

A TRADITION OF . . .



Understanding the origins of the various Christmas traditions can provide more meaning to the holidays for families and individuals. Although there are differences of opinion as to exactly how some customs evolved, most authorities believe that these developments represent the origins of the more popular Christmas traditions.

CHRISTMAS - For the most part, Americans regard Christmas as both a holy day and a holiday -- a period of religious devotion and of general relaxation. But this was not always so. The early Puritans opposed the celebration of Christmas and passed a law in 1659 fining anyone who celebrated on Dec. 25. The law was repealed in 1681.

Historians say that this time of year -- the moment of the sun's rebirth (winter solstice) in late December -- was the time for festivals even before Christianity. In most Christian churches, the Christmas season coincides with a sacred season called Advent (Coming) that

starts approximately four weeks before Dec. 25. The Christmas season continues to the Epiphany (Jan. 6).

The word "Christmas" is derived from the Greco - Latin words "christos" (anointed) and "mass" (to send). These words developed into the old English "Christes Maesse" or Christ's Mass denoting the Incarnation. This derivative was used as early as 1038.

At different periods in history, "Christmas" has been spelled Crystmasse, Crestenmas, Kyrsonas, Xtemas, Chrystmasse and other ways.

"Xmas," thus spelled, has its origin in the fact that the Greek letter "chi" is written as "X." This letter also was the initial of the name Christos.

GIFT GIVING - The first mention of gifts at Christmastime was the result of the custom instituted by Roman emperors who invited their subjects to make gifts to the monarch at this season. It was less a religious celebration and more a means of obtaining these gifts for themselves. But it is a

CHRISTMAS

custom we have taken over in a different spirit today.

For Christians, exchanging gifts at Christmas follows the example of the Wise Men who came from the East bearing gold, frankincense and myrrh for the Christ child. Some historians say the Wise Men arrived on Epiphany and, in many countries, presents are exchanged on Jan. 6.

SANTA CLAUS - The bringer of gifts is a traditional figure that varies from country to country. In Italy it is an old woman, Befana; in Spain, the Three Kings; in Germany, the Christ child; and in many northern European lands, it is Father Christmas. In America, the figure is Santa Claus, and there seems little doubt that he has developed from the tradition of St. Nicholas that Dutch settlers brought to this land in the 17th century.

Historically, St. Nicholas was Nicholas of Patara, a Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor in the 4th century. His feast usually is celebrated on the anniversary of his death, Dec. 6. Tradition makes a point of his generosity, and he also is known as the patron saint of children because he

miraculously restored life to three murdered children.

In appearance, St. Nicholas was supposed to have been lean and pale and usually was depicted in bishop's robes. Eventually custom endowed him with some aspects of the more jovial Father Christmas, who wore a red robe trimmed in white fur and was more portly.

It was in America that the finishing touch of a sleigh and reindeer was provided to his portrait in the poem "The Night Before Christmas," written in 1823 by Clement C. Moore.

TREE - Evergreen boughs and trees were used as festive greenery in many pagan rites, as were rosemary and bays, holly, laurel and mistletoe. The Christmas tree as Americans know it probably originated at the winter celebrations of pagan German tribes in the Black Forest. Placing candles on the tree for lighting did not develop until the end of the 17th century. Using lighted decorations is a practice derived from the custom of putting candles in the window to light the Christ child's way.

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RADIOS FOR THE CHRISTMAS THAT FILLS THE AIR

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A solution, in a single word, is: Radio.

There are gift - ideas galore in radios on the market today. Sets come in all sizes. Designs are new and exciting. Prices range to fit practically any budget.

There are small battery - powered transistor portable radios for those who like to take music or news with them wherever they go. Many models fit neatly into a jacket pocket, tackle box, purse, brief case or camera gadget bag.

One FM-AM model even looks like a camera. Designed for tough use by the teen or sub - teen youngster or others on the go, it has a handy carrying strap.

Indoors, a universal favorite is the clock - radio that brings so many services to its user. It tells time, acts as a waker - upper with music or an insistent buzzer alarm, lulls the listener to sleep and brings in radio favorites with the twist of a knob.

The new look in these sets is the digital clock - radio. With the easy - to - read numbers replacing the conventional clock face, the set is ideal for the oldster's bedroom or anyone who would like to tell time across the room -- without eyeglasses and in the dark.

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