

Started in Dickens' era, Christmas cards are a big business

CHRISTMAS IS A TIME when we take a special joy in contacting old friends and new friends to reaffirm our feelings for those who are on our "special people" lists.

The custom of exchanging Christmas cards not only is a traditional part of the holiday, but also has become a major industry — American families send an average of 75 cards per family.

The origin of the custom is in doubt and is a good topic for a protracted discussion with those who look into such things. However, the tradition probably began about 135 years ago in England.

One theory is that boys in boarding schools took special pains to write very attractive letters home about this time of year, perhaps trusting that parents might be a little more generous. Printers supplying paper to such boys began to elaborate with scenes, scrolls and other embellishments that simply grew into our present concept of cards.

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Carol Wald's car, 'A Child's Christmas,' pictures bits of historic cards in an eye-catching collage.

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