

I want to preface my presentation with a few words about why I chose to do this research on Santa Claus.

I grew up in a Protestant Congregational family. Our Christmas combined church and Santa Claus. We went to church on Christmas Eve — sometimes two or three times — depending on what services we were singing in, playing the organ for, or participating in as pageant performers.

Santa Claus came to our house sometime during the night (well after these church services) and we saw the evidence on Christmas morning. Actually, I don't remember much religious happening on Christmas Day — even if Christmas happened to fall on Sunday.

On Christmas, we mostly played with our new toys, had relatives arrive for a family party and ate a lot. Some drank quite a lot, too. I loved Christmas and my children experienced this holiday much the same way. It was the way my parents celebrated it and so did their parents.

Well, I needed to rethink this holiday when my son married a Jewish woman. They had decided together that their sons would be raised Jewish and we would be fortunate to be included in the many special holidays that my daughter-in-law observed.

So, I wondered and worried a bit about how I could still have Santa Claus and Christmas, and share this with my Jewish grandsons all at the same time. This research has helped me (and all of us) accept a reasonable solution. We enjoy it all!

So, with that explanation let's get to the topic of discussion....

Santa Claus: Is it Fantasy, Myth or Folklore? — The Truth

Maybe it's because I grew up in the innocence of the 50s or maybe it's because my mother never lied to me and she told me that she believed, or maybe it's because my name is Virginia and there was that newspaper editorial explaining very clearly that "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus." Whatever the reasons, I'm here to tell you that there IS indeed Santa Claus. Not "a" Santa Claus, but Santa Claus. Period.

This is not meant to be a philosophical dissertation or a scholarly thesis, but rather a fun, and perhaps even whimsical discussion about childhood beliefs that, for some of us, remain as part of our adult psyche.

But, before I can get into that, it's important for me to explain how, for some people, Santa Claus and the celebration of Christmas came to be thought of as one in the same.

Beginning with civilization, the people of the Northern Hemisphere found reason to celebrate at the winter solstice. You see, they were agrarian societies that honored the pagan gods on whom they relied for their food and livelihood.

The crops were in; the slaughtered livestock needed to be eaten right away as refrigeration certainly as we know it was thousands of years away. There was also plenty of newly brewed drink, so “party hearty” was pretty much the theme for the celebration of the winter solstice.

Thousands of years after that, the Romans celebrated their midwinter festival in two parts. The first, in honor of Saturn the god of harvest, began on December 17 and lasted seven days. Several days later came the New Year celebration.

Like the earlier celebrations, these festivities were marked with barbaric hedonism, but also with civilized goodwill. If there was war, it was suspended, businesses closed, homes and places of worship were decorated with greenery and light. And gifts were given, especially to the children.

During this season, playing cards and gambling were allowed; men dressed up as women; masters served their slaves (both drank themselves insensible); sex was rampant. In a nutshell, everyone had a very good time!

It was into this time that the Christian faith was born. There are Bible stories and other historical written works that document the birth of Jesus Christ and the beginnings of the Christian Faith. I’m not going to get into that, but it is important for me to mention this, as it is the connection between our Christmas celebration and beliefs in Santa Claus that have brought me to this point!

Back to the history...

As the Christian Church struggled to become established it was threatened by another group of worshippers who celebrated December 25 in honor of Mithra, the sun god. In some ways, Mithraism (a Persian cult) was not very different from Christianity. It believed in baptism, a future life, and the ultimate judgment day. Mithra was said to have been born on December 25, of a virgin and shepherds and magicians witnessed his birth. But, I digress...

In the fourth century, the Church named December 25th as the “Day of Nativity” hoping to draw the pagans from sun-god worship to worship of the Son of God. Within a century, the pagans had all but disappeared, but the pagan midwinter festival celebrations did not. This is one explanation of how Christmas developed a dual purpose... religious and secular; sacred and anything but sacred!

This pious and pagan observance known as Christmas continued through the Middle Ages until the Reformation. Long church services were offset by elaborate celebrations of performances and gluttonous eating.

By the time of the Reformation, the vulgar celebrations of Christmas far out-shadowed the religious ones causing the reformers to take steps to end this riotous behavior. In 1647, an act of Parliament forbade the observance of Christmas. In fact, in 1659, the

Puritan government in Massachusetts, made it illegal to celebrate Christmas and Christmas was taken off the church calendar.

The celebration of Christmas went underground until it resurfaced in the eighteenth century, in a very different way. The reaction to the Puritan restrictions was that once again shocking behavior became more acceptable during Christmas celebrations. Drinking and sex were the rage; hanky panky at Christmastime caused huge baby booms at the end of the following September. For the lower class, it was definitely a party gone bad!

For the wealthy, feasting with friends at Christmastime resumed. Even the church began to celebrate Christmas once again. However, even into the end of the eighteenth century, Christmas was not anything like what we celebrate today — no family togetherness, no Christmas trees, cards, shopping or gifts (even for children) and of course NO Santa Claus.

To bring us quickly into this time, we can't ignore that in the early 1800s, this country was experiencing social upheaval. As cities grew, so did unemployment and the gap between the rich and poor. The result was the most unruly Yuletide behavior yet. In some cities, gangs of hoodlums marauded the streets during the holiday season in violent demonstrations. In New York City, especially, the lives of respectable people were being threatened by workers who, if not laid off, were forced to work on Christmas Day.

It was during this time in history that Washington Irving, John Pintard, and Clement Clarke Moore (all New Yorkers) introduced St. Nicholas to America and invented his famous descendant, Santa Claus.

You do know that St. Nicholas was a real man. He was born about 280-300 A.D. in the city of Patara, in what is now Turkey. He was the only child of a wealthy family and was orphaned when he was very young. He was raised in a monastery and when he was only 17, he became one of the youngest priests in history. Even before he became a priest, Nicholas demonstrated unusual caring and generosity for others. There are many stories about this generosity and he gave away his wealth in the form of gifts to anyone in need, but especially to children. There are stories of him either dropping bags of gold down chimneys or throwing the bags through windows where they landed in the stockings hung from the fireplace to dry (now things are getting familiar-sounding).

Early in his priesthood, Nicholas became even more famous for his ability to perform miracles. Some of these had to do with saving sailors from storms at sea, but others were quite astonishing and included being able to bring some back to life after death. Whether or not these miraculous stories were true, it was apparent that Nicholas was a remarkably good man and certainly much beloved.

In his later years, Nicholas became a bishop (of Myra), which explains his bishop's hat, long flowing gown, white beard and cape. After he died, he was elevated to sainthood and when the Catholic Church started Christmas, St. Nicholas was included in the season. In fact, Nicholas became the most popular of all saints and became ranked third in

adoration behind only Jesus and Mary. Thousands of chapels and monasteries were named after him.

The Orthodox Church raised St. Nicholas, the miracle worker, to a position of high esteem. In fact, Russia's oldest church was built in his honor and St. Nicholas became the patron saint of children and seafarers. When the communists took over Russia and outlawed Christianity, the Russians called him Grandfather Frost, and he wore blue, not red.

During the Protestant Reformation, the reformers tried to eliminate the idea of saints, but in Holland and Germany St. Nicholas survived — but as a folklore image rather than a church figure. In fact, many countries and regions developed other gift-giver images. In France he was known as Père Noël; in England, some called him Father Christmas and he was always shown with sprigs of holly, ivy or mistletoe, while others called him Kris Kringle, a name derived from *Christ Kindl* (Christ-child); in Germany he was known as Weihnachtsmann (Christmas man).

In Holland, he was known as Sinterklaas and people celebrated December 6 (his name day) when he brought children presents. It is through the Dutch immigrants that Santa Claus came to the United States.

Now we return to Irving, Pintard and Moore...

In 1809, Washington Irving, using the name of Dietrich Knickerbocker, wrote "A History of New York," a satire that named St. Nicholas as the patron saint of the city. In a later edition written in 1821, Irving embellished on St. Nicholas, referring to his (and I am quoting now) "riding over the tops of trees, in that self same wagon wherein he brings his yearly presents to children... the smoke from his pipe spread like a cloud overhead... when he had smoked his pipe, he twisted it in his hatband, and laying his finger beside his nose, gave a very significant look; then mounting his wagon, he returned over the tree tops and disappeared." A familiar sounding description!

John Pintard was a merchant of wealth, an historian, and leading citizen in New York. He founded the New York Historical Society and even helped establish some of the holidays celebrated to this day, such as Columbus Day, Washington's Birthday and the Fourth of July. Pintard also worked hard to celebrate December 6 as a day to resurrect old-time customs when rich and poor would celebrate together. Nothing came of this idea, but together with Irving's description, it did lay the groundwork for Clement Clarke Moore's poem called "The Night Before Christmas."

Dr. Moore was a teacher, a scholar of Hebrew and a poet. He lived in an area of New York on a large farm called Chelsea, which by the way is a section of Manhattan still called Chelsea. As the story goes, in 1822 on the day before Christmas, Moore went to the city in a sleigh to buy his Christmas turkey. On this trip, he composed his famous poem and he read it to his family on that Christmas Day. Later on a family member made a copy and sent it to the *Troy Sentinel*, a newspaper in upstate New York, which published it for the first time on December 23, 1823. It was reprinted in 1824 and

between then and 1840 it became so popular that most people were now familiar with the visit of St. Nicholas. Moore did not publish the poem under his own name until 1844.

There is another twist to this bit of history. Some scholars say that Moore did not really write this poem; that another poet named Henry Livingston, Jr. actually was the author. But, this was never proven to be true.

So, with Moore's description, the vision of Santa Claus became clear. He had a white beard, red jacket and a pom-pom topped cap. He went about on the night before Christmas in a sleigh, pulled by eight reindeer, and he went down chimneys leaving gifts under trees and in stockings hung by the fireplace.

If all this is true, ask children, where does Santa Claus live for the other 364 days of the year? The answer to this is of course, The North Pole. We all know that. But how do we know that?

One explanation, by Finnish writer Safari Tupelos, brings us back to St. Nicholas' life (the one born in or around 300 A.D.). In addition to being a priest, Nicholas was a skilled sailor and his travels took him north to Turku, which was actually a country split into two parts, one of which is the Arctic Circle where no one could survive because of its huge banks of snow and the freezing cold. One story reports that while in the southernmost part of Turku, St. Nicholas became friends with a wise man known as the Gnome of the Turku Castle.

The Gnome told Nicholas that he had a good friend called Old Man Christmas who, because of his magical powers, was one of only a very few who could survive at the Arctic Circle. The Gnome further explained that an old popular belief prevailing in Finland and in Scandinavia claimed that the spirit of an elf sees to the welfare of a household (especially its well-behaved children) and that he and Old Man Christmas were that very spirit.

St. Nicholas met Old Man Christmas who explained that he was named for the mid-winter feast because he was born at that time of year. Before leaving Turku, St. Nicholas made Old Man Christmas and the Gnome take an oath to bring the message of peace, goodwill and harmonious co-existence, joy and happiness to all people on Earth, not just to those in Finland and Scandinavia. Which is just what Old Man Christmas has done ever since.

Now that we've been able to determine Santa Claus' home, let's address the questionable "flying" reindeer. (Book)

We learned that life in the Arctic Circle was only possible for a few – those who had magical powers, so it is certainly reasonable to believe that Old Man Christmas was able to pass along his magical powers to his animals.

In the first written reference to reindeer was a little poem published by William B. Gilley in 1821, two years before Moore's famous poem was written. The poem reads:

*Old Canticles with much delight
His reindeer drives the frosty night
O'er chimney tops and tracks of snow
To bring his yearly gifts to you.*

During a popular children's show on the radio in 1927, Markus Rautio announced that Santa Claus and his elf assistants (most likely descendants of the Gnome of Turku) lived in Lapland where the landscape resembles a huge ear. This is where Santa Claus listens to find out if the children are being naughty or nice. "Uncle Markus" revelation about the ear and the fact that Santa really lives in Lapland is further proof that the reindeer are real. Lots of reindeer live in Lapland!

So, is it fantasy, myth, folklore, or truth? What can we conclude from all this?

Is Santa Claus really an actual part of our history? I believe the answer is yes and this is how I see it.

There are many unanswered questions about the spirit known as Santa Claus. Our children's belief in this spirit is as strong as their belief in a world of happiness and peace. If we could think about Santa Claus through the mind of a child, we would most likely see a man who makes people all over the world happy. To a child, just the thought of Santa Claus brings an overwhelming feeling of happiness. In fact, I know few adults who do not share this feeling at Christmastime. And, the belief in one man delivering joy is strong enough to make some people forget their problems, even if for only a day.

As we have learned, stories about Santa Claus, beginning with a man named St. Nicholas, have been told through the years all over the world. These stories vary in small ways, but all tell of a man who, around the time of the winter solstice, visits the homes of good boys and girls, leaving gifts either under a tree or in shoes or in stockings. Most parents pass on the spirit of Santa Claus to their children and their children grow up believing in the spirit only to pass it on to their children. We adults love to see the expression on our children's faces when they first see the tree on Christmas morning. It is difficult — if not impossible — not to feel happiness following Santa's visit to the children in your life.

In 1897, when Virginia O'Hanlon wrote to "The Sun" newspaper and asked, "Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?" her doubt was soundly put aside by Francis P. Church's response that, "Yes, Virginia there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! How dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus! It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias. There would be no child-like faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

"Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies!"

Of course, there is more in his editorial, but basically it further confirms what I've known all my life... that Santa Claus lives today and will continue to live throughout time. While the belief in Santa Claus is very strong, especially among children, adults would do well as Francis Church suggested, joining their children in this experience of believing in something unseen. To believe in Santa Claus is to believe in giving and forgiving, in love and romance, in glory beyond what is seen.

(Modern Santa) Whether or not your religion includes such a man, the winter solstice season is undeniable. The holidays and celebrations of all religions and cultures that surround this time of year are meant to be positive, happy times for all people all over the world. If Santa Claus helps us remember to celebrate the season, I say, "Thank you for that!"

Yesterday, I had the most wonderful experience of bringing an abbreviated version of this message to a group of seniors at my church. Following my presentation, I encouraged them to share stories of their childhood memories that surrounded the holiday season. It was amazing how clear these memories were and how easily they could recall some very intricate details. One man in his eighties told of a toy that Santa brought to him when he was five years old. This toy is a metal Model-T car with moving parts — that still works — he runs it across the top of his bureau every morning when he is getting dressed!

I am going to encourage you to share a childhood holiday memory with your tablemates as we share our meals tonight. Whether it's the fact that your stocking always held an orange in the toe, or Santa sometimes smelled a little like he'd been imbibing, let the memories come.

I wish Happy Holidays to each of you and may the spirit of Santa's visit to your home be real for all of you, young and old.

Sources include:

Memories from my own childhood and words of my parents, Louise and Arthur Wilder
"Brief History of Santa" by Juelie McLean
"Inventing Christmas" by Jock Elliott, published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
"Pagan Claus A Look at Christmas Symbols" by W.J. Bethancourt III
"The Claus That Refreshes" by Barbara and David P. Mikkelson
"What is the History of Santa Claus?" by Lorraine C. Gallagher available online
"Yes, Virginia There is a Santa Claus" by Francis P. Church, September 21, 1897

Author's note:

Much of the material in this presentation came from a little book by Jock Elliott, called "Inventing Christmas." When I first read his book, I was so curious about some of the references that I found myself wanting to do more research. I quickly found that there is so much information about Christmas and Santa Claus, that I barely scratched the surface. As was evident in the discussion that followed my presentation to The Torch Club on December 3, 2003, there are countless ways that Santa Claus is depicted throughout the world, from the United States, to France — from England, Scandinavia and even into China! There is so much more to know about Santa Claus, but I will leave that to your own curiosity.

Virginia Wilder Cross , December 2003