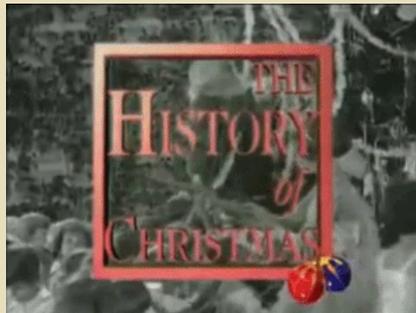


CHRISTMAS unWRAPPED: THE HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS

Produced and written by Alison Guss
Hosted by Harry Smith
The History Channel
[Transcribed from the movie by Tara Carreon]

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[Narrator] The Christmas Tree at Rockefeller Center. It's hard to imagine a Christmas in New York without it, but like many Christmas traditions, the tree is a relative newcomer to the Christmas story. Only since the early 19th century has the decorated tree been an important part of the American Christmas celebration. Hello. I'm Harry Smith. Welcome to the History Channel. Christmas Trees, candy canes, even Santa Claus seem like they've been around forever, but many of these Christmas traditions are surprisingly recent. Join us as we look back at how a holiday that started in pagan Rome became the centerpiece of the Christian year, and why this season is known as much for shopping as the birth of the Christ-child. Stay with us for Christmas unWrapped.

THE HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS
December 25th



[Narrator] It is a story everyone knows. After a rude refusal by a local innkeeper, Mary and Joseph bedded down in a barn in Bethlehem.



The next day, Mary gave birth to a son, the son of God. Those are the biblical origins of Christmas.



But centuries before Jesus walked the earth, early Europeans were celebrating light and birth in the darkest days of winter. In the Norse country, this winter celebration was known as Yule.



Around December 21st, the winter solstice, fathers and sons would drag home the biggest log they could find and set it on fire.



The yule log warmed but it also looked ahead. Each spark was said to represent a pig or calf to be born in the spring.



Also dragged inside were evergreens, the one plant that could make it through a Norse winter. Evergreens proved that life persisted in this dark time.



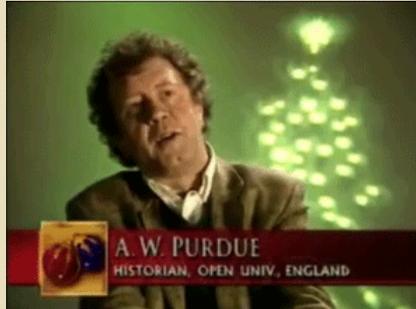
[Forrest Church, Minister, All Souls Church] There's a natural attraction to that which lives through the winter when one is struggling to survive through the winter. The evergreen is that part of nature that seems impervious to the coming of winter and the diminishing of the sun. And so it's an absolutely natural symbol, one which I think you react to almost without thinking about.



[Narrator] For as long as the yule log burned -- about 12 days -- feasting and revelry reined supreme.



In fact, this was one of the few times that meat was abundant, since cattle had just been slaughtered for the long winter.



[A.W. Purdue, Historian, Open University, England] There is a necessity to kill most of the cattle, because you can't keep them alive over the winter. You can't feed them. You keep a few alive for breeding. But there is an opportunity for a great blow-out, or a great feast type of party.

[Narrator] The party raged inside in defiance of winter's deadly howl.

[A.W. Purdue, Historian, Open University, England] There is a spooky feel about the northern yuletide festivals. You may be all right there in the hall near the fires, but outside there are demons and there are spirits.



[Narrator] In Germany, the pagan god Odin lent his name to this mid-winter holiday. Early Germans were terrified of Odin, whose nocturnal flights decided who would prosper or perish in the coming year.



Later, we'd see another Christmas sky-rider, Santa Claus, but for now staying inside became the smartest choice at this frightening time of the year.



A thousand miles away in Rome, winter was less harrowing, but the December festivals were just as elaborate. One week before the winter solstice, Romans began celebrating Saturnalia, a month long orgy of food and drink, named for the God Saturn, which meant plenty. Rome's established order was turned on its head during this wild, delirious time.



[Elaine Pagels, Religion Dept., Princeton] The Saturnalia celebrations were certainly times of revelry, of turning the social order upside down, and having the master pretend to be the slave, and the slave pretend to be the master. Sort of a time out of time in which one could celebrate a kind of disorder in the universe.



[Narrator] One of the holiday's important feasts was Juvenalia, which celebrated the children of Rome.



[A.W. Purdue, Historian, Open University, England] All of these early festivals weren't necessarily about children particularly, but they are about fertility. Children did have their particular place, and indulging children is, of course, very much a part of our own Christmas. And it did have its place even in these ribald, drunken festivals that the Romans had.



[Narrator] Among the upper classes in Rome, solstice celebrations were significantly more sober. Many influential Romans worshiped Mithra, the God of the unconquerable sun.



To this small but powerful sect, the birthday of Mithra was the holiest day of the year.



[Elaine Pagels, Religion Dept., Princeton] December 25th was the winter solstice in that part of the world, and it

was also understood to be the birthday of the sun god, Mithra. And Mithra was said to be born from a rock. Shepherds came to worship him as he was an infant god born out of that pastoral place in the fields. And many of those stories, of course, have come into Christian tradition.



[Narrator] While Romans were worshipping the sun god, a new religion was taking hold throughout the empire. At first, Christians didn't celebrate the birth of Christ.



His resurrection was the essential fact of the new religion. By the 4th century, however, the question of the holy birth became impossible to ignore.



[Penne L. Restad, Historian, Univ. of Texas] There were questions within the church about how do we even imagine Jesus? Some people believe that Jesus was purely a spiritual emanation of God, and others believe that Jesus must have actually appeared on earth. And so the decision to celebrate Jesus's birth meant that Jesus was actually a human, or a human form.



[Narrator] For Christians, the fact of his birth was settled, but the date remained a mystery. The Bible doesn't mention exactly when Christ was born, but certain facts suggest it probably was not in December.



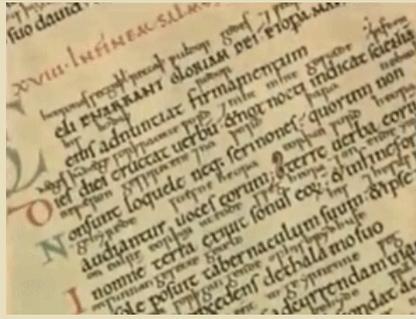
[Forrest Church, Minister, All Souls Church] If you're going to sort through the runes of the scriptures, Jesus was probably born in the Spring. If the shepherds are out in the fields watching their flock by night, we're not talking about one of the cold spells at the heart of winter.



[Narrator] If Pagan Rome was already celebrating the birth of Mithra on December 25th, it seemed natural to honor the birth of the Christ-child at the same time.



By the 4th century, the Church made it official.



December 25th was declared the feast day of the nativity.

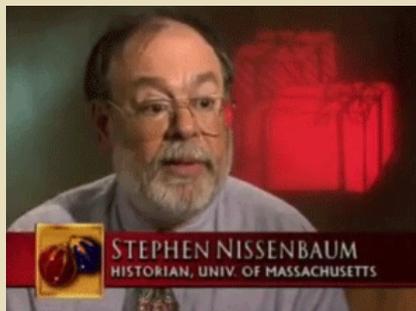
[A.W. Purdue, Historian, Open University, England] It was a short step from the feast day of the risen sun, S U N, to the feast day of the risen son, S O N. So in a sense, it's a very good choice that the symbolism is there, because the feast day of the risen S U N was about fertility, about birth. And so obviously is the Christian Christmas.



[Narrator] The Church knew it could not outlaw the pagan traditions of Christmas, so it set out to adopt them. The evergreens traditionally brought inside were soon decorated with apples, symbolizing the Garden of Eden. These apples would eventually become Christmas ornaments.



And holly, a traditional mid-winter decoration, was recast to represent Christ's crown of thorns.



[Stephen Nissenbau, Historian, University of Mass.] People already had their own agenda for this season. And that agenda was not one that was really radically changed when the names got changed from non-Christian to Christian names. The Church pretty much had a policy of live and let live. If people would call themselves Christians and do lip service to the birth of the savior, then let them do anything they wanted to do with it. But on the other hand, by assigning the nativity to that time of the year, the Church really gave up the opportunity to control the way that celebration took place.



[Narrator] The tension between piety and revelry at Christmas would reach its logical and extreme conclusion in puritan England when the holiday would be considered so un-Christian, it was done away with altogether.



By the Middle Ages, Christianity had largely replaced the old, pagan religions of Europe. On December 25th, the faithful were called to gothic cathedrals like Notre Dame and Salisbury Cathedral in England for Christ's

mass, soon to be called Christmas. But out in the streets, the holiday was still more raucous than religious.



[Stephen Nissenbau, Historian, University of Mass.] If you went to England around Christmas time, any time before, say, 1800, you'd probably feel pretty ill at ease. You wouldn't think it was Christmas at all. What would you think it was? Maybe Mardi Gras. Maybe New Years Eve. Maybe Halloween. Because Christmas in old-time England was really a carnival.



[Narrator] The houses of London were littered with brawling, drunken villagers and couples engaged in the most unholy activities.



And each Christmas, a beggar or student was temporarily put in charge after being crowned The Lord of Misrule.



The rest of the peasantry also got their once a year chance to grab power from the ruling classes.



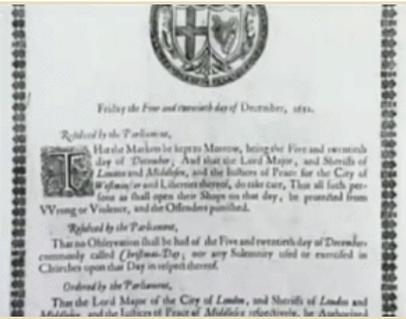
[Stephen Nissenbau, Historian, University of Mass.] They would go around to the houses of the rich, where they would bang on the doors and demand entry. And once they were let in, the lord of the manor had to give them the best stuff that he had. He had to give them his best food, he had to give them his best beer, his best of everything. And if he didn't, they would threaten or actually perform a trick. One surviving Christmas song says, "If you don't give us what we want, then down will come butler, bowl and all." Some historians think that it performed the role of a safety valve. You might say that a wealthy man could make up for an entire year of small or large injustices to the poor by giving a generous Christmas handout just once in the year.



[Narrator] The rules of Christmas would soon change, however, as a wave of religious reforms swept through England in the early 17th century.



Led by Oliver Cromwell, the puritans overthrew the king's forces in 1645 and vowed to rid England of all that was decadent. High on their list was English Christmas.



And in 1652, they outlawed it altogether. Shops were ordered to stay open; churches were forced to stay closed.

[Rev. Forrest Church, Minister, All Souls Church, NYC] The puritans were always, I think, deeply attracted to those things that they were most opposed to. They had a fear that they might have too good of a time. I don't mean to trivialize them, but there was a deep fear that if these things were legalized, they themselves might enjoy them, and their souls would be lost.



[Narrator] The puritans may have said "Good riddance to Christmas," but the people never really stopped celebrating it.



The holiday merely went underground.



If Christmas pie was illegal, it began to be known as "mincepie" instead, which was just as delicious.



[Rev. Forrest Church, Minister, All Souls Church, NYC] The deeper need for Christmas in the human heart, the need for celebration at a time of darkness, those needs made the battle against Christmas, gave it a few temporary wins, but it couldn't possibly secure a final victory.



[Narrator] In 1656, the men of Kent and Canterbury passed a resolution saying that if they could not have their Christmas day, they would have the king back on his throne. They soon got their wish.



The monarchy was restored with Charles II, and Christmas was restored with him. It seemed the English could live without a king but not without Christmas.



[A.W. Purdue, Historian, Open Univ., England] It has been argued that one of the reasons for the restoration of

the monarchy is because by restoring the monarchy, you also restored Christmas, restored the proper English Christmas with its rituals, its traditions, and its carousing. Christmas is brought back, if you like, by popular acclaim.



[Narrator] The fight against Christmas may have been lost in England, but the puritans had high hopes for the new colonies in America.



In 1620, a small group of separatists came ashore at Plymouth, Massachusetts.

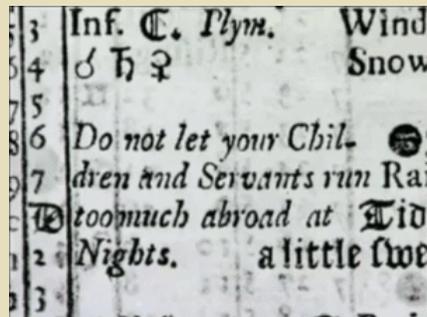


Even more orthodox than their English cousins, these men and women hoped to rid themselves once and for all of the Christmas scourge. In 1659, puritans in Boston followed their English brethren in outlawing Christmas.



Anyone caught exhibiting the Christmas spirit was fined 5 shillings. Like in England, however, Christmas

remained impossible to contain. The 1719 Boston Almanac doesn't list a Christmas holiday, but it does recommend that in late December, you not let your children and servants run too much abroad at night.



[Stephen Nissenbau, Historian, University of Mass] From almost the beginning, in Massachusetts, there's evidence that some people practiced Christmas, and that when they did so, it was in fact an opportunity to get drunk.



And one of the most interesting little sidelights on this, is the finding of historical demographers that there was actually a bulge in conceptions, the conception of children, that took place during Christmas.



[Narrator] Not all the colonies had such trouble with Christmas. Capt. John Smith, leader of the Jamestown settlement in Virginia, wrote that their first new-world Christmas was kept with plenty of good oysters, wild fowl and good bread.



Jamestown settlers were also the first to drink eggnog as a Christmas drink.



The nog coming from the word "grog," which means any drink made with rum.



After Independence, however, all things English fell out of favor in America, Christmas included.



In fact, on December 25, 1789, the United States Congress sat in session and continued to stay open on Christmas day for most of the next 67 years.



[Penne L. Restad, Historian, Univ. of Texas] At this same time, there are people who are writing in their diaries that, "Isn't it too bad we don't have any holidays?" So after the revolution, here is an entire nation that works hard, has forsaken many holidays, has given up many holidays, because they were holidays that were mandated by the Crown, and it is time to start thinking about how to populate the calendar.



[Narrator] As the 19th century dawned, Christmas would be one holiday that would hold the new nation together, but it wouldn't be the carnival Christmas of old England. Nor would it be particularly religious. America would invent its very own Christmas, and in the process reinvent it for the whole world.

O Tannenbaum



[Narrator] New York City, 1820. Within the space of a generation, New York had gone from a backwater port

town to the center of American commerce.



Great wealth came to a few during these years, and moderate living to the burgeoning middle class.



But the industrial revolution had also created the class of the unemployed and the unconnected, whose very existence threatened the cozy world of New York's middle rung. This was never more clear than at Christmas time.



[Stephen Nissenbaum, Historian, Univ. of Mass.] Class concept was emerging with the earliest stages of industrial capitalism, and so what had previously just had an edge of menace, a little bit of trick, but much more good will, much more treat, now changed, and the menace became increasingly obvious, and increasingly serious.



So that by the 1820s, the Christmas season in New York was really a time of gang rioting, a really very, very nasty scene.



So nasty in fact that in the year 1828, the New York City Council for the first time instituted a professional police force of the city, as a direct result of a particularly savage Christmas season riot the year before.



[Narrator] New York's upper class was worried, so worried that a few of them set out to change the way the holiday was celebrated.



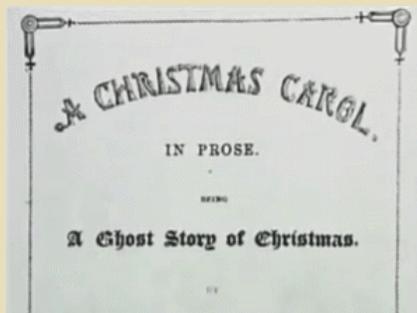
Washington Irving was America's best-selling novelist, and in 1819 he used his expertise to write "Bracebridge Hall," an enormously popular series of stories about Christmas at an imaginary English manor house.



Here, the classes mingled effortlessly as squires welcomed friendly and grateful peasants into their homes.



And in 1843, England's most popular writer, Charles Dickens, tackled the Christmas problem with "A Christmas Carol." It was a best-seller in London and America, and the lessons of the story struck a powerful cord on both sides of the Atlantic.





[A.W. Purdue, Historian, Open Univ., England] "A Christmas Carol", I think, showed the Victorians what could be the use and the meaning of Christmas in a society which had fears about inequality, about too much materialism, about, perhaps, just too rapid change.



[Narrator] There have been countless treatments of this Christmas classic, some in print and some on screen. This television version is from 1958, but the themes are straight out of the 19th century.



[Ebenezer Scrooge] It's not convenient. A poor excuse to pick the pocket of your employer every 25th of December. Christmas -- nonsense! Humbug!

[Stephen Nissenbau, Historian, University of Mass] I think the character of Ebenezer Scrooge is one very important lesson to middle class people. Because the Christmas season presented them with a real problem. What do we owe to the different people in our world? What do we owe to our families? What do we owe to our employees? What do we owe to the anonymous poor?



[Narrator] At first, Ebenezer Scrooge refuses to face those problems, but after his visions of Christmas past, present and future, Scrooge learns that family and charity cannot be ignored at Christmas time.



[Leigh Eric Schmidt, Religion Dept., Princeton Univ.] Really, it's a conversion story, a story about this hard-hearted man being born to Christmas observance. That conversion story is important for Victorians to be thinking about their own conversion to the holiday. Because it is very much that they are being re-converted. So many of them had given up on the holiday, so now they have to come to terms with their own reconnection to that. And Scrooge is a way of doing that.

[A.W. Purdue, Historian, Open University, England] There's this lovely story of Dickens going around America on one of these famous reading tours, and this American factory owner going to a reading of "A Christmas Carol." And on the way home saying to his wife, "Next year we shall close the factory on Christmas Day."



[Narrator] 19th century Americans were discovering Christmas after a 200 year drought of puritan disapproval. But the holiday would never have taken hold if society wasn't ready for it. One important shift was occurring right inside the family itself.



[Stephen Nissenbau, Historian, University of Mass] Before the 19th century, the family existed as what we might think of as an engine of discipline, designed to train children to work hard.



After 1820, 1830, the family was very quickly and perceptibly becoming an agency that was designed to provide the emotional nursery for children, so that they could grow up being sensitive little people, and who took a lot of pleasure in the family and in the world itself.



[Narrator] Christmas was tailor-made for this transition. Now there was a holiday where attention could be lavished on children without seeming to spoil them.



[Stephen Nissenbau, Historian, University of Mass] The moment of Christmas, where parents started to pay attention to their children, I sometimes come to think of this as the invention of quality time within the family. Parents would discover the joy that they could take out of watching the joy in their children's faces when they gave their children presents.



[Narrator] Americans now knew why they were celebrating Christmas, but they didn't know exactly how to go about it. The old pagan revelry was clearly inappropriate for a Victorian home, but some ancient traditions were perfect for reviving.



The Christmas tree has its roots in Germany where decorated evergreens had always been a part of the winter celebrations.



But the tree might have stayed there if not for the royal marriage in 1840 of Victoria, the queen of England, to

her cousin, Prince Albert of Germany. Albert brought his German ways to Windsor Palace, including the annual Christmas tree.



In 1848, the London Illustrated News published this engraving of the royal family, standing by the first Christmas tree most English had ever seen.



In just a few years, a decorated fir could be found in nearly every English home at Christmas.

[A.W. Purdue, Historian, Open University, England] Within a few years, if you look at Victorian diaries and letters, people are saying, "We had a Christmas tree as is customary," or "We had a Christmas tree as we have always had." But they hadn't always had it at all. It was a custom which started in the 1840s, and by the 1850s, people believed that the Christmas tree was part of the English Christmas.



[Narrator] Americans embraced the Christmas tree just as quickly as the English had. In fact, its connection to the Old World was one of its strongest selling points.



[Leigh Eric Schmidt, Religion Dept., Princeton Univ.] For a lot of Americans, these are going to be new holiday traditions, not something their parents did, especially in the case of the more austere Protestants. So they're looking for a reason for what they're doing. And one of the most convenient reasons they can have is they can say, "Well, this is the way it is done in Germany, or this is the way it's done in England."



[Narrator] All of a sudden, Christmas traditions were popping up everywhere.



In 1828, Joel R. Poinsett, America's minister to Mexico, brought back a green and red plant that seemed perfect for the new holiday.



And in 1843, the English firm of J.C. Horsley printed the first Christmas card.



A newly efficient postal service in England and America helped make Christmas cards an overnight sensation.



It seemed as though every vestige of the old bacchanalian Christmas was gone. But even the Victorians couldn't clean up Christmas completely.



[A.W. Purdue, Historian, Open University, England] Victorians were particularly keen on mistletoe, because, of course, you could actually kiss a lady, or a lady could kiss a man, that normally in the normal course of things she would not be allowed to kiss.



So in a society which was fairly strict, one vestige of that licentious Christmas from earlier times, a sprig of mistletoe, no Victorian Christmas gathering was without it.



[Narrator] By mid-century, Christmas was everywhere in America: in the streets, in the homes, in the marketplace.



The one place you could not find Christmas was in church. Most Americans were protestant, and the protestant church had ignored Christmas for years. But protestant Victorians longed for official religion on this sacred day.



[Leigh Eric Schmidt, Religion Dept., Princeton Univ.] What a number of them did initially was say, "Well, we can't find a Christmas service in our Baptist church or our Presbyterian church, let's go see what the Catholics are doing, or let's go see what the Episcopalians are doing." And increasingly that puts pressure on these latter

day puritans to have Christmas services, because there's a way in which lay people begin to expect it.

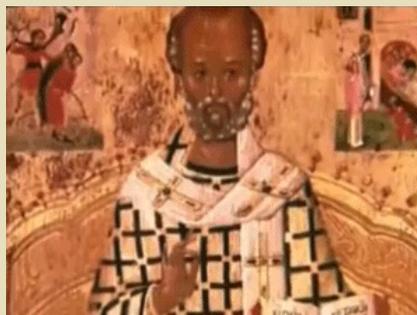


[Narrator] Church services, mistletoe and Christmas trees: America's new holiday now seemed firmly in place. But Victorian America had one last contribution to the Christmas season: a jolly elf who shimmied down the chimney would soon personify Christmas for generations to come.



Ol' Saint Nick

[Narrator] We borrowed the Christmas tree from Germany, and the Christmas card from England. But one Christmas icon was developed right here in America: Santa Claus.



Long before Santa, however, there was Saint Nicholas, a Greek Orthodox bishop who became one of the most popular saints of the Middle Ages. On December 6th, Saint Nicholas Day, good children woke to gifts from the kindly saint. Bad children sulked away with nothing.



In Holland, he was known as Sinterklaas, and when the Dutch came to this country, they brought tales of their gift-giving Nicholas with them.



This quaint custom caught the imagination of Clement Clark Moore, a well-heeled Episcopal minister in New York City. In 1822, Moore wrote a poem for his children about a good-natured saint who came down the chimney on Christmas eve.

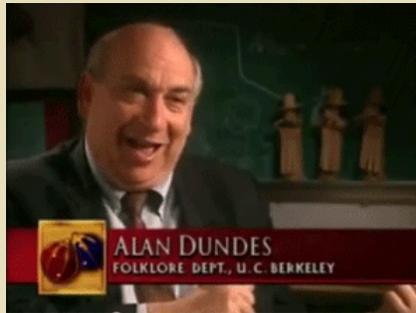
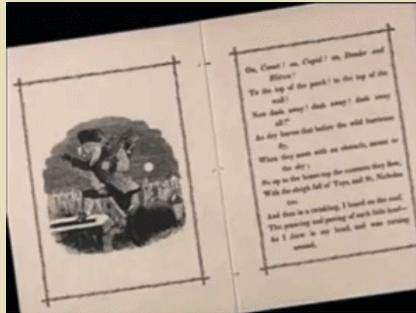


"Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse. The stockings were hung by the chimney with care in hopes that Saint Nicholas would soon be there.

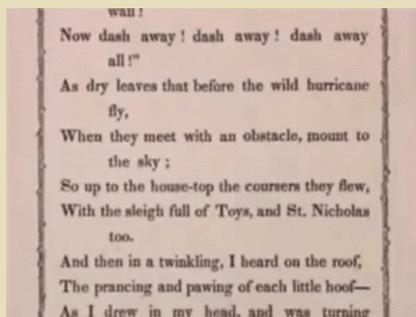


[Narrator] Moore dreamed up Dasher, Dancer and the rest of the reindeer, along with Santa's entrance through the chimney. But at first he was embarrassed by the poem. He worried it was too frivolous for a man of the

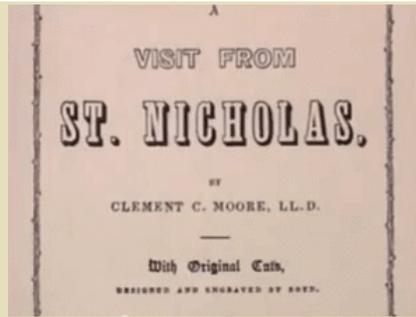
church.



[Alan Dundes, Folklore Dept., U.C. Berkeley] Clement Moore was a minister. Here, a minister, who should be on the other side, is promoting a secular Christmas, with reindeer and all of the rest of it. But there was no mention in the poem of anything religious.



In fact, that's why he didn't reveal who he was. In the beginning, he didn't reveal the authorship.



[Narrator] Moore soon owned up to the poem when it became clear that every child in America was scanning the horizon for reindeer on Christmas eve.



Less clear was what exactly this Santa Claus looked like.



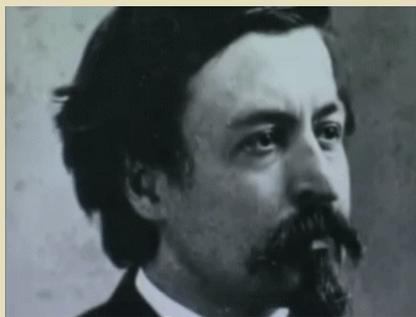
At first, Santa came in all shapes and sizes: a pagan sorcerer;



a frightening gnome;



even a drunkard on a turkey-driven sleigh.



Then in 1863, Thomas Nast, a cartoonist for Harper's Weekly, settled the matter once and for all with his version of the Christmas Saint.



Nast's Santa was rounder and jollier than his austere Catholic cousin.



He looked, in fact, like a man of his times, a man who would fit right in with the rotund, bewhiskered robber-barons of the late 19th century.



But Santa was a robber-baron in reverse.

[Penne L. Restad, Historian, Univ. of Texas] Instead of taking from the less fortunate, he gave to the less fortunate. He gave to people regardless of whether they had done something or not. In other words, he gave to children. Instead of gathering together wealth, he gets rid of wealth, and he does it yearly.



[Narrator] A captain of industry with a heart of gold. It's no wonder that by the 1840s, Santa Claus was an irresistible image to America's retailers. Here was a guy who could sell anything at Christmas, but make it seem

like you were not buying gifts at all.



[Stephen Nissenbaum, Historian, Univ. of Mass.] Santa provided a way for both children and parents to pretend that Christmas presents were not in the realm of the commercial marketplace, that Christmas presents existed in the realm of pure domestic affection. So Santa Claus played a very important role for both parents and children. He took presents out of the realm of commerce.



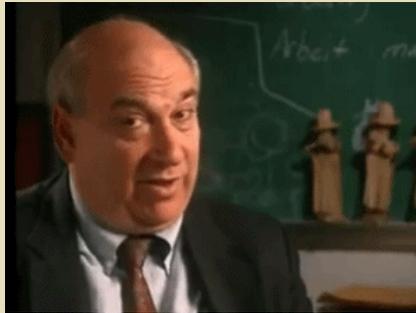
[Narrator] If the image of Santa could sell merchandise, retailers soon figured out that a real, live Santa would boost sales even further. Santa has been showing up in department stores since the mid-1800s. And since then, nothing has loomed larger to a child at Christmas than this annual pilgrimage.



[Alan Dundes, Folklore Dept., U.C. Berkeley] If you want to talk to Santa Claus, where do you go? You go to the shopping mall.



Now this is strange for a Saint to be living pretty much full time in a department store.



And it is rather American, because we are after all a capitalistic society. It makes perfect sense for us to have our national saint in a department store. That's commercial sense for us. Dollars and cents.



[Narrator] Author and humorist Jean Shepherd immortalized this rite of passage in "A Christmas Story," an autobiographical account of one boy's Christmas.

[Jean Shepherd, Humorist] I had been thinking for weeks what I wanted for Christmas. I figured the best thing to do was to tell Santa Claus about that.





And I looked up at that Santa Claus, and he had these big, watery blue eyes, and a huge beard. And he's looking me right in the eye, and he was so impressive that my mind went blank.



It's like if all of a sudden you are sitting on the President's lap, and he says, "What would you like me to pass in legislation, sonny?" I mean, your mind's gonna go blank. You can't remember any of this stuff. And so at that point Santa Claus looked at me and he says, "Alright, ha, ha, ha, ha, how about a football, kid?"



A football? I wanted a BB gun.

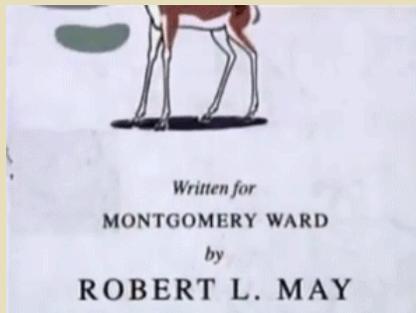


So he pushed me off his lap, and this elf grabbed me and threw me down a slide that went down into the snow. And I lay there for a minute, and I knew that I was not a fit person to talk to the great Santa Claus, who is obviously a star.





[Narrator] A celebrity of this magnitude obviously needed a sidekick.



In 1939, Robert May, a copywriter at the Montgomery Ward department store, dashed off a promotional children's book to lure Christmas shoppers into the store. [Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer]



May's story told of an ostracized reindeer with a big, red nose.





[Alan Dundes, Folklore Dept., U.C. Berkeley] This physical, should I say "disability", turns out to be an asset, because it's a foggy Christmas eve, and this light (ha ha ha) on his nose enables poor old stumbling Santa Claus to get through.



So you have this handicapped sort of child figure helping the benighted parental figure make Christmas possible.





[Narrator] Rudolph brought Christmas full circle. It was now the children who really made Christmas possible. Only THEY understood the meaning of this enchanted day. From Washington Irving to Montgomery Ward ...

I'll Be Home For Christmas



[Narrator] By the 1920s, few vestiges of the carnival Christmas were left in America. One exception was this Christmas parade in New York City, where a glimpse of Santa Claus was worth an all-day wait.



But by the 1950s, Christmas was strictly a family affair, with eggnog by the fire, Bing on the hi-fi, and a load of presents under the tree.

[Jean Shepherd, Humorist] The joy of opening up gifts is one of the things that makes Christmas what it is. It's the mystery of all of these packages. I think that's why we wrap them. It's exciting to have a package lying there

with silver paper on it. You don't know what's in it. And you open it up and there it is, it's something that's really great, that you really wanted.

[Narrator] But to give presents, you have to shop for them. And shopping has long been at the heart of the Christmas season. Critics say this yearly buying frenzy obscures the real reason for Christmas: to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child.



[Penne L. Restad, Historian, Univ. of Texas] People say that "Christ" has been lost in Christmas. Implicit in that is the idea that Christ had ever been totally the center of Christmas. And as Christmas has been celebrated ever since it was instituted as a feast of the nativity, there's always been other ritual, other ceremony, other activity associated with Christmas in addition to Christ.



[Narrator] At the All Souls Church in New York City, Christmas Eve services give the secular side of the holiday some stiff competition.



[Rev. Forrest Church, Minister, All Souls Church, NYC] At All Souls, we sing carols, we bring in [inaudible] orchestra that do great music from the Christmas tradition. Certainly today, most churches revel in the celebrations as completely as do the corporate malls. That's not a bad thing. It actually goes back to the sources of this kind of holiday, where we recognize that people have deep needs at this time of year to connect with that which is very important, but also to celebrate.



[Leigh Eric Schmidt, Religion Dept., Princeton Univ.] It gets 50-60% of the population going to one kind of Christmas religious service or another. So clearly a lot of people haven't lost sight of the religious need. But what seems to be the concern here is that there's a struggle, a competition over what the real meaning is, and a sense that the religious is not competing effectively with all these other competitors.



[Narrator] But perhaps Christmas in America is more a combination of the sacred and the secular, and less a competition between the two.



[Penne L. Restad, Historian, Univ. of Texas] I think that if people had Christmas with just Christ in it, it would not be a holiday that would come out into the streets the way that it does, because the trees, the carols, the shopping, all of that becomes the cultural material that holds the religion in place.



[Narrator] This cultural material is everywhere. Certain songs and movies have become as much a part of

Christmas as the tree.



[Jimmy Stewart] I don't want to get married to anybody, you understand? I want to do what I want to do. And you --



[Rev. Forrest Church, Minister, All Souls Church, NYC] Movies such as "It's a Wonderful Life", hunger for the art, or delight in them, reflects a deep potential goodness in the human soul.



But these are good movies. People do good things, and they get rewarded for them. Someone might say that this is a trivialization of Christmas. I think it probably is coming a little closer than many of the things we do to tapping the true Christmas spirit in the broadest sense of that word.



[Child] Look Daddy! Teacher says, "Every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings."



[Stephen Nissenbaum, Historian, Univ. of Mass] Nowadays, kids watch new films and new TV shows, and they will grow up thinking that that was the way Christmas always used to be. We always reinvent, and every time we reinvent we think that what we're reinventing is something that has no beginning.



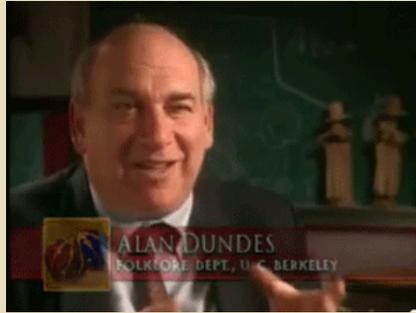
[Narrator] You can reinvent Christmas, or celebrate it the way your great grandparents did. The only thing you cannot do is ignore Christmas.



To not catch a glimpse of a Christmas tree, or hear a note of jingle bells, would be nearly impossible. And since 98% of Americans celebrate Christmas in some form, it looks like that won't change for quite some time.

[Alan Dundes, Folklore Dept., U.C. Berkeley] It gives you a kind of sense of belonging. You are who you are

because of the way you celebrate Christmas, in part.



And if you're celebrating an Armenian Christmas, or an Italian Christmas, whatever it is, whatever your group is, if you celebrate Christmas the same way every year, there's a sense of continuity here.



And the new children are brought in, and in effect are socialized by saying, "This is how we celebrate Christmas in our own family."



Something touches Americans, somewhere down deep in his belly button, about Christmas. You can't really explain what it is about Christmas that he enjoys so much.



He just knows that when all those red and green lights go up, you know, on the street, and you see Santa Clauses walking around with their bells, that something happens to you. You enjoy it. Now you can be cynical

all you want, but you still enjoy it.



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