



BURT WOLF TASTE OF FREEDOM CHRISTMAS



THE WINTER SOLSTICE

Ancient astronomers believed that the sun traveled around the earth on a giant track. Every day it would move along covering a distance equal to its own width. It took six months to travel from its farthest point in the North to its farthest point in the South. When it got to the end of the track, it would rest for a few days and then head back. The resting points were known as the *solstice* which is a Latin word meaning “the sun stands still.” The winter solstice takes place on December 21st and in the northern hemisphere it marks the shortest and darkest day of the year.

The ancient Romans used December 25th to observe the feast of the Unconquered Sun during which they proclaimed their belief that in spite of the fact that it was the darkest time of the year the sun would return.

At the beginning of the 4th century, Constantine the Great declared Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Often, when a new religion is adopted by a culture, the dates of the new religions holidays remain on or near the dates used by the old religions holidays.

During the middle of the 4th century, Christians took the longest night of the year on December 21st for the feast of the Doubting Thomas and December 25th for the celebration of Christ’s birth.

The idea of the sun being reborn during the darkest of times was an excellent symbol for the new religion—light conquering the powers of darkness. In fact, for many centuries, Christ was called the “Unconquered Sun.” Sometime during the 13th century, St. Francis of Assisi introduced the Christmas crib and within a decade the straw of the manger was being shown as rays of light radiating from the baby Jesus.

Christmas is about remembering your past. The sound of sleigh bells, the smell of pine needles, the taste of gingerbread. The toy trains and doll houses remind us



of a time when we thought we could control the world around us—when all of our dreams might come true. In the northern hemisphere, we celebrate Christmas at the coldest and darkest time of the year when the fields are barren. Accordingly, the central message of Christmas is “no matter how dark and how cold it looks now, light, warmth and growth will return.”

CHRISTMAS TREES

In Catholic communities, St. Nicholas, the Three Kings and the Christ Child were represented in human likeness during the Christmas season. German Protestants felt that human images were inappropriate and during the 1500s they introduced the Christmas tree as a counterbalance. The use of evergreen plants as a symbol for everlasting life has been around for a long time. Ancient societies in Europe and around the Mediterranean often marked the dark days of the winter solstice by decorating their homes with evergreen plants. Catholic countries tended to put stars on the tops of their Christmas trees, Protestants, would top off with Kris Kringle or angels. The Christmas tree tradition was introduced to the United States in December of 1850, when Godey’s Magazine published a picture of Queen Victoria of England and her family standing around a small Christmas tree that was balanced on a table. This image exuded the warmth and beauty of the holiday and was reproduced around the world.

The Queen’s husband, Prince Albert, was German and Christmas trees had been part of the German holiday tradition for hundreds of years. Prince Albert was merely introducing his children to the customs of his own childhood. But anything that happened in the British Royal household was immediately covered by the British press and anything that was in the British press was immediately covered in the United States.



One year later, in 1851, a farmer from the Catskill

Mountains paid a license fee of \$1 to the City of New York and set up the first official sidewalk concessions for the sale of Christmas trees. The greenery of the forest slipped into town and everybody loved it.

The first set of electric Christmas lights went on to the tree of Edward Johnson, who was the Vice President of Thomas Edison's electric company in New York. Electric lights were more economical than candles because they could be reused for years and even more important they were much safer than a candle's open flame.

For the same two reasons, economics and safety, artificial trees became popular. During the 1890s, we began importing artificial trees from Germany that were made of goose feathers. When the First World War cut off the supply from Germany, we began making them here in the United States. Today, Americans use more artificial trees than real ones and some of the manufacturers offer them with the lights already attached to the branches. Just open the box and Christmas pops out.

CHRISTMAS ORNAMENTS

When I think of F.W. Woolworth, which isn't that often, I think of him as the man who made a fortune as the father of the five and dime store. But a big hunk of his wealth came as a Christmas present. In 1880, Woolworth was wandering around the warehouse of an importer in Philadelphia, looking for some cheap toys to put into his store. The importer thought that F.W. might also be interested in a series of glass Christmas tree ornaments that he had just brought in from Germany.

For hundreds of years, the German town of Lauscha had been a glass-blowing center and during the middle of the 1800s, they began manufacturing glass ornaments in the shape of balls and reindeer.

Woolworth thought the importer was out of his mind. The breakage during shipment would be enormous and if any of them got through in one piece, no one would know what to do with them. The importer, however, felt so strongly about the market for these ornaments that he guaranteed their sale. If Woolworth

didn't sell at least \$25 worth he could have the whole shipment for free.

The ornaments came into Woolworth's store just before Christmas and he put them out thinking that he was wasting good retail space. Two days later they were sold out. The next year,

he stocked up with a much larger supply and once again sold out. In the end he made over 25 million dollars selling glass Christmas ornaments from Germany. And when the Second World War came along and interrupted trade with Germany, he taught the Corning Glass Works of Corning, New York how to make the little ornaments and they didn't do badly, either.

Families often have homemade Christmas decorations, some are extremely elaborate and frequently inherited as family heirlooms—each with its own story (who made it, when, how, recollections about it). Ornaments are a way of keeping the family's memory alive.

SANTA CLAUS

For over a hundred years the dominant image of Christmas in the United States has been Santa Claus. But like it is with so many superstars, the general public usually doesn't realize how long the talent had been in the business before he was "discovered." Santa is a perfect example. His early work was as a bishop during the fourth century in Turkey. He was a real person and his name was Nicholas. His thing was to give gifts to kids and dowries to young ladies who wanted to get married. Later he became a minor folk hero in northern Europe, and eventually arrived in New York City with the early Dutch settlers. The name Santa Claus comes from the Dutch for St. Nicholas.

His first significant media exposure came in the 1860s, when Thomas Nast, an important artist of the period, showed him in a series of illustrations for Harper's Weekly. At the time, explorers had undertaken a number of dramatic expeditions to the North Pole and everyone was fascinated with the stories that were coming back. Nast decided that Santa Claus lived at the North Pole and Nast's drawings showed Santa in a sleigh pulled by reindeer with sacks of gifts behind him. It was also Nast who introduced the idea of stockings hung by the chimney with care. Nast got his ideas from a poem by Clement Moore called "A Visit From Santa Claus." And Moore got those ideas from Washington Irving who most of us heard about when Walt Disney used Irving's book as the basis for the Tale of the Headless Horseman and the story of Rip Van Winkle.

In 1931, Santa's agent got him a deal with Coca-Cola and he has appeared in their holiday promotions ever since (and you thought Tiger Woods had a great agent). Santa, in his present form, is an all-American invention. The size of his stomach, his ruddy complexion, his fur-



trimmed suit and his desire to share his *stuff* all speak to the image of America as a nation of abundance. Santa stands there with a brand named product in his hand, openly declaring we are economically the richest nation in the world and proud of it.

And even with product endorsements aside, we always present Santa as an entrepreneur in his own right. He's got a factory filled with workers. He developed an airborne delivery system a century before anyone heard of Federal Express. And he is one of the leading authorities on the "not for profit business." Now, of course, we don't know what his personal compensation package is and what kind of a deal he cut for Mrs. Claus but since there are no stockholders and the toys keep coming; it looks like he's OK.

GIFT GIVING

Originally, Christmas presents were simple gifts for little children. The tree was the holder and they hung from the branches—the gifts, not the children. Usually, there were nuts, candies, and dried fruits that had been placed in homemade containers that were light enough to hang. But as the trees got bigger, the presents got bigger. And when the presents began to get too big to hang on the tree, they started getting placed under and around the tree. In the old days, the present was clearly visible—no wrapping—what you saw was what you got. And most often the presents were handmade.



But things change and one of the great forces for change in the history of American business was the Civil War. Suddenly, the Union army was placing huge orders with manufacturers. Industry had to learn how to mass produce what was needed. Instead of getting a suit cut to the precise size of your body, you got a 52 regular and hoped it did the job. We even learned to mass produce our Christmas presents.

And that led to the gift wrapping business. During the transition from making Christmas gifts yourself to buying something mass produced there was a period marked by a sense of guilt because you didn't make the gift yourself. That guilt was reduced by personally doing the wrapping. It said, "OK, I didn't make the doll for you, all right! But look at the great job I did on the wrapping."

It was during the 1860s that the first wrapped gifts showed up. The paper was always plain and held in place with sealing wax or pins and later with string and tinsel cord. By the middle of the 1870s, everybody was

wrapping. But fancy wrapping paper only arrived during the First World War.

Joyce Hall had a little shop in Kansas City, Missouri. One day he ran out of solid color tissue and filled in with some French envelope lining paper that he used in his greeting card business. He sold out. So next year he bought more of the envelope lining paper. And he sold out again. He got the point and started printing his own colorful wrapping paper. He also thought it should have a brand name so he called it Hallmark.

Some historians believe that the idea of wrapping a present is part of the Victorian passion for enclosing things, for disguising anything that appears to be intimate and for holding off anticipated pleasure. I'm not sure I agree with any of that. As a matter of fact, I'm not sure I even understand what they are talking about. But it's always fun to pick on Victorian habits. And for whatever reason you would like to accept, these days 96 percent of all Christmas presents given in the United States are wrapped.

CHRISTMAS THROUGH A WINDOW

The unofficial beginning of Christmas is the unveiling of the holiday displays in department store windows. Every year they try to outdo the windows of the past year. The tradition got started at Lord & Taylor in 1938. They were the first department store to devote prime retail space to the celebration of the Christmas season rather than their merchandise.



THE YULE LOG

Like many of our Christmas customs, the burning of a Yule log goes back to northern Europe during the 12th and 13th centuries. At the time, communities near the Arctic Circle would set monumental bonfires to remind the sun to return. They would save the biggest log for the fire that was going to be set on the longest night of the year. In order to connect the old with the new, a part of this year's Yule log is saved to kindle the fire for next year's winter solstice.

CAROLING

The word "carol" comes from an ancient Greek word that means to sing and dance in a ring. But dancing was deeply opposed by the medieval Christian Church, in part because dancing the *carole* required a large, flat, and convenient piece of ground—like a church yard. And since the singing of carols was not originally limited

to Christmas but also included New Year's, Easter, planting times, harvest times and dozens of saints days, the monks never knew when their courtyard would be filled with less than talented singers.



The first carol is considered to have been sung by the angels who announced the birth of Christ to the shepherds of Bethlehem. During the 12th century, St. Francis of Assisi formally introduced Christmas carols into church services. On Christmas Eve, St. Francis had a group of his monks sing songs in honor of Jesus' birth. St. Francis was definitely into Christmas. He also started Nativity Plays and instead of having them performed in Latin, which would have been standard for the time, he had them sung in languages that the common people would understand. The new carols soon spread throughout Europe.

During the 14th century, lighter, more joyous Christmas songs came into fashion and groups of town criers began walking through the streets singing the songs in exchange for food or gifts.

When a book of British carols was published in 1822, there was a widespread revival of interest in the form. The Victorians, who had a great interest in parlor singing, began to use this cheerful and easily sung music in their Christmas celebrations. And by the early 1900s the old custom of singing in the streets had once again taken hold in Christian communities throughout the world. Surprisingly, one of the most famous carols "Joy to the World" was written in Virginia by Isaac Watts in the 1760s.

ADVENT

There are two important periods of abstinence in the Christian year. The most significant is Lent, which takes place during the six weeks before Easter. The second is Advent, which occurs during the four weeks before Christmas. The world was once thought to have lasted four thousand years from creation to the birth of Christ. It is the period covered in the Old Testament and the four weeks of Advent symbolize that time. One idea behind both Lent and Advent is anticipation: getting ready for a great feast by not feasting. Any feast stands out more if you've been holding back before it arrives. The word advent means "coming", and the time is marked by a sense of expectation. Today, Advent calendars are found all over the Christian world, but the custom began in Germany. The Advent calendar



has a miniature door for each day from the first day of Advent until Christmas. Each day, one of the doors is opened and inside is a picture or a saying or a little present.

In some houses you will see a "Star of Seven", a seven-branched candlestick inherited from Jewish tradition. The candles are lit every evening during Advent, and eventually carried to the midnight service on Christmas Eve. This custom was one of the rituals that led to lights on the Christmas tree.

CHRISTMAS EVE

Luke's Gospel says that Christ's birth took place at night and the Midnight Mass that takes place on Christmas Eve is a once-a-year phenomenon. The church has been decorated and is meant to awe the people arriving and seeing it for the first time. The effect is similar to what you feel when you see an enormous Christmas tree for the first time. Each church will have its own Christmas Crib which usually stands in the church throughout Advent, but the Christ Child is only placed in the scene on Christmas Eve. Children are taken up before the Mass to see the Crib and, of course, being up at midnight marks the evening as very special.



THE FOODS OF CHRISTMAS

One of the most important rules in any festival is that the festival itself and most of the objects within it must be temporary. A festival, by definition, is something out of the ordinary, different from everyday life. If it stays around too long it loses its impact. For that reason, food and anything made of edible materials is always a mainstay at a festival.



In many cultures the pre-Christmas meal is rather simple. The main dish is often fish. To receive a portion of fish roe is considered a sign of good luck—a common belief holds that a lot of little eggs mean a lot of good fortune. Vegetable dishes often include beets and cabbage—red and green are always the colors of Christmas and Christmas foods. Red is for warmth and brightness; green is the promise that the leaves of the trees will return in the spring.

Apples are hung on the tree and represent the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. They are bright and shiny and attractive. People learned to preserve apples through the long winter months—which serves as a symbol of the human intelligence and resourcefulness that is necessary for survival during dark times.

Christmas is also a time for bread and cake baking and cookie making. Special Christmas breads are introduced like the German *Christstollen*, filled with nuts, raisins, lemon peel and other dried fruits. It is almost a German version of the English Christmas pudding. And there are dozens of different baked sweet cakes and cookies made with marzipan, anise, almonds, hazelnuts and chocolate. Nuts are always part of Christmas—they represent the puzzle of life. You must open them up to find your destiny.



Traditional European bakers use large amounts of pepper and strong spices in their Christmas recipes. The custom goes back to the time of the ancient Romans and the birth of Christ. *Pfefferkuchen* is based on a medieval recipe for spice cake made with pepper. *Lebkuchen* are honey cakes frosted with elaborate designs.

Gingerbread is also part of the Christmas tradition. Ginger is an ancient spice that originated in Asia. During the Middle Ages it was the second most popular spice—right after black pepper. And during the 1500s, bakers started adding it to breads and cookies. German bakers were particularly attracted to the taste of ginger and the city of Nuremberg, which was one of the spice trading centers of Europe, became the gingerbread capital of the world. The town's sculptors, wood carvers and gold smiths began forming gingerbread into hearts, angels, men, animals and houses.

In the United States, the traditional beverage for Christmas is eggnog. Eggnog is related to a series of drinks made from milk and wine that go back for hundreds of years. When wine and milk drinks arrived in colonial America, we dropped the wine and replaced it with rum. Rum drinks were called grog and one particular recipe was known as egg and grog, which eventually contracted to *eggnog*.



Foods associated with a festival need staying power, they must make us feel that they are unusual and yet very much part of our distant past. They should take time and effort to prepare and ideally involve a number of people from different generations. And if we only eat them on the day of a particular celebration, it's even better.

The old British Christmas pudding meets all those requirements. The custom of serving British pudding is only about two hundred years old, but it feels like it has

been going on much longer. A traditional Christmas pudding contains 13 ingredients representing Christ and His disciples. When you light the brandy that is poured over the pudding, the flame represents Christ's passion. And the garnish of holly is a reminder of His Crown of Thorns. As Charles Dickens pointed out in *A Christmas Carol*, the pudding rests on the table like a cannonball, hard, firm and blazing in brandy. It is a blast from the past that stands in opposition to everything that is new, light, low calorie or modern.

Perhaps the greatest single influence on Christmas dinners in the United States came from the meal that was described by Charles Dickens in "A Christmas Carol". He took the grand family feast of the Old English Christmas and shrunk it down so it worked for a single household. His book was first published in 1843 and became a Christmas instruction manual for the American Homemaker.



Some people feel that Christmas has been turned into a national shopping festival and that buying stuff is our only interest. I don't agree. I think it's essential to remember that the central theme of Christmas is the story of God giving his only son as a gift to humanity. And the idea of gift giving was reinforced when the Three Kings arrived with presents for the Christ Child. We are only following these examples by giving gifts to the people we love and the neediest of our fellow man. For me, Christmas is about rebirth during the darkest time but it is also about generosity and sharing.

TO LEARN MORE . . .

BRIEF HISTORY OF OUR SEASONAL HOLIDAYS

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