

Christmas Trivia

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History of Christmas

What Christian group banned Christmas in Boston from 1659 to 1681?

The Puritans

Even though the ban on Christmas was lifted in 1681, Christmas didn't become popular in Boston until the mid-19th century. Puritans also suppressed Christmas in England as well, during the Interregnum.

Before becoming tied up with Christmas what was Yule?

A pagan midwinter festival

It was celebrated by Germanic peoples and was connected to Norse mythology. With Odin being the Yule Father and leading the Wild Hunt across the sky. Yuletide is about two months and falls roughly mid-November to early January. In the middle of Yuletide is Yule.

As a fun side note, jolly most likely has its origins in Yule.

The French word "Noel" is often used around Christmas, but what was its original meaning in Latin?

Birth

You can definitely see why Noel became so synonymous with Christmas.

What Roman holiday held from December 17th to the 23rd had a large influence on how Christmas was celebrated?

Saturnalia

Saturnalia was one of the most popular holidays in the Roman calendar. It of course involved lots of feasts and drinking and merry making because, you know, they're Roman. But it also involved role reversals where slaves were allowed to be rude to their owners and by some accounts were waited on by their owners. Also, similarly to our modern Christmas, there was lots of gift giving. Especially on December 19th, Sigillaria.

Even though the timing is similar, it isn't believed that December 25th was chosen as the date for Christmas because of Saturnalia. Some people believe that the origin for the date for Christmas was the Roman feast day Sol Invictus which was also on December 25th. And others insist that the date of conception was the basis for choosing December 25th. But really what it all boils down to is that there is a lot of controversy on how December 25th was chosen as the date.

Among Christians who lived in the East, when was Christmas originally celebrated?

January 6th

In the West, Christmas was always celebrated on December 25th. Now, except for a select few, like the Armenians, almost everyone who celebrates Christmas does so on December 25th.

In what century was the first written use of Xmas?

The 16th century

The "X" in Xmas comes from the Greek letter Chi which looks like an "X". The letter "X" has long been used as an abbreviation for Christ since the Greek word for Christ begins with what looks like an "X". Christ was often written with the letters Chi (X) Rho (p) which looks like Xp.

Santa Claus

The modern Santa Claus is mainly a mix of what two figures?

Saint Nicholas (Sinterklaas in dutch) and Father Christmas, also if you said Odin I'd accept that too

St. Nicholas was a Greek bishop who lived in the 4th century and was famous for his generosity and gift giving. Sinterklaas (Dutch for St. Nicholas) gives gifts on December 5th and is based on St. Nicholas. Father Christmas dates back to at least the 16th century and is the personification of Christmas cheer and is widely considered synonymous with the modern Santa Claus.

And for good measure, there might be some Odin thrown in, especially with the tradition of Santa's long beard. And there is Santa's nightly ride, which is pretty similar to Odin's Wild Hunt. But while it doesn't take much of a leap to make comparisons between Odin and Santa, there's not a lot of direct evidence linking them.

There are lots of other gift giving figures around Europe and elsewhere but as far as I can tell Father Christmas and Saint Nicholas are the main influences behind Santa Claus as we know him today.

What political cartoonist is largely responsible for defining what the modern Santa Claus looks like?

Thomas Nast

Thomas Nast drew a picture of Santa Claus for the January 1, 1881 issue of Harper's Weekly and the rest of the media ran with it. It became the visual prototype of the Santa Claus we all know and love. He also drew an earlier version of Santa Claus in the January 3, 1863 issue of Harper's Weekly but it doesn't resemble the modern Santa as much as his 1881 drawing.

What was the poem "Twas the Night Before Christmas" originally titled?

A Visit from St. Nicholas

It was anonymously published in 1823. It has been attributed to, and claimed by, Clement Clarke Moore but there is some controversy as to whether he actually wrote it.

In what decade did Coca-Cola start using Santa Claus in advertisements?

1920's

There's a myth that Coca-Cola invented the modern Santa Claus and his red and white suit. But there are numerous examples of a Santa Claus as we know him with his red and white suit well before Coca-Cola started their advertising campaign. That being said, their advertising definitely helped to cement the image of the modern Santa Claus in the minds of consumers.

What entrepreneur was the first person to dress up as Santa in his department store and started the tradition of department store / mall Santas?

James Edgar

He owned a department store in Brockton, Massachusetts. He first dressed up as Santa in 1890 to the great delight of his patrons, with children coming from miles around to visit him.

Who did the German Nazi Regime replace Santa Claus / St. Nick with?

Odin

Odin was branded as Solstice man. Catchy super hero name right? They also renamed Christmas trees, changed the words to Silent night, and there were even swastika shaped tree lights.

In what decade did NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command, formerly CONAD) start tracking Santa on Christmas Eve?

The 1950's (specifically 1955)

The NORAD Tracks Santa program officially started on December 24th, 1955 and has continued every year since. In 2004 Google started tracking Santa as well.

Christmas Songs

In the song *Twelve Days of Christmas*, what is given on the 7th day?

Swans a-swimming

There is actually a lot of variation of the lyrics over the years. Some of my favorites include: 11 badgers baiting, 10 asses racing, and 9 bears a beating. Also “calling birds” was originally “colly birds”, with “colly” meaning black.

In what country did *Silent Night* originate?

Austria

It’s original German title was Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht. The lyrics were written by Joseph Mohr in 1816 and the music was composed by Franz Xaver Gruber 1818.

As a heartwarming Christmas miracle, it was sang during the impromptu WWI Christmas truce. Because it was a carol popular in both English speaking and German speaking countries, it was known by both sides. It was sung simultaneously in English and German by the troops.

What was the original title for *The Little Drummer Boy*?

Carol of the Drum

It was written and composed in 1941 by Katherine Kennicott Davis and was popularized by the Trapp Family Singers and the Harry Simeone Chorale.

How were the writer of the story *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* and the writer of the song *Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer* related?

They were brothers-in-law

John D. Marks, the writer of the song Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer, was famous for writing other Christmas songs. Surprisingly he was also Jewish. He wrote Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree, A Holly Jolly Christmas, Silver and Gold, as well as others.

What popular holiday song was written during the Cuban missile crisis and was a plea for peace?

Do You Hear What I Hear?

Gloria Shayne Baker composed the music, and the lyrics were written by her then husband Noel Regney. This was a switch from their normal routine of her writing the lyrics and him writing the music.

What jaunty Christmas carol written in 1739 was supposed to be accompanied by slow and somber music?

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Charles Wesley who wrote the original carol expected the carol to be sung with slow and somber music. And it was. Until 1855, when William H. Cummings adapted music that Felix Mendelssohn had composed in 1840 to fit Hark! The Herald Angels Sing. Mendelssohn's music was originally written to commemorate the invention of the printing press.

What was the original title for the popular Christmas song Silver Bells, written by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans?

Tinkle Bells

The song was changed after Jay's wife pointed out that tinkle could also mean peeing.

Christmas decorations

In what country did the custom of putting up a Christmas tree originate?

Germany

From Germany in the 18th century (possibly 16th century) it spread to Britain and from there to America and elsewhere around the world.

What animal parts were the first artificial Christmas trees made from?

Goose feathers painted green

These feather trees were first made in Germany during the 19th century. Another form of artificial Christmas trees were wooden pyramids painted green and lit by candles.

What was the first year that the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree was put up?

1933

Which was the year that 30 Rockefeller Plaza opened. There is a story of workers putting up a tree on Christmas Eve in 1931 during the construction of the Rockefeller Center that began the tradition. But there was no tree in 1932 and the tree in 1933 was the first official Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree.

What plant based Christmas tradition did servants in Victorian England popularize?

Kissing under the mistletoe

Mistletoe was an important part of Celtic and Norse religion and became intertwined with Christmas, but no one knows exactly how the tradition of kissing started. Mistletoe did have an association with fertility among druids, which is one possible origin but no one knows for sure. But what we do know is that the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe spread from the servants of Victorian households to the upper classes of Victorian society.

Who created the first electric light Christmas display?

Thomas Edison

In 1880 he put up the first Christmas display made from electric lights to advertise his light bulbs. A few years later an inventor named Edward Johnson, a colleague of Thomas Edison, created the first string of Christmas lights.

What northeastern US state holds the Guinness record for largest snowman?

Maine

Specifically, the town of Bethel, Maine. They built the tallest snowman, actually a snowwoman, named Olympia. She is 122ft 1in tall, or 37.21 meters. The record was set in 2008.

How tall, plus or minus 25 feet, was the tallest cut Christmas tree?

221ft

It was a Douglas fir and was put up in 1950 at the Northgate Shopping Center in Seattle, Washington.

The record for largest artificial tree was 55 meters (180.4ft) and was erected in China by the Chinese company GZ ThinkBig Culture Communication Co.,Ltd.

What country is the Poinsettia, with its red and green foliage, native to?

Mexico

It derives its English name from Joel Roberts Poinsett, the first US minister to Mexico. He introduced the plant to the US in 1825.

What old Christmas tradition signals to people passing by that the residents of a house are Christian?

Putting candles in the window

It was not only a way for residents to show their faith but also an invitation for other Christians to join them in celebration.

General Christmas Trivia

What day is a close second and sometimes surpasses Black Friday for busiest brick and mortar shopping day of the year?

The last Saturday before Christmas (a.k.a Super Saturday)

Black Friday has traditionally been the biggest shopping day of the year in the USA, but it seems like it has a contender in the Saturday before Christmas.

What large former retail outlet commissioned and published Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer?

Montgomery Ward

They ordered a new Christmas book be made so that they could hand them out for free to customers, which would be cheaper than buying and giving away coloring books for Christmas as they had done in the past. They gave the task to Robert L. May who wrote Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer in 1939. In a surprisingly generous gesture, Montgomery Ward gave May the copyright for Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

The man who voiced the Grinch in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* was most famous for playing what popular Hollywood monster?

Frankenstein's Monster

William Henry Pratt whose stage name was Boris Karloff, voiced the Grinch as well as playing Frankenstein's monster in Frankenstein (1931), Bride of Frankenstein (1935), and Son of Frankenstein (1939) as well as many other horror films.

How many wise men / Magi / kings does the bible say visited the baby Jesus?

It doesn't mention a number.

Okay so this was a bit of a trick question. But it really surprised me. The book of Matthew, the only gospel to mention the wise men / Magi / kings, doesn't say how many there were. It just says that they visited the baby Jesus and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. People just assume that there were three wise men because there were three gifts. But really the author could have been talking about two or seven or fifty wise men / Magi / kings.

Christmas around the world

What is the most popular meal for Christmas in Japan?

KFC fried chicken

It's so popular in fact, that you have to order in advance or face standing in long lines to get your Christmas fried chicken. Some people even start lining up Christmas Eve to make sure they get their Christmas KFC.

In what European country are children given gifts by St. Basil on January 1st instead of Santa on December 25th?

Greece

Children open their gifts on St. Basil's Day which falls on January 1st. They also bake a rich bread called vasilopita and put a coin inside. It's also customary to set an extra place at the table for St. Basil.

What Southeast Asian country boasts the longest holiday season starting with decorations and carols as early as September and celebrations that last sometimes until late January?

The Philippines

While the official holidays last from December 16th to January 9th, people in the Philippines start celebrating with decorations and carols much earlier. Sometimes into early September, and with the celebrations of Santo Nino in the third and fourth Sundays of January, the celebrations can sometimes continue until the end of January.

In what northern European country might you receive gifts from a different Yule Lad each night if you leave your shoes on the window sill the each of the 13 days before Christmas?

Iceland

Of course if you've been bad you might receive a rotten potato. Each Yule Lad specializes in one bad behavior. The English translation of their names are great. There is Sausage-Swiper, Stubby, Window-Peeper, Door-Sniffer and so on. You should really check out the Wikipedia page on Yule Lads, good stuff.

In what European country might you find money under the table cloth when you sit down to eat the traditional Christmas Eve supper Wigilia?

Poland

But first you'll have to abstain from eating all day and then you'll have to wait until someone spots the first star in the sky to sit down to eat. You might also find bits of hay under the table in remembrance of Jesus being born in a manger.

In what Central American country might you find yourself kicking off the holiday season by burning the devil on December 7th while sweeping your house?

Guatemala

People traditionally sweep their houses while the devil burns so that he won't be able to hide in their house. As Christmas draws closer they also celebrate with Advent wreaths and Nativity scenes.

What cartoon character is a Christmas Eve staple in Sweden and is watched by millions of Swedes every year?

Donald Duck

The tradition started in 1959 when the Disney special "From All of Us to All of You" but titled "Donald Duck and his friends wish you a Merry Christmas" in Sweden ran on television. There were very few channels in Sweden at the time so it was watched by many Swedes and ended up becoming a Christmas Eve tradition.

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