

Celebrating Christ's Nativity with

Multiple cultures form mosaic of Christmas feast

By Kelle Lunney
Guest contributor

Christmas has the unique distinction of being the holiday that all countries claim as their own. It can be compared to a mosaic in that various cultures, faiths, and traditions have contributed to its creation and its celebration.

Christmas also forms a remarkable bond between people that does not exist at any other time of the year. Happiness, goodwill, and gaiety prevails and there is a certain *joie de vivre* in the atmosphere. Contrary to popular belief, very few of the customs associated with Christmas have their origin in the church with the exception of the Nativity scene.

Instead, Christmas is the product of several Old World traditions stemming from nations that include: France, Germany, England, and Ireland. In short, Christmas is a universal holiday that holds worldwide appeal and which inspires a sense of unity.

Trees and the ever-present mistletoe play a major role in the yuletide festivities. The use of trees, especially evergreens, began in Germany where they were a symbol of great reverence. Christmas trees first appeared in the New World

during the Revolutionary War and gained popularity as a result of the influx of German immigrants.

The Druids bequeathed to the world the custom of decorating houses with mistletoe. These Celtic priests believed the plant to be a sign of peace. When two enemies met under this flower they would drop their weapons and embrace in friendship. The present practice of kissing under the mistletoe is thought to have evolved from this ritual.

Music is another essential part of the holiday spirit. Some of the most beautiful carols have been imported from France and England. "The First Noel," "Bring a Torch, Jeannette, Isabella," and "Oh, Holy Night" are just a few of the French hymns popular today. The English songs "Good King Wenceslas," "The Coventry Carol," and "The Holly and the Ivy" are favorites as well.

The ringing of the bells all over the world is also a part of the Christmas tradition. Cathedral chimes and church bells are heard clearly at midnight, but the most eagerly awaited sounds are the merry sleigh bells of Father Christmas, better known as Santa Claus.

Gifts, sumptuous feasts, and various Christmas Eve preparations are perhaps the most

thrilling of all. Just as zealous children in the United States gingerly hang their stockings, French children place their shoes near the fireplace on the eve of Christmas in hopes that Pere Noel will fill them with sweets.

On the night before Christmas in Ireland, it is the duty of the youngest child in the household, or a daughter named Mary, to light a candle in the front window. The Irish are great storytellers and on Christmas Eve the oldest member of the family gathers everyone around the hearth and recounts the story of Mary and Joseph. The candles are said to light the way for Mary and Joseph who wander forever on Christmas Eve.

Although the previously stated material both enhances and enriches the spirit of Christmas, it does not dominate it. The Christmas holiday is the celebration of the coming of the Christ child but it is also a time for togetherness and awareness of others. It is true that Christmas has become extremely commercial and ostentatious, but if we peer beneath the surface we will rediscover our roots and heritage and the true meaning of Christmas.

Kelle is an 11th-grader at Elmira Notre Dame High School.

Various nations add to Yuletide customs

By Shawn Nichalek
Guest contributor

During the Christmas season there are many traditions that we get from other countries that we do not often think of—traditions such as decorating Christmas trees, exchanging gifts or even sending cards.

Ancient pre-Christian winter festivals used trees decorated with lights to symbolize life and warmth during the cold months of winter.

Gift giving is one of the oldest customs associated with Christmas but it was actually part of a pagan Roman holiday that became part of Christmas when it was decided that Christmas would be in December. The reason for Christmas to be set in December was to compete with the pagan festival.

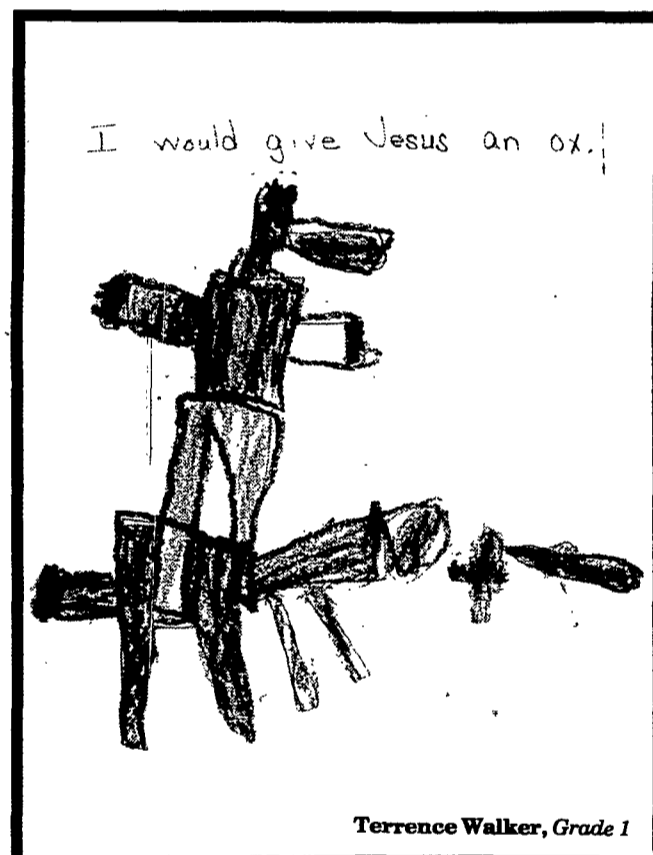
The first Christmas card was made in England in 1843 by an artist named John Horsley. The practice soon became popular in all English speaking countries and is most wide-spread in the United States.

Manger scenes are a custom that is said to have been started by St. Francis of Assisi. On Christmas Eve of 1224 he was supposedly to have set up a stable in a corner of a church in his native village. The scene had real people and animals to represent those of the first Christmas.

As you can see many customs have been handed down that we still practice for Christmas.

Shawn is an eighth-grader at St. John the Evangelist School in Greece.

Illustrations drawn by students from St. Monica's school in Rochester.



Gifts of love and goodness will help make God proud

By Laurie Race
Guest contributor

If I were one of the kings that visited Baby Jesus and I had to give Him a gift, I would give Him the gift of my love. I would be as good as I can be to others and make Jesus proud of me. I know it's hard and sometimes I don't do what God wants me to do, but I still try very hard.

Laurie is a fourth-grader at Blessed Trinity School in Auburn.

Mexican-Americans share in Joseph and Mary's trek

By Jason Yee
Guest contributor

Mexican-Americans celebrate Christmas a different way than most of us. They have nine days they celebrate before Christmas. These are called posadas which means lodgings.

In these nine days Mexican-Americans reenact how Mary and Joseph went around trying to find a place to stay. Mexican-Americans try to find a place to stay but are turned down. Finally they find a place to stay. After this everybody has a big feast and celebrates the occasion.

Children try to break a piñata which is a small, brightly colored animal made of paper or clay, containing candy. Once the piñata breaks, all the children collect all the candy they can get.

This is how Mexican-Americans celebrate their Christmas. This tradition enriches the world and gives it more variety.

Jason is an eighth-grader at St. John's in Greece.



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