

Tracking down Christmas past

Ebenezer Scrooge would have felt right at home in this country making Bob Cratchit work on Christmas Day. It wasn't until after the mid-1800s that Dec. 25 was no longer a work or a school day for many Americans.

The traditional American Christmas is not so very old at all. Gift-giving, card-sending, tree-trimming and other present-day customs did not become popular until the final decades of the 19th century, arriving then as a package of Victorian style and business zeal.

For many years, Thanksgiving actually was far more special than Christmas in New England. In the South, firecrackers were set off Christmas morning, colored eggs decorated evergreens in Dutch settlements along the Hudson River. Well into the 1800s, Santa Claus was portrayed as quite a small, elfish figure sometimes capped off with a feather.

Technological developments, advances in transportation, printing and mail services probably were responsible for the enormous change and popularization of Christmas day in the Victorian period," according to Shirley Cherkasky, a sociologist responsible for holiday research at the Smithsonian Institution's Division of Performing Arts.

"Certainly, the publication of Charles Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol,' with its themes of charity and goodwill, affected the idea of how people felt Christmas should be observed," she adds.

EARLY IN THE COUNTRY'S history, the Puritan settlers believed Christmas should not be observed at all, and in 1659 the celebration was outlawed in Massachusetts by the decree: "Whoever shall be found observing any such

day as Christmas and the like . . . shall pay for each offense five shillings to the country."

The Puritans associated Christmas with the Church of England, a painful reminder of their struggle for religious freedom. The Dec. 25 holiday, they strongly felt, was a human invention, a fabrication. Christ's birthdate was unknown, and therefore, the day should never have been ordained by the Church. The Puritans also didn't care much for the occasion, thinking it too closely linked to the spirited pagan celebration of the winter solstice.

But in New York, Pennsylvania and the southern colonies, Christmas was another matter altogether. The Anglicans, Lutherans, Dutch Reformed and Roman Catholics in these regions celebrated with music, dancing, feasts and family gatherings.

"TODAY, IF YOU'RE talking about getting back to a more religious holiday, you might remember that Christmas used to be pretty wild," Cherkasky notes. So wild that one early custom called mumming — knocking on doors, ringing bells, rattling cans and shooting off fireworks — got completely out of hand in Baltimore late in the 1800s, falling into decline when quieter residents complained.

After years of struggle, the Massachusetts Puritans in 1681 repealed their anti-holiday decree, apparently won over by two reasons: the seasonal joy they could see their neighbors experiencing, plus the protection the U.S. Constitution gave to the separation of church and state.

By the mid-1800s, Christmas spirit was on the upswing throughout the country. Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," published in 1843, helped bridge local

and regional differences in holiday customs. Its themes of kindness and generosity, according to Cherkasky, crossed many cultural and regional boundaries, thereby helping to universalize the Christmas celebration.

In 1858, Dickens gave readings of the tale in the United States and, after one appearance, he wrote: "They took it so tremendously last night that I was stopped every five minutes. One poor young girl burst into a passion of grief about Tiny Tim and had to be taken out."

As it did in other areas of American life, the Industrial Revolution began to influence the way Christmas was observed. Christmas cards, for example, could be produced and mailed inexpensively, gaining wide popularity by 1875. And for better or worse, the first holiday advertising appeared in the 1830's.

But it was not until late in the century, when the business and pleasure of gift-giving began in earnest and that elaborate Christmas celebrations became an annual American experience. "Gifts at first were given mainly to children, servants and tradespeople," Cherkasky notes. "It was a time for evening up accounts. But that was all to change."

"The folk-secular aspect of Christmas was taking precedence over its religious one," Cherkasky says. "This was apparent in the increasing importance of Santa Claus." Thomas Nast's drawings in "Harper's Weekly" portrayed Santa for the first time as a jolly, white-bearded character dressed in fur.

The popularity of the Christmas tree grew right along with the change in social customs and technological prog-

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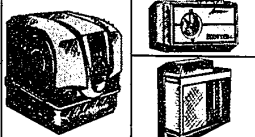
ress. After Queen Victoria set up a Yuletide tree at Windsor Castle, the style was set, reaching the White House in 1855 during Franklin Pierce's presidency.

Thomas Edison's lab came up with a string of tree lights in 1882, three years after the incandescent light breakthrough, and immediately this novel idea became the rage among the wealthy. Christmas tree parties to show off the expensive, lighted trees were major social events.

Today the Christmas season is the sum of many traditions. "We're so enculturated with a whole set of things to do, compared to the time when the season was really quite simple," says Cherkasky.

In A Book of Christmas, British author William Samson puts it this way: "Christmas from whatever angle you look at it is complex. When the English-speaking countries sit down at lunch-time to a 'traditional Christmas dinner,' they eat Aztec bird beside an Alsatian tree, followed by pudding spiced with subtropical preserves . . ."

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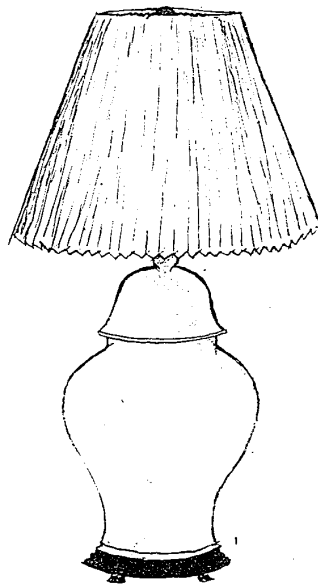
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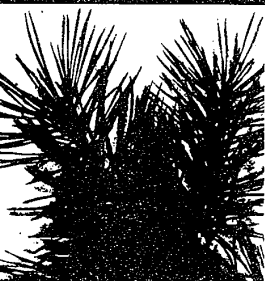
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