. The official publication date is 1955 (posthumously), although there is a recording of the story in Dylan’s own voice. (Note: Dylan Thomas is better known for “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night.”)

## “How The Grinch Stole Christmas!”



Dr. Seuss’ *How The Grinch Stole Christmas!* was written in 1957 by Dr. Seuss (Theodor Geisel), a Jewish man.

## Other Christmas Literature

- *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* by **Washington Irving** (see 1819 in timeline, below).
- *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle*, by **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** (see 1892 in timeline, below).
- *The Father Christmas Letters* by **J. R. R. Tolkien** (see 1920 in timeline, below).
- *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* was a locked room mystery by **Agatha Christie** (see 1938 in timeline, below).
- The writings of Truman Capote (1924-1984) include **A Christmas Memory**, a 1956 short story of childhood reflections that was adapted for television.

I heard the bells on Christmas Day  
Their old familiar carols play  
And wild and sweet, the words repeat  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men.  
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow



## Historic Traditions

### Christmas Markets

Also known as **Christkindlmarkt** (literally: Christ Child Market, referring to an angel-like "spirit of Christmas"), or **Weihnachtsmarkt**, these street markets are associated with the celebration of Christmas during the four weeks of Advent. Traditionally held in the town square, the market has food, drink and seasonal items from open-air stalls accompanied by traditional singing and dancing.

These markets originated in Germany in the late middle ages. Dresden's **Striezelmarkt**, first held in 1434, is considered the first genuine "Christmas market."

### The King of Misrule

Also known as the Abbot of Misrule, this official managed the Christmas festivities held at the late medieval and early Tudor court and in the houses of great noblemen. He served anywhere from 12 days to 3 months and arranged all the festivities

and entertainment. Scotland's counterpart was the "Abbot of Unreason." This tradition ended in 1553.

### Christingle

Many years ago in Czechoslovakia, children were asked to take a gift to put beside the crib in church. One family had no money for gifts but were determined to take something. They found an orange which they felt would be okay, but were disappointed to find it was going moldy at the top. However, they thought they would scoop out the bad bits and put a candle in the top and turn it into a lantern. Thinking that it looked a bit ordinary, one of the girls took a red ribbon from her hair and tied it around the middle. They had difficulty getting it to stay in place, so fastened it with four small sticks, on the ends of which they put a few raisins. They took their lantern to church and were afraid of the reactions of the other children. However, the priest acknowledged their gift and told the congregation how special it was for the following reasons; the orange is round like the world the candle stands tall and straight and gives light in the dark like the love of God the red ribbon goes all around the 'world' and is a symbol of the blood Jesus shed when he died for us the four sticks point in all directions and symbolize North, South, East and West – they are also said to represent the four seasons the raisins represent the fruits of the earth, nurtured by the sunshine and the rain.

Some children in the UK make their own Christingles in their classrooms and gather together to light them in a church service that raises money for the Church of England Children's Society.

### Devil's Knell

A Yorkshire Christmas Eve custom is the tolling of the "Devil's Knell." It has been rung every year for the past 700 years. The knell is rung once for each year that has past since the birth of Jesus. It is rung in celebration of the Devil's departure from Earth.

### The Hunting of the Wren

The hunting of the wren was a Celtic custom in the western and southwestern parts of the British Isles. The hunt took place on St Stephen's Day (Boxing Day). The men and boys of the village would kill a wren, hang it on a pole and carry it in a procession. It was borne to its funeral by the Wren Boys or Droluns. Plus, everyone who gave money was presented with a feather for good luck.

### Wassailing the Apple Trees

This humorous tradition was documented in 1851 in a London Newspaper. In Devonshire, England, on Twelfth Night (January 7), the farmers get their weapons and go to their apple orchard. Selecting the oldest tree, they form a circle and chant:

Here's to thee, old apple tree  
 Whence thou mayst bud  
 and whence thou mayst blow  
 And whence thou mayst bear apples enow:  
 Hats full, caps full,  
 Bushels, bushels, sacks full,  
 And my pockets full too!  
 Huzza! Huzza!

The men drink cider, make merry, and fire their weapons (charged only with powder) at the tree. They return to the home and are denied entrance no matter what the weather by the women indoors. When one of the men guesses the name of the roast that is being prepared for them, all are let in. The one who guessed the roast is named "King for the Evening" and presides over the party until the wee hours.

Wassailing the apple tree is still used, to an extent, in Herefordshire and other parts of the West Country. It generally takes place on the Twelfth Night, or sometimes on Old Twelfth Night. Farmers and their families would feast on hot cakes and cider, and then they would go into the orchard with more 'supplies.'

A cider-soaked cake is laid in the fork of a tree and then more cider is splashed on it. The menfolk fire their guns into the tree and bang on pots and pans while the rest of the people bow their heads and sing the special "Wassail Song." This custom is said to ward off bad spirits from the orchard and encourage the good spirits to provide a bountiful crop for the following year.

### Playing Snap Dragon

Snap Dragon was popular in England during the 1800's. Set brandy on fire in a bowl and throw raisins into the flames. The party guests then take turns snatching the flaming raisins and popping them into their mouths. The flames go out as soon as the mouth shuts, so speed and dexterity are essential.

Here he comes with flaming bowl,  
 Don't he mean to take his toll,  
 Snip! Snap! Dragon!

Take care you don't take too much,  
 Be not greedy in your clutch,  
 Snip! Snap! Dragon!

With his blue and lapping tongue  
 Many of you will be stung,  
 Snip! Snap! Dragon! Cookies and Milk for Santa - While leaving treats for Santa and his reindeer dates back to ancient Norse mythology, Americans began to sweeten up

to the tradition during the Great Depression in the 1930s, as a sign of showing gratitude during a time of struggle.

For he snaps at all that comes  
 Snatching at his feast of plums,  
 Snip! Snap! Dragon!

### Christmas Outlawed 1647-1660

In 1647, the English parliament passed a law that made Christmas illegal. Christmas festivities were banned by Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell, who considered feasting and revelry on what was supposed to be a holy day to be immoral. The ban was lifted only when the Puritans lost power in 1660.

## Modern Traditions

### Cookie Exchanges



Participants bring dozens of cookies from their favorite recipe to swap. Thus, guests head home with a wide variety of goodies. In *The Cookie Party Cookbook*, Robin Olson writes that she found references to "cookie parties" dating back to the late 1800s, and that they began to be called "cookie exchanges" by the 1930s, and "cookie swaps" in the '50s.

### Ornament Exchanges

Similarly, handmade ornaments are exchanged among crafters and hobbyists.



### Volunteering

Popular local places to volunteer on Christmas Day or Christmas Eve include:

- Homeless shelters/soup kitchens
- Religious organizations (e.g. Salvation Army)
- Local hospitals, especially children's wards
- Retirement homes

### Gingerbread Houses

Queen Elizabeth I inspired the decorating of gingerbread cookies, but it was the Germans who elevated the art to the building gingerbread houses. It started with the Brothers Grimm and their telling of *Hansel and Gretel*.



## Ugly Christmas Sweaters



Making fun of and purposefully exaggerating ugly sweaters started in the 1980s, but it was the Vancouver Canadians who first used it as a party theme in 2001. Today, the ugly sweater industry is a multi-million dollar business.

## Making Fun of Fruitcake

Fruitcake, a mix of dried fruit, nuts and brandy, is a favorite of the Brits, but Americans like to joke about it. Truman Capote wrote a short story about “fruitcake weather” in 1956. The small town of Manitou Springs, Colorado holds an annual Fruitcake Toss on January 3.

**The worst Christmas gift is fruitcake. There is only one fruitcake in the entire world, and people keep sending it to each other. – Johnny Carson**

## Luminarias

These folded brown bags that are simply filled with sand and illuminated by votive candles date back 300 years. They are particularly popular in the Southwest. They line sidewalks and churches in places such as Albuquerque and Santa Fe, New Mexico. In Phoenix, the annual Las Noches de las Luminarias at the Desert Botanical Garden features more than 8,000 luminaria bags.

## Kissing under the Mistletoe

The modern tradition of meeting under the mistletoe started in England. Mistletoe is found on willow and apple trees (and in gardening shops) and the practice of hanging it in the house goes back to the times of the ancient Druids. It is supposed to possess mystical powers which bring good luck to the household and ward off evil spirits.



For Scandinavians, the goddess of love (Frigga) is strongly associated with mistletoe. This link to romance may be where our tradition of kissing under mistletoe comes from.

## Tracking Santa's Journey

NORAD's Santa Tracking app follows Santa in real time as he leaves the North Pole and journeys around the world making deliveries.  
<https://www.noradsanta.org/>



## A Timeline of Christmas

3 <sup>rd</sup> c.	<b>Saint Nicholas</b> is born in the ancient Lycian seaport city of Patara.
325 AD	<b>Saint Nicholas</b> attends the first Council of Nicaea under the rule of Emperor Constantine the Great.
336 AD	Christmas <b>first celebrated</b> in Rome.
6 <sup>th</sup> c.	Roman emperor Justinian I builds one of the first of many thousand churches dedicated to <b>Saint Nicholas</b> at Constantinople (now Istanbul).
8 <sup>th</sup> c.	The <b>Christmas tree</b> tradition begins with St Boniface, who converted the druidic German people to Christianity.
1087	Italian sailors steal <b>Saint Nicholas' alleged remains</b> from Myra and take them to Bari, Italy.
1434	The first <b>Christmas market</b> (Striezelmarkt) is held in Dresden, a German city on the River Elbe.
1553	Up until this year, an official known as the <b>King of Misrule</b> , or the Abbot of Misrule, managed the Christmas festivities held at the late medieval and early Tudor court and in the houses of great noblemen. The official served anywhere from 12 days to 3 months and arranged all the festivities and entertainment. Scotland's counterpart was the “Abbot of Unreason”.
1595	Frumenty evolves into plum pudding, having been thickened with eggs, breadcrumbs, and dried fruit and given more flavor thanks to the addition of ale and spirits, and begins to be a customary <b>“Christmas pudding.”</b>
16 <sup>th</sup> c.	Martin Luther is credited as being the first person to put <b>candles on a tree</b> to represent stars.
1647	English parliament passes a law making <b>Christmas illegal</b> . Christmas festivities were banned by Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell, who considered feasting and revelry on what was supposed to be a holy day to be immoral.
1660	The Puritans lose power in England and the <b>ban on Christmas celebrations is lifted</b> .

1664	Puritans ban <b>Christmas pudding</b> as a “lewd custom,” describing its rich ingredients as “unfit for God-fearing people.”	1848	An image of the British royal family with their <b>Christmas tree</b> at Windsor Castle created a sensation when it was published in the <i>Illustrated London News</i> . A modified version of this image was published in the United States in 1850. By the 1870s, putting up a Christmas tree had become common in America.
1670	The first <b>candy canes</b> (sugar sticks bent to resemble shepherds’ crooks) were handed out by the choirmaster at the Cologne Cathedral to keep the young singers quiet during the long Living Creche ceremony.	1850	London confectioner Tom Smith conceives of <b>Christmas crackers</b> whilst sitting in front of his log fire
17 <sup>th</sup> C.	Ginger snap cookies gained favor in Colonial North America as Christmas tree decorations.	1852	<b>The Wonderful Toy Shop</b> is published by Philip J. Cozans in New York. Hand-colored wood engravings feature a variety of toys (available to affluent children) of the period. Mostly made of wood, wax, tin, and rubber, they included: dolls and dolls’ houses, games, puppets, musical instruments, guns, rocking-horses, soldiers, bows and arrows, blocks, tools, kites, and wagons.
1714	George I re-establishes <b>Christmas pudding</b> as part of the Christmas feast.	1857	John Pierpont writes <b>Jingle Bells</b> , intending it to be a Thanksgiving song.
1767	A wooden <b>Cup and Ball Toy</b> is commercially advertised in the New York Journal.	1863-1886	<b>Harper’s Weekly</b> runs a series of engravings by Thomas Nast. From these images come the concepts of Santa’s workshop, Santa reading letters, Santa checking his list and so on.
1795	Isaac Weld, Jr. writes in his travelogue about being served <b>egg-nog</b> by his American and Canadian hosts.	1867	Macy’s begins the practice of remaining open until midnight on Christmas Eve for last minute <b>Christmas shopping</b> .
1812	“Hansel and Gretel,” a well-known fairy tale of German origin is recorded and published by the Brothers Grimm. This popularized the <b>gingerbread house</b> , which soon became a favorite Christmas decoration.	1870	Christmas is formally declared a <b>United States Federal holiday</b> and signed into law by President Ulysses S. Grant.
1819-1820	<i>The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent</i> is a collection of 34 essays and short stories by American author <b>Washington Irving</b> , published serially throughout 1819 and 1820. The two best-known stories were "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle", but many of the others described English traditions around Christmas. Those stories directly contributed to an American revival of Christmas celebration.	1874	The first window displays with a Christmas theme at <b>Macy’s</b> .
1822	Clement Moore is credited with having penned <i>A Visit from St. Nicolas</i> , better known as <b>The Night Before Christmas</b> for the enjoyment of his family and friends.	1876	Abram C. Mott & Hermann Albrecht patent the <b>Christmas tree stand</b> (in the United States).
1828	Joel Roberts Poinsett, the first Mexican ambassador from the United States, imports “ <b>poinsettia</b> ” plants from Mexico.	1878	Johannes C. Eckardt patents a spring-wound, revolving, musical <b>Christmas tree stand</b> .
1841	Prince Albert has a <b>Christmas tree</b> set up in Windsor Castle for his wife, Queen Victoria, and their children.	1879	French <b>snow globes</b> are a fashionable gift throughout Europe.
1843	Charles John Huffman Dickens (b. 1812) writes <b>A Christmas Carol</b> .	1880	Woolworth’s sells the first manufactured <b>Christmas Tree ornaments</b> .
1843	The tradition of mailing printed <b>Christmas cards</b> starts in London.	1882	An American telephonist invents the <b>electric Christmas lights</b> .
1846	Mailing of printed <b>Christmas cards</b> becomes popular in America.	1892	Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) writes <b>The Nutcracker</b> , which is first performed on March 19 <sup>th</sup> , in St. Petersburg.
1847	A German-Swedish immigrant named August Imgard of Wooster, Ohio, is credited with being the first to decorate a Christmas tree with <b>candy canes</b> .	1892	<i>The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle</i> , was the seventh <b>Sherlock Holmes</b> story by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to appear in <i>The Strand</i> . In it, Sherlock Holmes puzzled out how a certain Christmas goose had come to swallow a purloined gem.



1897	Francis P. Church, an editor for the New York Sun, replies to a letter sent in by eight-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon. The famous line, " <b>Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus</b> " appears at the beginning of the second paragraph.	1931-1964	<b>Coca-cola</b> runs a set of paintings by Haddon Sundblom in its ads, which further the modern Santa Claus image.
1899	Alfred Wagner patents a <b>motorized Christmas tree stand</b> with a base for water.	1934	Dickens' <i>A Christmas Carol</i> appears on CBS with <b>Lionel Barrymore</b> as the covetous, grasping old sinner, under the sponsorship of the Nash-Kelvinator Company. The tradition would endure in various formats for the next twenty years.
1901	Joshua <b>Lionel</b> Cowen invents an electric motor small enough to use in model train engines.	1937	The first <b>Christmas commemorative postage stamps</b> in the world were issued by Austria. Only a handful of other countries followed suit, sporadically, until the early 1960's. (The first Christmas stamps issued by the US Postal Service didn't appear until 1962.)
1902	A Clifford Berryman political cartoon about President Roosevelt is said to propel the <b>teddy bear</b> into a national obsession.	1938	<i>Hercule Poirot's Christmas</i> was a locked room mystery by <b>Agatha Christie</b> . It was published in the U.K. in 1938 and retailed at seven shillings and sixpence (7/6). In the U.S. it was sold under the title of <i>Murder for Christmas</i> (and later as <i>A Holiday for Murder</i> ) for \$2 (1939).
1904	The world's first <b>Christmas Seal</b> (non-postage stamp) was issued in Denmark. It bore the likeness of the Danish Queen (Louise of Hesse-Kassel) and the word "Julen" (Christmas). Over 4 million were sold in the first year at DKK 0.02 per seal, with the proceeds going to fight tuberculosis, a greatly feared disease at the time that seemed particularly cruel for its harmful effects on children.	1939	Santas at Montgomery Ward stores give away 2.4 million copies of a booklet entitled <b>Rudolf the Red-Nose Reindeer</b> .
1907	The extravagant <b>Newport Beach Christmas Boat Parade</b> with its \$50,000 holiday light jobs can be traced back to a very informal cruise across the bay offered by an Italian gondolier, John Scarpa, who decorated his gondola with Japanese lanterns. That "random act of incandescence" turned official in 1913, calling itself "The Illuminated Water Parade." Today, tens of thousands of people view the spectacularly decorated yachts each night along the 14-mile route.	1942	Irving Berlin writes ( <i>I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas</i> , for the Bing Crosby movie "Holiday Inn."
1920-1942	<i>The Father Christmas Letters</i> are a collection of letters written and illustrated by <b>J. R. R. Tolkien</b> between 1920 and 1942 for his children, from Father Christmas. They were subsequently released posthumously by the Tolkien estate and edited by Baillie Tolkien. Elements of these stories apparently inspired parts of <i>Lord of the Rings</i> .	1946	Gene Autry and Oakley Haldeman write <b>Here Comes Santa Claus</b> . Autry came up with the idea for the song while riding his horse, Champion, in the "Santa Claus Lane Parade" (now known as the <b>Hollywood Christmas Parade</b> ). He was inspired by all of the children yelling, "Here comes Santa Claus, here comes Santa Claus."
1923	Calvin Coolidge ceremoniously lights the first outdoor tree at the <b>White House</b> .	1947	The US Marine Corp Reserve's <b>Toys for Tots</b> program began with one hand crafted Raggedy Ann doll made by Diane Hendricks. She asked her husband, Major Bill Hendricks, USMCR, to deliver the doll to an organization in Los Angeles, which would give it to a needy child at Christmas. When he determined that no such agency existed, she told him to start one. 257 million toys later, the program is still going strong.
1928	The very first <b>Hollywood Christmas Parade</b> consisted of only one actress, Jeanette Loff, sitting beside Santa Claus. The Hollywood Chamber of Commerce used live reindeer to pull the sleigh down Hollywood Boulevard in order to attract shoppers. They dubbed it the "Santa Claus Lane Parade." Starting in 1931, a powered float with model reindeer pulled Santa's carriage while a machine made artificial snow.	1949	<b>Gene Autry</b> first sings a musical version of "Rudolf the Red-Nose Reindeer."
		1950s	Gregory Keller, a Catholic priest, invents a machine to automate <b>candy cane production</b> .
		1950	Steve Nelson and Jack Rollins write and compose " <b>Frosty the Snowman</b> ."
		1953	Dylan Thomas dies shortly after recording for radio broadcast his poetic recollection of <b>A Child's Christmas in Wales</b> .

1956	The writings of Truman Capote (1924-1984) include <b>A Christmas Memory</b> , a short story of childhood reflections that was adapted for television.	1994	<b>Mariah Carey</b> drops <b>All I Want for Christmas Is You</b> (Columbia) which becomes the highest grossing holiday single of all time (certified 8x Multi-Platinum as of 2020).
1957	Dr. Seuss (Theodor Geisel), writes <b>How The Grinch Stole Christmas!</b>	2000	The first Christmas celebration on the <b>International Space Station</b> occurred one month after Expedition One established a permanent presence there on November 2, 2000.
1961	Jacqueline Kennedy establishes an annual tradition whereby the <b>First Lady sets a theme for the White House decorations</b> for Christmas. The theme that year was Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite ballet.	2000	Disneyland, in sunny Southern California, manages to make it <b>snow on Main Street</b> nightly, after the fireworks.
1965	<b>A Charlie Brown Christmas</b> , a beloved TV special inspired by Charles Schulz's Peanuts comic strip was first rejected by CBS executives. When it finally aired on December 9, 1965, almost half of all U.S. TV sets were tuned to the broadcast, and the show went on to win an Emmy and a Peabody  "I never thought it was such a bad little tree," Linus says in the special. "It's not bad at all, really. Maybe it just needs a little love."	2001	The first known <b>Ugly Christmas Sweater</b> themed party took place in Vancouver, Canada.
1968	<b>Apollo 8</b> , the first manned mission to the Moon, entered lunar orbit on Christmas Eve, December 24, 1968. That evening, the astronauts; Commander Frank Borman, Command Module Pilot Jim Lovell, and Lunar Module Pilot William Anders did a live television broadcast from lunar orbit. They showed pictures of the Earth and Moon and Lovell said, "The vast loneliness is awe-inspiring and it makes you realize just what you have back there on Earth." They ended the broadcast by reading from the book of Genesis.	2003	" <b>Elf</b> " directed by Jon Favreau, starring Will Ferrell, James Caan, Zooey Deschanel and Mary Steenburgen, earned \$220.4 million worldwide on a \$33 million budget. It spawned a Broadway musical (2010) and a stop-motion animated television special (2014).
1989	<b>National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation</b> (Warner Bros) was written by John Hughes, based on his short story in National Lampoon magazine, "Christmas '59." It is considered a modern Christmas classic, despite mixed reviews from critics. Oddly, the film was released in UK cinemas in the middle of the summer in 1990.	2005	The <b>Elf on the Shelf</b> makes its first appearance. Each toy comes with a copy of <i>Elf on the Shelf: A Christmas Tradition</i> by Carol Aebersold and her daughter, Chanda Bell.
1990	With a U.S. box office take of \$285.76 million (\$476.68 million worldwide), <b>Home Alone</b> becomes the highest-grossing live action comedy film of all time in the US. It proved so popular that it stayed in theaters well past the Christmas season and was the number one film at the box office for 12 straight weeks.	2012	Michelle Obama picks "Joy to All" as the <b>White House theme</b> .
1993	Tim Burton's <b>The Nightmare Before Christmas</b> (Disney) was the first stop-motion animated feature to be entirely converted to 3D.	2013	The world's first <b>robotic astronaut</b> , Kirobo, part of a Japanese experiment to develop a companion for isolated people, has been interacting with crew members onboard the International Space Station. Astronaut commander Kiochi Wakata, asked the robot about Christmas presents. It replied, "Santa Claus will come to space. I want a toy rocket... let's ask Santa Claus."
		2013	Michelle Obama picks "Gather Around" as the <b>White House theme</b> .
		2013	Disney's 53rd animated feature film, <b>Frozen</b> was inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's 1844 fairy tale <i>The Snow Queen</i> . From the soundtrack, <i>Do You Want to Build a Snowman?</i> is the second all-time best-selling holiday single.
		2013	<b>The Great Christmas Light Fight</b> , a reality competition television show, premiered on December 9, 2013 on ABC. 2020 marks its eighth season so far.

