

## Traditions of Christmas

# Some customs pre-date Christ

Each year we automatically include, in our celebration of the upcoming holiday, the same traditions we remember as children. When did these early traditions start, why do we decorate a tree, kiss under the mistletoe or await a visit from Santa?

Many of our Christmas customs predate the birth of Christ. They were, in fact, pagan rituals which have been retained over the years. Other traditions are those created centuries ago by pastors or parents, for the edification of parishioners or children. Nonetheless, they have remained an important part in our holiday festivities.

Hanging mistletoe is a pagan custom which has survived to become part of our Christmas holiday traditions. Druid priests cut mistletoe with a golden sickle and caught it in a white cloth before it

touched the ground.

It was then distributed to their followers to hang in their homes. Its magical powers were supposed to bring happiness, romance and peace.

In ancient Scandinavia, enemies meeting by chance beneath a tree bearing mistletoe were obliged to disarm, embrace in friendship and keep peace together for the rest of the day. From this legend comes the custom of kissing beneath mistletoe.

Centuries before Christ, people who worshipped nature brought evergreens into their homes during festival time as proof of continuing life.

The ancient Romans decorated evergreens with gifts and ornaments at Saturnalia, a winter festival to welcome the coming spring and the revival of nature's fruit-bearing season.

Holly with its brilliant green leaves and bright red berries was revered by ancient people as a symbol of eternal life. Because it bore fruit in winter, it was regarded as one of the most favored plants of nature.

The early Romans believed it possessed medicinal and magical powers. They sent sprigs of holly to friends as a protection from evil and a repellent for poisons.

With the spread of Christianity, holly became associated with the promise of everlasting life. A German legend claims Christ's crown of thorns was plaited from holly; that before the Crucifixion the plant bore white berries, afterwards the berries were red.

The wassail bowl which we associate with Christmas celebrations, comes from an ancient Saxon drinking custom. The wassail bowl was ornamented with arcs of evergreen over the top; the drink itself was a combination of hot ale, sugar, nutmeg or ginger, decorated with baked apples.

Christmas carollers in old England often carried wassail bowls with them when they went carolling. They would go "wassailing" to the house of a friend, sing a carol, and offer to drink to the health of those inside.

The evergreen tree became a part of our Christmas celebration early in the 16th century. Martin Luther, according to legend, was so impressed with the beauty of the stars shining through the snow laden boughs, that he cut a small fir and took it home.

He set up the tree in his house and decorated it with candles to symbolize for his children the star



A visit from the Smurfs highlighted last year's Festival of Lights Celebration. Here Timothy Sakai enjoys a chat with Poppa Smurf. — Bill Lanning

filled sky over Bethlehem.

The use of the creche as a Christmas symbol dates back to St. Francis of Assisi. In 1224, he set up a manger scene in the hills above the village of Greccio, Italy, to dramatize for his parishioners the origins of Jesus.

He built a real stable, filled with live animals, straw and hay. People dressed as Mary, Joseph and the shepherds stood among the cattle near a straw-filled manger containing a lifelike wax image of

the Christ Child.

The manger scene was so loved by villagers that it was repeated year after year at Christmas. Gradually it was adopted by other towns and the custom spread.

Eventually the creche became as important to the celebration of Christmas in southern Europe as the Christmas tree in the north.

Santa Claus, the jolly old elf with red cheeks and a white beard, is the American derivation of old St. Nicholas, a wealthy bishop.

## Christmas Trivia

Trivia buffs, look no further. Test your knowledge with the following Christmas trivia questions. If you're stuck turn to Page 10.

### Questions

- 1) In what year was December 25 selected as the day to celebrate Christmas?
- 2) Who was first recorded as having dined on turkey for Christmas dinner?
- 3) "Christmas" and "Santa Claus" are towns in which U.S. states?
- 4) When was the first commercially printed Christmas card sent?
- 5) Is Christmas egg nog a custom of Europe or of North America?
- 6) What do these people have in common? Groucho Marx, Winston Churchill, A.Y. Jackson and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.
- 7) Who abolished Christmas Day?
- 8) What is the all-time favorite sentiment expressed on Christmas cards?
- 9) What famous poem was written by a New York minister in 1822?



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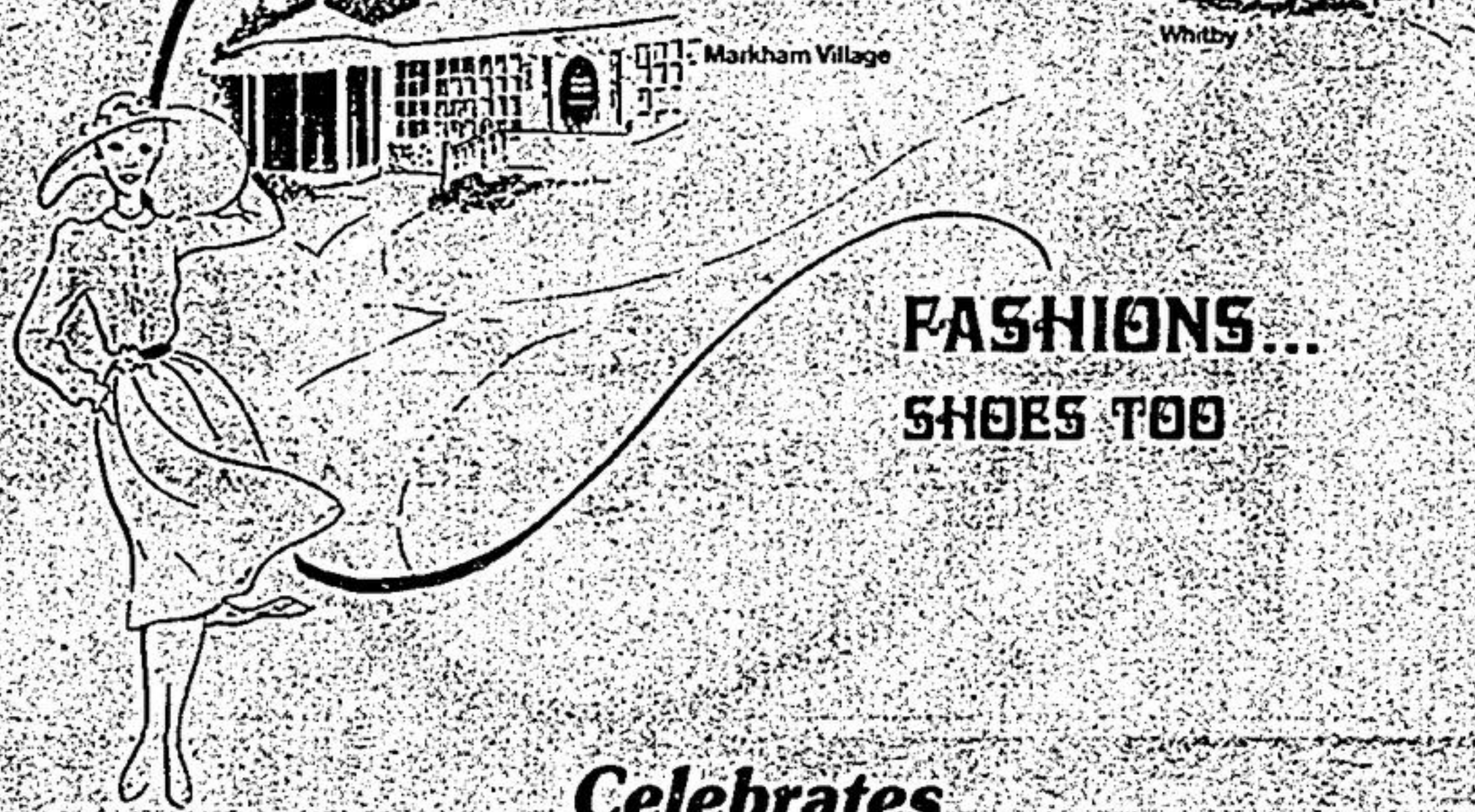
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