

Chandler Lodge #138 F & A.M.  
Lodge Education Program

Subject: Symbols of Christmas

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As we enter into the holiday season and approach the end of another calendar year, I thought maybe we could take a minute and review some of the legends, and traditions that we celebrate during the holiday season. These items are primarily descendants of the Christian faith holiday, 'Christmas' that celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ. Other cultures, and religions have different beliefs and traditions regarding the holidays, but here is some background on the most common items we see and hear this time of year.



In the Western world, the birthday of Jesus Christ has been celebrated on December 25<sup>th</sup> since AD 354. It is believed that the bishop of Rome, Julius I, selected this date as a means of stamping out many of the pagan festivals of ancient Babylon, Egypt and other midwinter festivals that were practiced in many parts of the Middle East and Europe. Although the exact date of birth has not been pinpointed, the English world around 1043 began referencing December 25<sup>th</sup> as being Christmas Day.



The Nativity is a tradition developed for re-enacting the birth of Christ and the construction of scenes of the nativity story contained in Chapter 2 of the gospel of St. Luke. It is regarded that recreating this scene was made popular in Italy and said to have been introduced by Saint Francis as part of his efforts to improve the spiritual knowledge of his country.



Mistletoe was revered by Druid priests 200 years before the birth of Christ because it had no roots, and would remain green during the winter. The Celts believed mistletoe to have healing powers, and the Romans viewed this plant as a symbol of peace. But ultimately the Scandinavians associated the plant with Frigga, the goddess of love, and hence the custom of kissing under the mistletoe, with the promise of happiness and good luck in the following year.



Santa Clause originated in the present day Turkey in the 4th century with a real person named Saint Nicholas. He was a generous man, particularly devoted to children and his reputation for kindness gave rise to claims he that he could perform miracles. St. Nicholas became the patron saint of Russia, and later throughout Europe where thousands of churches were dedicated to him. Officially in the 12th century the Feast of St Nicholas was celebrated on December 6<sup>th</sup> and recognized with much charity and gift-giving. The legend was kept alive in Holland as the Dutch 'Sinterklaas'. He was known to reward good children with treats in their wooden shoes placed by the fireplace. The Dutch colonists brought this tradition with them to America in the 17th century and here Santa Claus emerged.



In 1822, Clement Moore, wrote a Christmas poem for his three daughters entitled, "An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas." This poem is largely responsible for the current image of Santa Claus as a "jolly old elf" with the supernatural ability to ascend a chimney with a mere nod of his head. This became a popular Christmas Eve tale as the familiar idea of Santa Claus flying from house to house in "a miniature sleigh" led by eight flying reindeer, whom he named, and leaving presents for the deserving children. In 1881, political cartoonist Thomas Nast created the first likeness of our modern Santa Claus. His cartoon depicted Santa as a rotund, cheerful man with a full, white beard, bright red suit with white fur lining, his cartoon also first created the North Pole, Santa's workshop, the elves, and even Mrs. Claus.



Decorating trees has always been a part of the German winter solstice tradition. In 16th-century Germany fir trees were decorated, indoors and out, with apples, roses, gilded candies, and colored paper. It is held that a Protestant reformer named Martin Luther first adorned trees with light after noticing the stars shining through the branches of a fir inspired him to recreate this effect by placing candles on the branches of a small fir tree. When Germany's Prince Albert married England's queen Victoria the tree was found in Windsor Castle and became popular throughout England, and later traveled to America with German settlers in Pennsylvania. The first picture of a Christmas tree appeared in a newspaper in 1848 and helped the custom spread to homes across the United States in just a few short years.



Another Christmas tradition from legend is that of a nobleman that grew despondent over the death of his wife and ultimately squandered his fortune, leaving his three young daughters without dowries and thus facing a life of penniless spinsterhood. The now famous and generous St. Nicholas rode his white horse by the nobleman's house and threw three small pouches of gold coins down the chimney. Luckily that night the young women had hung their stockings by the fireplace to dry, and in the morning found their fortunes safely caught.



The boughs of Holly come from northern Europe under the belief they were magical from their green color in winter. Usually hung over the doors of a home to drive away evil spirits thought to be heard howling in the winter winds, it was also brought indoors to freshen the air and brighten the mood during the long, dreary winter months. A more modern legend is that the thorny leaves of holly represent the crowns of thorns, and the red berries symbolize the blood of Christ.



The poinsettias were named after a mason, Joel R. Poinsett, who was an Amateur botanist and U.S. ambassador to Mexico. He brought this native Mexican plant to America in 1828. In nature this perennial plant will grow to ten feet high. The brilliant red colors, and star shaped leaves have made this the top holiday plant sold. It should be noted that the bright red petals, often mistaken for flowers, are actually the upper leaves of the plant.



Christmas cards began in England as a means of young boys schools to learn writing skills by creating Christmas greetings for their parents. Sir Henry Cole is credited with creating the first modern day Christmas card, as he was too busy to sit down and compose individual greetings to his friends and family. In 1843 he commissioned artist John Horsley for the illustration of a three panel card depicting a family enjoying Christmas festivities and inscribed with the message "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You."



In 1607 at the Jamestown settlement of Virginia, there are reports by Captain John Smith that Eggnog was made for the first time in the colony. This was a popular drink with the elite classes of Europe, but due to the expense of wine and milk, it never became a success until arriving in America with the colonist. Because farms and the associated dairy products were plentiful its popularity grew, and because Rum from the Caribbean was less taxed than English liquors, the less expensive and more potent version became a popular holiday beverage. There are two schools of thought regarding the name, first is that the name is derived from the old English 'grog', and alludes to any drink made with rum. The second theory is a derivative of the word 'noggin' which was a small carved wooden mug used in the English taverns.



The Chicago-based Montgomery Ward Department Store is responsible for bringing us Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. In 1939, with the help of his daughter, Robert May wrote this beloved tale and supplied the company with the story to hand out as Christmas coloring books to children at the stores. "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" was first printed commercially in 1947. In 1948 a nine- minute cartoon of the story was shown in theaters and when songwriter Johnny Marks, wrote the song "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer", the story became an instant holiday classic. This song was recorded by Gene Autry in 1949 and sold two million copies that year alone, eventually becoming one of the best-selling Christmas songs of all time. In 1964 NBC produced a movie television special. With additional characters, and Burl Ives providing the narration the movie has gone on to become a holiday favorite to this day

Celebrating Christmas has been controversial since its inception. Since numerous festivities found their roots in pagan practices, they were greatly frowned upon by conservatives within the Christian Church. The feasting, gift-giving and celebration spirit presented a stark contrast to the simplicity of the Nativity and humble beginning of Christianity. Throughout history the excesses and commercialism exhibited upon this holiday have made many people throughout the centuries and into today condemn this action as being contrary to the spirit of Christmas. Regardless of your thoughts towards Christianity, and the holiday, it is legitimate to see that many of today's popular Christmas symbols come from heritage throughout the civilizations of history and the ingenuity of their people.