

A Santa Claus Is A Kris Kringle Is A Saint Nick



By MOLLY JUDGE

Perhaps the most beloved of all mythical figures is the jolly, fat man who ventures from his workshop in the North Pole on Christmas Eve to deliver gifts and fill the stockings of good little girls and boys.

With the help of Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donder, Blitzen and on foggy nights, Rudolph, he manages to arrive on every roof top in America, slide down the chimney and place the presents that he carries in his knapsack under the Christmas tree. And with a little magic and luck, he is able to slip away on the sleigh drawn by the flying reindeer before the dawn of Christmas morning.

St. Nicholas, Santa Claus or Kris Kringle is the embodiment of the spirit of giving and generosity of Christmas. He rewards good children and puts coal in the bad, nasty children's stockings. Christmas has come to rely on him as a necessary symbol of the season, the time when people celebrate the birth of Christ by sharing with others.

Santa Claus is an intrinsic part of the Christmas tradition in this country. The tradition began in the fourth century on Dec. 6 with the birth of St. Nicholas and is still changing with every poem, book, song or myth that adds more data to Santa's character.

Santa is actually St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra. Little is known about this generous saint and many of his deeds are surrounded in legend. He became a bishop shortly after his long pilgrimage to Egypt and Palestine from his birthplace at Parara, a city of Lycia in Asia Minor. During the persecution of Diocletian, he was thrown into prison, later to be released by Constantine the

Great. It is said that he attended the Council of Nicaea in 325, although no written record of his appearance is documented. After his death around 350 A.D., his relics were sent to the church of San Nicola in Bari where they are preserved and valued for their medicinal powers.

Legend has it that St. Nicholas performed a daring rescue of three plump boys from the clutches of a homicidal innkeeper who had planned to make a mincemeat pie out of them. He also saved three women from the chains of slavery by giving their once wealthy father three bags of gold. Thus the man decided not to sell his daughters and instead married them off to three aristocratic men. Sailors of the Middle Ages made the saint their patron because he was credited with calming the Mediterranean Sea during a severe storm which enabled distraught seamen to land safely on shore.

The saint became the patron of children, merchants, bakers and travelers as well.

Because of his reputation for generosity the eve of his birthday became a time to give small presents, candy and fruit to children. But the Reformation decreased St. Nicholas' popularity. He became secularized as Father Christmas in England and Pere Noel in France although the Netherlands held on to the religious connotations by continuing to worship him as a saint.

The Dutch carried this faith in St. Nicholas to the new world. His figure was carved on their first ship to this country and their first church in Nieuw Amsterdam was named after him.

The children of the Dutch settlers would always place their shoes near the chimney filled with straw and an apple on the

eve of Dec. 6. They would go to bed awaiting the arrival of the Bishop of Myra clothed in the traditional bishoply garb with miter, crozier and a long white beard flowing from his thin chin. He was pictured riding a white donkey who was fond of straw and accompanied by Swarte Piet or Black Pete, his servant and a passionate apple lover. The Saint would then fill the shoes of good children who studied their catechism with gifts, candy and fruit.

When the English gained control of the land naming it New York, they blended the Dutch traditions with their own Father Christmas. The English children paid tribute to Christ by having the spirit of the good-hearted saint appear on Christmas Eve as did the three wise men. This English version of the saint lost his bishoply clothes and became dressed in red and white, the color of vestments. Because of pronunciation difficulties, Sainot Nikolaas or Sinterkalkas developed into the words, Santa Claus.

Washington Irving helped change the custom by stating that the aged bishop flew through the air and dropped gifts down chimneys. Nevertheless, Santa remained in the background. It wasn't until 1823, that the tradition achieved eminence through the efforts of Dr. Clement Clarke Moore. In Dr. Moore's celebrated poem, "Twas the Night Before Christmas," Santa is described as the jolly saint who flies through the air on a sleigh drawn by eight magical reindeer. He brings presents into houses via the chimney and occasionally will feast on milk and cookies, courtesy of a thoughtful child.

It was to this tradition that the German settlers of Pennsylvania's Christmas celebration of the Christ Child was incorporated.

Good German children would anxiously await the coming of the Christ Child or Christkindl who brought them tiny gifts along with candy and fruit on Christmas Eve. Christkindl would ride a white mule and sneak into their homes through the keyhole in the front door. The American dialect soon changed the pronunciation of Christkindl to Kris Kringle and

the Christ Child took on the characteristics of St. Nick.

Regardless of the uncertainty surrounding his arrival, Santa Claus or St. Nicholas, or, if you prefer, Kris Kringle has a rough job ahead of him. How many right, jolly, old elves do you know that can visit millions of American homes in one evening?



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ALL IN THE FAMILY



Sarah Child

I was thinking about writing this Christmas column on my way home from the supermarket. Trying to think of some way to convey the special quality of the season I thought of other columns I'd written.

The one which came most readily to mind was one I'd done about the Christmas spirit — how sometimes it does not catch up with people until some event or happening triggers it.

For some just entering the month of December is enough. Others require Christmas music, the hustle and bustle of shopping, heavy snowfall, the fragrance of cookies baking, putting up the tree, the richness of the Christmas liturgy and vestments, the gathering of family, the opening of gifts.

The Christmas spirit? Is it really that elusive, I wondered, that it requires all those physical accoutrements?

Just then I passed a pick-up truck parked at the four corners of our small village proper. Two

young laborers, one black, one white were getting out probably headed for a lunchtime beer.

They were laughing together obviously enjoying each other's company. "Take that, you rabble rousers in Boston," I thought as the warmth that comes from seeing something good happen spread over me.

And then it dawned on me — again. That was what the Christmas spirit is all about. Something good happening.

The trappings, the trimmings, the one day we celebrate Christ's birthday. Of course they are important. But Christmas really, doesn't come but once a year. It happens every day. Sometimes we overlook it or look right past it. But it is always there, manifesting itself every time an act of kindness, an act of warmth, an act of friendship takes place.

I have known Christmas a hundred times these past few months. Everytime someone has reached out and I have reached back — or vice versa — it has been Christmas.

Christmas is not sending out 200 cards, topping the evergreen with an angel or a star or sharing drink and food with friends. These are but expressions of our caring. And it is that caring which goes on and on and on that is Christmas.

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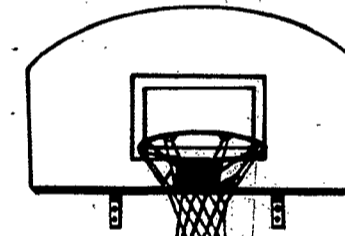
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