

Rejoice

A Child is born

unto you and his name is Emmanuel.

Georgetown/Acton, Tuesday, Dec. 21, 1982

'Christmas' derived from Old English Cristes Maesse (the Mass of Christ)

The typical North American Christmas combines customs and traditions—the tree, Santa Claus, lights, mistletoe, gift giving, caroling, and card sending—brought to this country by settlers from Europe. Many of these customs are directly related to the birth of Christ and stem from church religious observances. Others, though, have a basis in folk customs, some present even before the birth of Christ.

Early Christians did not celebrate the birthday of Jesus as a holiday festival as it is known today for several hundred years after He was born.

The Rev. Cyril Martindale, a Catholic historian, has written that such festivals were rejected by early Christians because they were associated with pagan rituals. Later, the celebration of Christmas was introduced to counteract the pagan fest of the Sun-God held in Rome about December 25.

The word Christmas is derived from the Old English, Cristes Maesse (the mass of Christ) and was first called by that name in 1038.

An explanation of why Christmas is sometimes written Xmas: X is the Greek equivalent of the "ch" sound and the letter "X" is taken to represent the word Christ.

Christmas was a seasonal celebration in Europe from the sixth century on. Dutch settlers brought the tradition of St. Nicholas to America in the 17th century. This

tradition was the forerunner of Santa Claus.

St. Nicholas was the Archbishop of Myra and was said to have given three dowless maiden sisters his money, thus making them marriageable. One version of the story is that the youngest, after her two sisters had each received a gold purse dropped down the chimney on successive nights, hung her stocking in the fireplace hoping for her gift. She received it on the third night. St. Nicholas became the patron saint of children.

Good or bad

In Europe, St. Nicholas became a figure on a white horse (or donkey) who wore robes of the bishop and sometimes carried a bunch of twigs in one hand to punish naughty children and a bag of presents in the other for good children. The evolution of this gift-giver into Santa Claus includes aspects of Father Christmas, a folk figure long known in Northern Europe. He wore a red robe trimmed in white fur, was jovial, enjoyed merry making and encouraged kissing under the mistletoe.

Washington Irving, the American author, described the St. Nicholas of the Dutch settlers in 1809 and made him a popular figure in America.

The description of Santa Claus and reindeer in Clement C. Moore's poem "The Night Before Christmas" imprinted an image on the public in 1823 of Santa as a jovial, hearty gift-giver riding through the sky in his sleigh.



The creche In history and in legend

The creche—a representation in miniature of the manger in which Christ was born, complete with tiny figures of the Holy Family, angels, the adoring Magi, and even the animals which were present—is a familiar sight under the Christmas tree, where it commands a place of honor during the Christmas season.

Traditionally, the crib remains empty until Christmas arrives, at which time the miniature figure of the Christ Child is lovingly placed within it.

The original creche is believed by many to have been set up by St. Francis of Assisi. In the year 1224, St. Francis arranged a representation of the Holy Family in a grotto in the Italian hill town of Greccio.

With a white ox and a donkey—both of whom represented animals present at the Nativity—at either side of the creche, the midnight mass was celebrated on Christmas Eve at an altar situated above the crib.

The creche, (presepio, in Italian) is still most popular in Italy, its country of origin. Each year, in Rome and Naples, children construct presepi of cardboard, and populate them with inexpensive clay figures bought in the market.

A typical Neapolitan presepio might incorporate a hill, with the sacred grotto below, a tiny shepherd's hut, some trees, a dirt path or two winding toward a cave, and perhaps a stream, the latter formed with pieces of glittering glass. Landscaping would be done with moss.

Rejoicing angels, and the star which guided the Three Wise Men to Bethlehem, would be suspended by nearly invisible threads, and the crib would be carefully padded with real straw.

So much for the simple creche. Many more elaborate were created in the course of time.

One German example was large enough to fill an entire room. This creche represented the main square of a small village, which was bordered by various large edifices, including a domed cathedral, in the porch of which the crib was set up.

Some creches, made in Naples, boasted classical temples, or the remains thereof. Usually, the figures which were incorporated into the scene would be dressed in contemporary rather than Biblical garb, providing a fascinating view of the fashions current when the creche was created.

The animals most likely to be found in a creche are the donkey and ox, mentioned above, and the cow, the goat, and the horse. Each of these animals has a legend connected with it.

Both the donkey and the goat were noisy, disturbing the peaceful sleep of the Holy Infant. For this reason, both were punished; the donkey was not permitted ever to have offspring, and the goat was doomed to carry, throughout history, the opprobrium of having a voice no human could find pleasant.

The horse, too, was punished—for selfishly eating the hay which had been laid down for the Christ Child to sleep upon, he was doomed always to be the servant of man, and never to be satisfied, no matter how much he ate.

The ox, on the other hand, generously gave its hay to provide Christ's bedding, as well as warming the Infant Jesus with his breath. And, the cow, as a token of its devotion, gave her newly born calf as an offering to the Child.

Both ox and cow were rewarded by the Madonna, who promised them that they would always enjoy their food so much that they would chew it a second time.



Distant and regal, this enthroned Madonna and Child seem to stare into eternity. The painting, the Madonna of Humility, is by the 15th century Siennese painter, Sandro di Pietro. In the collection of The Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of Frank L. Babbitt.

Christmas cards can warm up hearts

Greeting cards as we know them today date back only 150 years or so, but the traditions that led to them go back thousands of years.

Ancient Egyptians, for example,

celebrated the New Year as a time of nature's reawakening. Early Romans observed the Feast of Lupercalis, which evolved into Valentine's Day.

While Christmas has been celebrated

for centuries, it wasn't until the 1800's that people began widely exchanging written greetings with artistic design.

Until that time, the only people whose friends received a Merry Christmas

greeting were those who could read and write and could afford to pay a messenger to deliver their sentiments.

This was to change by the mid-19th century. By then, many people were learning to read and write through free public schooling. Thousands of people were earning money on jobs provided by the invention of machines during the Industrial Revolution. The printing press had been invented and was being perfected.

The First Christmas Card

With the passage of the Penny Postage Act in England in 1840, which allowed anyone to send a letter anywhere for a penny, the price of mailing letters was finally within the reach of almost everyone.

With all these social developments, the custom of exchanging Christmas cards became popular. In 1843, the first commercially printed Christmas card was created. It was designed by artist John Calcott Horsley for London businessman Henry Cole.

The original Christmas card was divided into three panels with the main illustration showing adults at a family party raising wine glasses in a toast. The panels on either side showed two of the oldest traditions of Christmas—feeding the hungry and clothing the needy. The card bore the now classic greeting: "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You" and is now part of the Hallmark Card Museum.

Original specimens of the first Christmas card are now extremely rare and valuable. Only a dozen are known to exist. Two of these, including the most perfect one in existence (it has never been used) are part of the 70,000 card Hallmark Historical Collection.

Within a few years, several printing companies in England were producing Christmas cards. By 1875, Christmas Cards had come into their own in both England and North America.

Christmas cards evolved as the years passed. During the Great Depression, many people sent cards instead of gifts because money was scarce. One 1930's card depicted a grandfather remarking: "This isn't what I'd like to send, ain't being poor a crime... but perhaps I'll have a million bucks to send to you next time!"

When World War II came, Christmas cards became very patriotic. Special cards were created for servicemen overseas and showed Santa holding the flag, "Across the miles" and, "Missing You" sentiments expressed the sombre reality of the day.

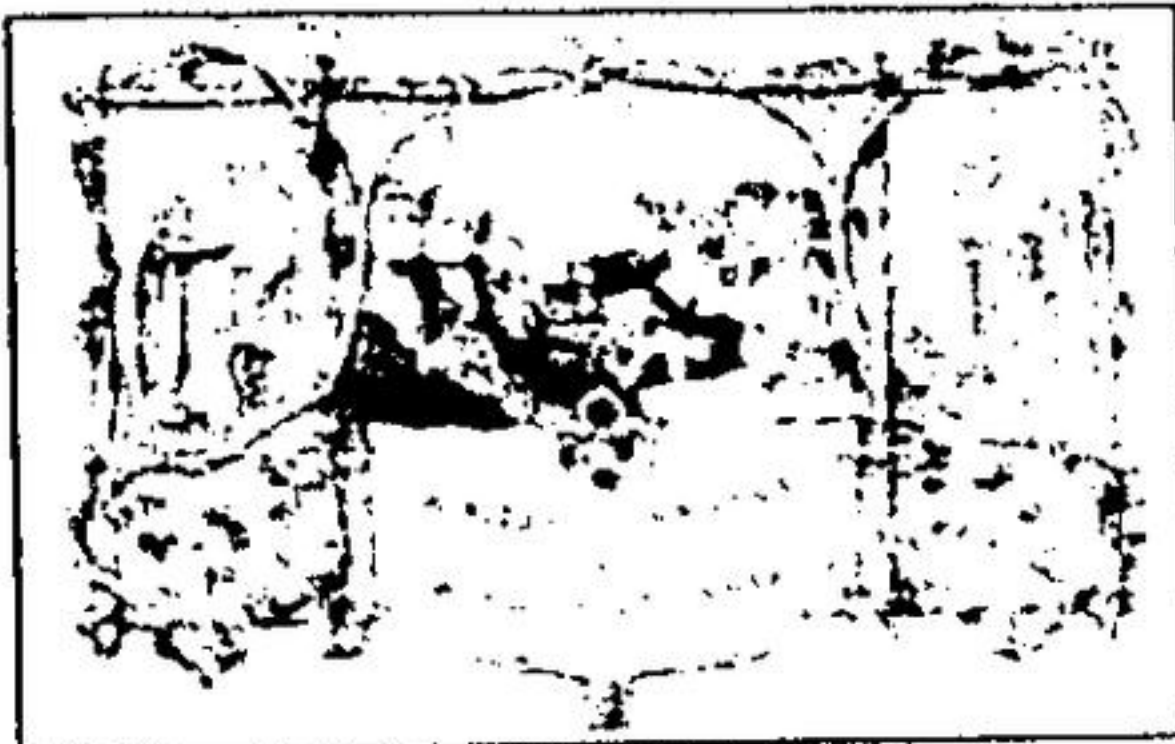
Modern Day Cards
In 1970, Hallmark reprinted the first prayer said from space by the Apollo 8 astronauts on Christmas Eve, 1968. This picturesque card showed an "earthrise" from the surface of the moon.

In the 1970's, contemporary cards showed Santa jogging and playing tennis. These cards were specifically designed for people swept up in the fitness craze.

Today the line of Christmas cards includes hundreds of finely crafted cards featuring innovative designs and unique processes. Consumers can choose from boxed cards with festive Muppets, Peanuts and Betsy Clark designs to popular favorites such as Norman Rockwell and Currier and Ives.

The Canadian Artist series of boxed cards includes works by Frank Panabaker, Alex McLaren, Clarence Gagnon and many others.

This year consider what sending a Christmas card can do—it can warm a heart, light up a face, tickle a funny-bone, surprise a child, renew a friendship, create priceless memories and start a tradition.



Top left: This is a reproduction of the first commercially printed Christmas card. It was designed in 1843 by John Calcott Horsley for London businessman Sir Henry Cole. It was divided into three panels with the main illustration showing adults at a family party raising wine glasses in a toast. The panels on either side showed two of the oldest traditions of Christmas—feeding the hungry and clothing

the needy. The card bore the now classic greeting: "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You" and is now part of the Hallmark Card Museum. Top right: "Peace and joy this Christmas tide" is the message of this card, circa 1880. Bottom left and right: New Year's cards printed in Canada in the late 19th century.