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The American Way of Christmas (Part Three): *Santa Claus Is Coming to Town!*

Editor's note: Following is the third of a four-part series on "The American Way of Christmas" by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth. The Jefferson first published it as Book Notes #125 in December 2022.



You better watch out
You better not cry
You better not pout
I'm telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town
He's making a list
He's checking it twice
He's going to find out
Who's naughty and nice, Santa Claus is coming to town

[Pre-Chorus]

He sees you when you're sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows when you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness sake ...” [1]

Written in 1934 by J. Fred Coots and Haven Gillespie, “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town” is one of those cultural “bits and pieces” the rolling “snowball” of Americans inventing *The American Way of Christmas* gathered up and added to their evolving tradition. First performed in 1934 on Eddie Cantor’s radio show, it became “an instant hit with orders for 500,000 copies of sheet music and more than 30,000 records sold within 24 hours.” [2] As the “snowball” of Christmas invention kept rolling, “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town” found renewed life on ABC Television in 1970 as the first stop-motion animated film. It featured the voices of Fred Astaire and Mickey Rooney. [3] It has been a Christmas season TV staple ever since.

The definitive 21st century version is Bruce Springsteen’s, which can be found at [Bruce Springsteen - Santa Claus Is Comin' To Town \(Official Audio\) - YouTube](#)

Who is this guy who “sees you when you’re sleeping,” who “knows when you’ve been bad or good”?

Where did the kind, jolly Santa Claus of *The American Way of Christmas* originate?

Where did his journey to becoming a global icon of generosity and compassion begin?

And what happened along the way?

Unless one wants to connect Santa Claus to the Magi, a linkage some have tried to make, Santa makes no scriptural appearance. Of course, his spirit of generosity does have a vague connection to the Magi and their bearing gifts to the baby Jesus. Santa’s journey, however, begins with an early Christian bishop who certainly existed. That he existed is confirmed by the record of his attendance at the first Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, which established the church doctrine that Christ is divine and originated the Nicene Creed’s affirmation of faith. Much of the other information about him is clouded in myth. [4]



The patron saint of many but most importantly of children, St. Nicholas was the Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) in the fourth century. The only child of wealthy parents, Nicholas was legendary for his generosity, in particular for giving gifts to the children of the poor. The most famous tale of Nicholas’ benevolence involves an impoverished widower and his three daughters. Terrified because he could neither support them nor give them dowries to attract a husband, the widower feared he would have to sell them into slavery or prostitution.

Nicholas, learning of their plight, in three separate gifts secretly drops a bag of gold through a window into the widower’s house providing them with a dowry and saving the daughters from their doom. Different versions of the story have Nicholas dropping the gold down the chimney or, after the first gift, the eldest daughter hung a stocking by the chimney in which Nicholas deposited his golden gifts. Other tales of Nicholas’ protection of the young include rescuing three brothers from a murderous innkeeper and calming the waters on a sea journey to Egypt. [5]

St. Nicholas died on December 6, 345 or 352. In the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox Catholic churches, December 6 is the Feast Day of St. Nicholas. In medieval Europe, Nicholas became revered as the protector of children. A tradition emerged of giving children gifts on either December 6 or the evening of

December 5 in his memory. St. Nicholas, dressed in his red bishop's robes, which is why Santa Claus wears red, became the gift-giver who inquired whether the children had been good or bad. If good, they received a gift; if they'd misbehaved, they got nothing.

As his legend spread throughout Europe for more than a thousand years, December 6 was a major holiday. It still is in many parts of Catholic Europe. As Christianity moved northward, St. Nicholas acquired additional traits. In northwestern Europe he became loosely associated with the pagan god Odin and the tradition of the Yuletide, the midwinter celebration of the sun at the winter solstice characterized by burning a gigantic log – a Yule log – for its warmth and as a symbolic homage to the sun. Odin's long white beard, bringing of gifts, and riding across the night sky on his gray horse became key images as St. Nicholas evolved into the Dutch Sinter Klaas. [6]



From left are Krampus, Knecht Ruprecht, and Belsnickle

Oh, recall “he knows whether you’ve been naughty or nice”? In addition to a horse and a long white beard, during his thousand-year advance, St. Nicholas also acquired several sidekicks who accompanied him at different times and in different cultures. They were Krampus, Knecht Ruprecht, and Belsnickle. In central European folklore a part of the pagan winter solstice rites featured Krampus, a half-man, half-goat demon who became St. Nicholas’ companion. Krampus scared naughty children into behaving properly. [7] He is celebrated on December 5 – *Krampusnacht*.

Knecht Ruprecht is a slightly different version of Krampus. In different accounts he appears in either the late Middle Ages or the early 17 century. He accompanies St. Nicholas scaring naughty children into good behavior. [8] In German folklore, Belsnickle was not a companion of St. Nicholas but a character who combines both St. Nicholas’ benevolent traits and the threatening traits of the older Krampus and Knecht Ruprecht. A masked figure, wearing furs and slightly disheveled in appearance, the early German settlers in Pennsylvania brought Belsnickle to America. He would leave treats and toys for the good children and switches for the bad children. [9]

For all of those thousand years, St. Nicholas – “Ole St. Nick” – was not associated with Christmas other than the coincidence of feast days occurring in December. In the 16th century, however, during the Protestant Reformation’s opposition to the veneration of saints, St. Nicholas’ Day fell into disfavor. But no one wanted to forsake the custom of gift giving to children. It was Martin Luther who started the tradition of giving children gifts on Christmas in order to focus their attention on Christ. So, the day of gift giving moved to December 24 or December 25.

That created a problem – who was the gift giver?

Luther proposed the Christ child as the gift giver. Hence, arose the tradition of the *Christkind*, German for Christ child, as the bestower of gifts. *Christkind* morphed into *Kris Kringle* in English. But that presented two more problems. It made gift giving the emphasis on Christmas, not the birth of Jesus. It also created a paradox – a child giving gifts to children did not create the same enthusiasm among children as the older tradition. It also, somehow, simply didn’t make sense. Other adult gift givers, such as the German *Weihnachtsmann* and the English *Father Christmas* simply did not resonate. [10]



Father Christmas, in particular, presented a problem. In England he was considered an adult figure who brought Christmas to adults. After a nod to the holiday’s spiritual origins, Father Christmas essentially told the adults to have a party. Father Christmas represented Christmas as carnival. Usually characterized as wearing a green robe, green the color of life’s renewal, Father Christmas made his first appearance in Ben Jonson’s *Christmas, His Masque* in 1616. Father Christmas fell out of favor during the Puritan ascendance in the early 17th century.

He returned in 1660 with Charles II during the Restoration. Father Christmas “was essentially concerned with the adult world, personifying feasting and games, he had no connection with presents, and he was not treated with much respect, being generally a burlesque figure of fun.” [11] Enjoying a renaissance in the early-19th century, Father Christmas was then overwhelmed by the arrival in England of the Americanized Santa Claus. Today they are virtually indistinguishable and largely interchangeable. [12]

But that is getting ahead of the story.



What happened to St. Nicholas?

In Holland, St. Nicholas re-emerged as Sinter Klaas, which is a mispronunciation of the Dutch Sint Nikolaas (St. Nicholas). The gift giving day remained December 6. It is still a major holiday in the Netherlands as every December 5 Sinter Klaas arrives from Spain on a steamboat with his helpers, all called Pete, mounts his white horse

Amigo and parades through Amsterdam. Children place a shoe near the fireplace or a window, leave an apple for Sinter Klaas to eat, go to bed to arise on the morning of December 6 to learn their fate. If they're good, they get a present; if not, Sinter Klaas puts them in his sack and takes them back to Spain. [13]



From left: John Pintard, Washington Irving, Clement Clarke Moore, Sarah Josepha Hale, Thomas Nast, Francis Church, and Haddon Sundblom.

More important to our interests, the early Dutch settlers of New Amsterdam and the Hudson River Valley brought Sinter Klaas to North America. In the American colonies, then the early republic, the gift giving day was either New Year's Day or Twelfth Night. It shifted to Christmas Eve or Day as Americans in the early republic sought to create a common American culture. Illustrating Eric Hobsbawm's notion of an "invented tradition," early-19th century Americans picked up bits and pieces of their existing customs and then following the lead of John Pintard, Washington Irving, Clement Clarke Moore, Sarah Josepha Hale, Thomas Nast, Francis Church, and Haddon Sundblom transformed Sinter Klaas into Santa Claus completing the invention of *The American Way of Christmas*.

Americans in the early republic lived in a society characterized by turbulence and change. Seeking stability, some yearned for the "old days" and the "old ways," even if those "old days" and "old ways" might have been largely imaginary.

John Pintard was one of those who yearned for the "old days." A descendant of French Huguenot refugees, Pintard was a Revolutionary War veteran, a successful merchant, a founder of Tammany Hall, and the New York Historical Society. In the 18-oughts he began to write a series of letters advocating the restoration of old cultural customs and the creation of uniquely American

holidays uniting Americans in a common culture. In 1810, he advocated naming St. Nicholas the patron saint of New York City and the New York Historical Society. [14]

Beginning in the late 18th century in the then British North America, the Dutch Sinter Klaas and the English Father Christmas began to merge into a single character of Santa Claus, a name first used in the American colonies in 1773. [15] Pintard used that emerging custom to set in motion a chain of inspiration. First, his friend Washington Irving and then Clement Clarke Moore brought Sinter Klaas to America as “Ole St. Nick,” “St. Nicholas,” and “Old Sante Claus.”



In his 1809 *Knickerbocker's History of New York*, Irving had one of his characters dream he saw Sinterklaas fly across the night sky over treetops in his one-horse wagon, slide down chimneys to deliver gifts, then touching his nose as he remounted his wagon, fly off into the night sky. Irving portrayed Sinter Klaas not as a bishop in red robes, but as a pot-bellied sailor with a pipe in a green winter coat. His pipe was short stemmed – the pipe of a working man, not the long-stemmed pipe of the gentry. [16]

Speaking to the power of old customs in confused times, Irving's Sinter Klaas delivered his presents on New Year's Eve, neither the traditional December 6 nor Christmas Eve or Day. Irving's Santa Claus had neither sleigh nor reindeer, but drove a flying wagon powered by a lone horse reminiscent of images of the Norse god Odin flying across the night sky or Sinter Klaas in Holland. As Bruce David Forbes says, “In essence, St. Nicholas in the colony of New Amsterdam was an invented tradition, attributable to Irving and his friends.” [17] It became a tradition at the New York Historical Society and by 1835 Irving and his friends had founded the Saint Nicholas Society. [18]



The next iteration of the evolving Santa Claus occurred in 1821 in New York when William Gilley published a precursor to the “Gift Books” that would become a favorite children's Christmas present in the 1830s and '40s – *The Children's Friend: A New-Year's Present, to the Little Ones from Five to Twelve*. It included an anonymous poem titled “Old

Santeclaus with Much Delight.” From time-to-time its authorship is attributed to Clement Clarke Moore, but that remains debated. More importantly, it was

the first poem or story to call him not St. Nick or Sinter Klaas, but Santeclaus, to provide him with a sleigh and a reindeer (only one), and to have him deliver gifts on Christmas Eve. [19] This Santeclaus combined both the benevolent and disciplinary characteristics of St. Nicholas and his companions. It says:

from Old Santeclaus

Old SANTECLAUS with much delight
His reindeer drives this frosty night,
O'r chimney tops, and tracts of snow,
To bring his yearly gifts to you...

Where e're I found good girls or boys,
That hated quarrels, strife and noise,
I left an apple, or a tart,
Or wooden gun, or painted cart ...

But where I found the children naughty,
In manners crude, in temper haughty,
Thankless to parents, liars, swearers,
Boxers, or cheats, or base tale-bearers,

I left a long, black, birchen rod,
Such as the dread command of GOD
Directs a Parent's hand to use
When virtue's path his sons refuse. [20]

Two years later in 1823, the Troy, New York *Sentinel* published the poem that defined the American Santa as a benign lover of children. Gone were the birch rods and any hint of child discipline, for in Clement Clarke Moore's "A Visit from St. Nicholas" "St. Nick became a cute, lovable little man, like a favorite uncle or grandfather but magical." [21] Now better known as "The Night Before Christmas," it is, as Bruce David Forbes says, "the best-known poem in the English language. If someone gave us the first line, most of us could recite the second line automatically." [22] It begins,

"T'was the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse. ..."

Moore was a wealthy "old New Yorker" like Pintard and Irving. A man of leisure and a professor at the Episcopal General Theological Seminary, Moore increased the family's fortune by developing their estate into the Chelsea section of Manhattan. While he profited from the rapidly changing society of his time, he also sought to preserve the old ways. He, however, gradually transformed St. Nicholas into St. Nick and by the poem's 1830 edition used the names "St. Nicholas" and "Santa Claus" interchangeably.

Moore gave Santa most of his “American characteristics”: he traveled in a sleigh (not a wagon) powered by a team of eight reindeer that Moore was the first to name:

"And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name:
"Now, *Dasher!* now, *Dancer!* now *Prancer* and *Vixen!*
On, *Comet!* on, *Cupid!* on, *Donner* and *Blitzen!*"

Most importantly, St. Nicholas came on Christmas Eve and in the process became an essential part of the American Christmas experience.

There are, however, some differences between Moore’s St. Nicholas/Santa Claus and the archetypal American Santa Claus. For one thing, he temporarily lost his bishop’s robes and mitered cap, which Thomas Nast later returned to him. Like Irving’s Sinter Klaas, Moore’s Santa smoked a pipe, but, if you read the poem closely, you will also discover that Moore’s St. Nick was an elf driving a miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer:

“When what to my wondering eyes did appear,
But a miniature sleigh and eight tiny rein-deer,
With a little old driver so lively and quick,
I knew in a moment he must be St. Nick. ...”

Moore’s St. Nicholas was a benevolent lover of children who, as Penne Restad says, “Put to work in the domestic sphere, Santa combined characteristics of God, Jesus, and human parents into a presence embodying love, generosity, good humor, and transcendence.” [23] In Moore’s poem St. Nicholas/Santa became the embodiment of *The American Way of Christmas*’ at first non-denominational Protestant and then more generally ecumenical holiday that seems to have sprung free of its Christian origins to become a universal celebration of goodwill. For, as Moore quotes St. Nicholas/Santa upon his departure:

“He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight—
“*Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!*” [24]

But how did Moore’s elfin Santa become the human sized, roly-poly figure whose belly shook like jelly, had a home and workshop at the North Pole, was married to Mrs. Claus, and had a workforce of convivial elves?

That was the achievement of Thomas Nast.

A German immigrant who came to America at age six during the 1840s, Nast was the foremost political cartoonist of the 19th century. Working first at **Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper** and then **Harper's Weekly**, Nast gave the Republican Party its elephant symbol, exposed the corruption of Tammany Hall through withering satirical images, and made two iconic images part of American folklore: Uncle Sam and Santa Claus.

Using ideas from his German heritage, Nast gave Santa his long-stemmed, gentleman's pipe, returned to him his red bishop's robes and a drooping conical hat reminiscent of a bishop's miter, gave him his luxuriant white beard, rosy cheeks, and sack full of toys slung over his shoulder, and ensconced him in his ice palace works at the North Pole with a team of elves making toys for children.

When you see Santa at the mall or on TV or on a billboard or when you simply close your eyes and imagine Santa Claus, you are seeing Thomas Nast's creation.



Who drove the engine of Santa's growing popularity during the mid-19th century? Sarah Josepha Hale, who added Santa Claus to her advocacy of Christmas trees in **Godey's Lady's Book** making both parts of American society's cultural fabric.

Santa continued to evolve. Many stories in the late-19th century gave him a wife – Mrs. Claus – the definitive version of which is probably the composer of “America the Beautiful” Katharine Lee Bates' 1889 short story “Goody Santa Claus on a Sleigh Ride.” [25] “Goody” is short for the old Colonial American expression “Goodwife.” In short, it means the mistress of a household or “Mrs.” [26] Other additions to Santa's lore include the 1939 addition of a ninth reindeer – Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

Santa leaped free of America's cultural borders when Haddon Sundblom created the most famous images of Santa for the Coca-Cola Company. Inspired by Nast's image of Santa, Sundblom's images, and Coca-Cola's worldwide sales turned Santa into a global icon. In fact, at lunch the other day a friend who spent a year or two living in Buddhist Thailand told the story of seeing a Santa figure

climbing a four-story vine inside a shopping mall. Almost certainly, you have internalized Sundblom's images so that for you they are Santa.



Is there really a Santa Claus?

Of course, just like there really was a St. Nicholas, for whether or not either “really exists” as a person or a phantom or an elven wizard, they exist because humans need Santa to exist for what he represents: unconditional love, generosity, and a humane kindness – things often in short supply in human society. Frank Church gave the best answer to that question ever penned in an 1897 editorial in the *New York Sun*. Responding to a Letter-to-the-Editor from eight-year-old Virginia O’Hanlon asking if there really was a Santa Claus, Church wrote:

Yes, VIRGINIA, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no VIRGINIAS. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished. [27]

Whether or not he knows if you’ve been naughty or nice, Santa knows the one thing all great leaders know – people can’t live without hope. Whether St. Nicholas bringing gifts of gold to an impoverished widower to save his daughters from doom or a shopping mall Santa humoring an antsy and expectant child, Santa Claus is an avatar of possibilities – an apostle of hope in a world in which sometimes all one has is hope.

Santa is the incarnation of hope.

Gathering up the “bits and pieces” of many peoples’ different customs, adding to them the vision and insight of others seeking to build a common American culture, it is the genius of the “snowballing” creation of *The American Way of Christmas* to have somehow managed to bridge the divide between Christmas as a Christian holy day and its roots in pagan, midwinter festivals celebrating the sun, yearning for the return of its warmth and the hope for a new year’s possibilities.

To answer the question with which this three-part series began, is it “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Holidays,” it is both. Although at times the season can seem interminable, stretching as it now does from just before Thanksgiving until, well, until almost the Super Bowl in February, one needs to pause amidst all the energy and sometimes angst of the season to reflect upon its true meaning – a profound expression of the human need to simply “*be*” and to believe in a better future.

Merry Christmas!

Happy Holidays!

And, oh yes, “Ho, Ho, Ho!”



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End Notes

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