

Encyclopedia of  
**CHRISTMAS**  
*and New Year's  
Celebrations*

*2nd Edition*

*Over 240 Alphabetically Arranged Entries Covering  
Christmas, New Year's, and Related Days of  
Observance, Including Folk and Religious Customs,  
History, Legends, and Symbols from Around the World.  
Supplemented by a Bibliography and Lists of Christmas  
Web Sites and Associations, as well as an Index*



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# *Santa Claus*

*Kriss Kringle, St. Nick*

Born in the United States of mixed ethnic and religious heritage, Santa Claus embodies the American ideal of the nation as a great melting pot of cultural identities. Santa Claus became an important folk figure in the second half of the nineteenth century, about the time when Americans were beginning to celebrate Christmas in large numbers (*see also America, Christmas in Nineteenth-Century*). Santa Claus bears a good deal of resemblance to his closest relative, the old European gift bringer **St. Nicholas**. Indeed “St. Nick” serves as one of Santa’s nicknames.

While the origins of many legendary figures remain obscure, researchers have traced the basic framework of the Santa Claus myth back to the creative works of three individuals: writer Washington Irving (1783-1859), scholar Clement C. Moore (1779-1863), and illustrator Thomas Nast (1840-1902). These men, in turn, drew on elements of European and Euro-American Christmas folklore in their portrayals of the Christmas gift bringer. Interestingly enough, Americans embraced this “ready-made” folklore in the late nineteenth century, a time when ready-made goods of all kinds became widely available due to the rise of industrial manufacturing.

Today Santa Claus reigns as an icon of American Christmas celebrations. Many Christmas decorations bear his image, and popular songs tell of his **North Pole** and Christmas Eve activities. Nearly every American child can tell you that Santa is a plump, old man with a white beard who wears a baggy red suit and cap trimmed with white fur. Many send letters to his North Pole workshop describing the **gifts** they would like to receive for Christmas (*see also Children’s Letters*). They eagerly await Christmas Eve, when he loads his sled with toys for good girls and boys and flies around the world, sliding down chimneys to place the presents under decorated **Christmas trees**. As if to confirm this Christmas fairy tale, men in



Santa suits regularly appear on street corners, at office parties, and in department and toy stores around Christmas time.

### *Before Santa Claus*

In spite of its contemporary popularity, Christmas was not widely celebrated in the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century (*see also America, Christmas in Colonial*). A few ethnic groups, however, clung to the Christmas customs inherited from their European ancestors. Before Santa Claus became a familiar gift bringer to most Americans, the Pennsylvania Dutch received Christmas gifts from the Christ Child, whom they called **Christkindel**, *Christ-kindlein*, or *Christkindchen*.

The Pennsylvania Dutch were Swiss and German immigrants who settled in Pennsylvania during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These German-speaking immigrants called themselves *Deutsche*, which means “German.” Eventually, Americans turned “*Deutsche*” into “Dutch.” Although the “Plain Dutch” (the **Amish**, Mennonites, and Brethren) did not celebrate Christmas, the “Gay Dutch” (Lutherans and Reformed) did.

The Gay Dutch brought their German Christmas folklore with them to the United States. This folklore included two Christmas gift bringers, the Christ Child and Belsnickel (*see Knecht Ruprecht*). These two figures were distributing gifts to people of German descent in Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century, decades before Moore wrote his famous Christmas poem, “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” and a century before Thomas Nast’s illustrations popularized Santa Claus. Belsnickel was also known in German communities in Michigan, Iowa, and New York.

### *The Christ Child in America*

The Christ Child contributed very little to our contemporary image of Santa Claus. Unlike Santa Claus, who rides in a magical flying sleigh, the early American Christ Child traveled from house to house on a humble donkey. Children left out plates or baskets filled with hay for the Child’s mount. The Christ Child exchanged the hay for nuts, candy, and cookies.

By the early 1800s, however, the image of the Christ Child began to blur together with that of another European gift giver, the elderly St. Nicholas. Moreover, the German words for Christ Child, *Christ-Kindel* or *Christ-Kindlein*, began to slur as more non-German speakers attempted to pronounce these words. "Christkindel" turned into "Krist Kingle," and later, into "Kris Kringle." In 1842 the publication of *The Kriss Kringle Book* cemented this pronunciation error and compounded it by using the name to describe a gift giver who seemed suspiciously like Santa Claus. Eventually, all that remained of the German Christ Child was the Americanized name "Kris Kringle." And even that was transformed into a nickname for Santa Claus.

### ***Belsnickel in America***

Belsnickel may have contributed to the image of Santa Claus in a more direct way. In **Germany** Belsnickel, or Knecht Ruprecht, accompanied St. Nicholas on his gift-giving rounds. Germans pictured him as a shaggy, soot-covered man who carried a whip, a **bell**, and a sack of treats. In Pennsylvania Dutch country, however, Belsnickel made his rounds without St. Nicholas. He brought nuts, candies, and cookies to children daring enough to brave a possible smack of the whip as they scrambled for the treats he tossed on the floor. Since Belsnickel often dressed in furs, at least one writer has speculated that his image may have inspired the fur-trimmed suit worn by Santa Claus. In the United States beliefs and customs surrounding Belsnickel survived somewhat longer than those surrounding the Christ Child, dying out in the early twentieth century.

### ***St. Nicholas in America***

Whereas Belsnickel and the Christ Child appeared around Christmas, St. Nicholas traditionally brought his gifts on the eve of his feast day, December 6 (*see also St. Nicholas's Day*). Historical evidence suggests that the gift-giving customs surrounding the saint were well known in the Netherlands during the eighteenth century. By contrast, only a few scattered references to beliefs and customs surrounding St. Nicholas can be found among Dutch and German immigrants to the United States during this same era. Apparently,

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folk traditions concerning St. Nicholas as a winter season gift giver did not cross the Atlantic with Dutch and German immigrants in any great force.

### *Washington Irving and St. Nicholas*

The St. Nicholas we know today needed the help of writer Washington Irving to establish a toehold in this country. In 1809 Irving's satirical *A History of New York* raised St. Nicholas to a position of importance in New York's Dutch-American community, primarily as a symbol of ethnic identity. In doing so, he made a few changes to the traditional European image of the saint. Irving replaced the tall, somber, and commanding man in a red bishop's robe with a short, round, jolly Dutchman who smoked a long-stemmed pipe and dressed in colonial garb.

### *Clement C. Moore and St. Nicholas*

Clement C. Moore, a professor at New York's General Theological Seminary, was a friend of Washington Irving's. In 1822 he wrote a poem about St. Nicholas that was destined to shape the American image of Santa Claus. Titled "A Visit from St. Nicholas," the poem begins with the familiar line, "'Twas the night before Christmas." Moore based the appearance of St. Nicholas partly on the image of him presented in Irving's *History* and partly on a plump Dutch man who lived near Moore's house. Moore's St. Nicholas also bears some resemblance to Irving's portrait of Wouter Van Twiller, the first governor of the New Netherlands colony in what is now New York.

Although the poem is about St. Nicholas, Moore shifted the traditional date of Nicholas's visit from the eve of his own feast day to Christmas Eve. In this way Moore transformed the saint into a Christmas gift bringer. In addition, Moore's poem promoted the European St. Nicholas's Day custom of using **stockings** as convenient receptacles for gifts. Moore also retained the old European idea that St. Nicholas enters homes through the chimney, an idea some writers ultimately trace back to the belief that pagan deities spiraled downwards into homes on the smoke of hearth fires (*see also Berchta*).



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In spite of his reliance on Dutch folklore in portraying the image and activities of St. Nicholas, Moore eliminated **Black Peter**, St. Nicholas's faithful companion in the Netherlands. According to Dutch tradition, Black Peter usually did the dirty work of climbing down the chimney and so acquired a grimy appearance. In Moore's poem St. Nicholas himself descends the chimney and thus appears all "tarnished with ashes and soot." Moore may also have been patterning this aspect of St. Nicholas's appearance after Belsnickel, whom nineteenth-century German-American youth would impersonate by coating their faces and hands with soot.

Although Moore is sometimes credited with the invention of Santa's flying **reindeer**, scholars note that the image actually appeared in a little-known children's poem published a year before Moore wrote "A Visit from St. Nicholas." Moore did, however, assign the reindeer the names by which we still know them today: Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donder, and Blitzen. Moore's poem was first published under his own name in 1844.

### *More Confusion Over Names*

By the time the next major contributor to the gift bringer's mythology came upon the scene, the St. Nicholas figure popularized by Moore and Irving had become known as Santa Claus. The Dutch phrase for St. Nicholas is *Sinterklaas*. Apparently, American English speakers found this word troublesome. Scholars have uncovered a number of early American renditions of the good saint's name, including "St. Aclaus," "St. Iclaus," "Santeclaw," "Sancte Klaas," "St. Claas," and "St. a claus." Eventually, Americans settled on "Santa Claus," a name which, for most English speakers, obscured the gift giver's link back to one of Europe's most popular saints.

### *Thomas Nast and Santa Claus*

Nineteenth-century illustrations depicting Santa Claus reveal that people held widely varying views as to what the gift bringer looked like. Some imagined him as fat, others as thin. Some saw him as gnome-like, others as an adult human being. One magazine illustration even depicted him as a little girl, perhaps confusing him with



another gift bringer, Christkindel. In the late 1800s illustrator Thomas Nast, a German-born immigrant, published a series of Santa Claus drawings that captured the public imagination and settled the issue of Santa's appearance.

In embellishing the mythic figure outlined by Moore and Irving, Nast may well have drawn on his knowledge of northern European customs surrounding Christmas gift givers. In a series of drawings published over the course of thirty years, Nast created the Santa Claus costume with which we are so familiar today: a long, white beard, black boots, and a red suit trimmed with white fur. At least one writer has speculated that Nast drew on popular German conceptions of a fur-clad gift giver, such as Belsnickel, in designing the costume. The fact that the costume was primarily red, however, suggests that Nast had the European St. Nicholas in mind, since the saint was traditionally depicted wearing the red robes of a bishop.

Nast expanded the Santa lore of his time by giving the gift bringer a home address, the North Pole, and some new helpers, **elves**. Furthermore, although Moore's poem suggested that Santa was an elf himself, Nast settled on portraying him as a fat, jolly, elderly man. Some speculate that Nast knew of the Scandinavian tradition whereby elves deliver Christmas gifts (*see* **Jultomten**). They suggest that knowledge of this folk custom may have inspired him to add elves to Santa's household.

### ***Nineteenth-Century Developments***

Although the folklore surrounding Santa Claus has for the most part remained remarkably stable since its creation, a few changes occurred over the course of the nineteenth century. The original Dutch St. Nicholas punished misbehaving children by leaving them only a rod or stick, which symbolized a beating. So did Knecht Ruprecht, Belsnickel, and, by some reports, Christkindel. As the century rolled by, however, Americans placed less and less emphasis on the punitive aspect of Santa's mission. Some researchers attribute this development to changing concepts of childhood and child rearing. By the late nineteenth century many Americans began to view children less as unruly creatures who needed to be controlled by threat of punishment and more as ignorant and innocent souls who needed to be

taught through nurturance and good example. Apparently, Santa Claus changed his attitudes towards children along with the rest of the country.

Moore's poem makes no mention of a Christmas tree, and has the jolly gift giver fill the children's stockings instead. Nevertheless, Santa eventually adopted the old German custom of placing gifts under the Christmas tree. In 1845 a children's book titled *Kriss Kringle's Christmas Tree* presented American audiences with the idea that the Christmas gift bringer hangs his gifts on the Christmas tree. Throughout the nineteenth century the association between the tree and the gifts grew stronger as the custom of installing a decorated tree in one's house at Christmas time gained in popularity. As Americans began to give one another more and heavier gifts, they began to place them beneath the tree rather than hang them on the tree. And while stockings hung by the fireplace never completely disappeared from the American Christmas scene, they became a much less important component of the gift-giving ritual when Santa began to place gifts under the tree.

### ***Promoting the Santa Claus Myth***

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Santa Claus myth had become so well established that retailers, advertisers, and charities began to use it to promote their interests (*see also Commercialism*). Hired Santas began to appear on street corners and in department stores. In 1937 the first training school for professional Santas was established in Albion, New York. Its classes taught potential Santas how to act and dress the role and coached them in Santa mythology. By the mid-1950s **New York City** alone could boast of at least three such Santa schools.

In the first half of the twentieth century, however, some people worried whether the sudden proliferation of street-corner Santas would cause children to question the Santa Claus myth. In 1914 a group of concerned citizens in New York City formed the Santa Claus Association, a group whose self-appointed mission was to safeguard children's belief in Santa Claus. At Christmas time they busied themselves with collecting children's letters to Santa Claus from the post office and responding to the requests they contained. In 1929 post

office officials themselves took over the task of responding to these letters. Other groups did their part to limit the overbooking of Santas. In 1937 the **Salvation Army** stopped hiring Santas to promote their cause. In 1948 the Boston city council recommended that the city host only one Santa per season to be headquartered on Boston Common.

While some worked to protect children's belief in Santa Claus, others wondered whether children should be taught the myth at all. Religious parents expressed concern that children would confuse Santa Claus with **Jesus**. Their concern echoed that of German Protestant reformers from centuries past who eventually succeeded in replacing St. Nicholas as the holiday season gift bringer with Christ-kindel.

### ***Twentieth-Century Developments***

Santa has become such a popular American institution that a multitude of training courses are now available for the thousands of people who play Santa Claus each year at public events. It has been estimated that about 20,000 "rent-a-Santas" ply their trade across the United States each year at Christmas time. Most of the training directed at these seasonal Santas teaches them how to maintain their jolly manner and appearance under pressure from the public. Practical advice, such as not falling asleep on the job, blends with bits of Santa etiquette, such as not accepting money from a parent while a child is looking on, and avoiding eating garlic, onions, or beans for lunch. Another typical teaching counsels seasonal Santas to keep their cool even if blessed by a "royal christening" from an over-excited child.

The twentieth century has witnessed only a few refinements to the basic Santa Claus myth. The most important of these was the addition of a new member to Santa's team of flying reindeer, a gawky, young, red-nosed creature named Rudolf. Young Rudolf enjoyed instant popularity with the American public, inspiring both a popular song and a children's television special. In addition, beginning in the 1920s the Coca-Cola Company commissioned artist Haddon Sunblom to draw a series of color illustrations of Santa Claus for an



advertising campaign. Like Nast's earlier illustrations, these drawings helped to define the image of Santa Claus in the minds of many Americans.

During the twentieth century American pop culture reached almost every part of the globe. People from all over the world can now identify the jolly, chubby, white-bearded man in the red suit as Santa Claus. He competes with other Christmas gift bringers, such as **Grandfather Frost** and **La Befana**, for the allegiance of people in many nations.



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## APPENDIX 2

# Web Sites

This appendix furnishes addresses for web sites offering information on a wide variety of Christmas-related topics.



### *Christmas Around the World*

#### **International**

This site provides links to pages describing Christmas celebrations around the world, sponsored by Coral Technologies, Inc.:

<http://www.santaclaus.com/world.html>

#### **Australia**

The following web site, sponsored by the Australian government's Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, offers information on Christmas celebrations in Australia:

<http://www.acn.gov.au/articles/1998/11/xmas.htm>

The Australian National Botanic Gardens sponsors a page on native plants associated with Christmas. Gives photos as well as text from *Australian Native Plants* by John Wrigley and Murray Fagg (1996):

<http://www.anbg.gov.au/christmas/christmas.html>

#### **Bulgaria**

"Wonderland Bulgaria," a web site maintained by Iliana Rakilovska, Irina Simeonova, Maria Nankova, and Kamen Minchev, furnishes information on the history, population, folklore, and geography of Bulgaria. For information on Bulgarian folk festivals, see:

<http://www.omda.bg/engl/ethnography/festivals.html>

## Associations

This appendix lists groups whose missions relate to Christmas in some way. A brief summary of the group's purpose, available publications, and full contact information accompanies each listing.



### Alternatives for Simple Living

**Address:** 5312 Morningside Ave., P.O. Box 2787, Sioux City, IA 51106

**Phone:** 712-274-8875; **Toll-free:** 800-821-6153; **Fax:** 712-274-1402

**Contact:** Rose Ann Pridie, Office Manager

**E-mail:** [alternatives@simpleliving.com](mailto:alternatives@simpleliving.com)

**Web site:** <http://www.simpleliving.org>

**Founded:** 1973

**Publications:** *The Alternative Wedding Book*; *Beyond a Consumer Lifestyle* (video); *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* (video); *Simplify and Celebrate: Embracing the Soul of Christmas*; *Adventures in Simple Living*; *Simple Living 101*; *To Celebrate: Reshaping Holidays and Rites of Passage*; *Whose Birthday Is It, Anyway?* (Christmas annual).

**Purpose:** Promotes voluntary simplicity by educating members and the public on alternatives to materialistic lifestyles and celebrations. Runs National Alternatives Celebrations campaign, urging a reduced reliance on commercial modes of celebration and a return to the original meaning of holidays, especially Christmas. Suggests donating money saved to projects that promote human welfare. Also known as "Alternatives."



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The Index lists customs, symbols, legends, musical and literary works, historical figures and mythological characters, foods and beverages, religious groups and denominations, geographical locations, ethnic groups, keywords, alternate names, and other special subjects mentioned in the text.



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