

# Christmas Origins

By Kenneth Parrish

Winter has always been a time of celebration since ancient times. The early Europeans celebrated light and birth during the darkest days of winter. Many people rejoiced during the winter solstice, when the worst of winter was behind them, and they could look forward to warmer days and longer daylight hours.

The Norse people of Scandinavia celebrated Yule from the winter solstice through January. Fathers and sons would bring home large logs, and would set them on fire in recognition of the return of the sun. The people would feast for as long as the log burned, which could be up to 12 days.

The end of December was a perfect time to celebrate. It was during this time that most of the cattle was slaughtered so that they would not have to be fed during the winter. This was the time that, for many, they had a fresh supply of meat. This was also the time of year when wine and beer was finally fermented and ready for drinking.

In Germany, the people honored the pagan god Oden during the mid-winter holiday. They were terrified of this god. The German people believed that Oden made nocturnal flights to observe his people, and then decide who would prosper or perish. Because of this, many people chose to stay inside.

In Rome, where winters were not as harsh as they were further north, Saturnalia was celebrated. This was a hedonistic time when food and drink were plentiful. Saturnalia was a holiday to honor the god of agriculture, Saturn, and it lasted a full month beginning a week before the winter solstice. During this time, the normal Roman social order was turned upside down; slaves would become masters, peasants took command of the city, and schools and businesses were closed so that everyone could join the festivities.

The Romans also celebrated Juvenalia, a feast to honor the children of Rome. Members of the upper class also celebrated the birth of Mithra, the god of the unconquerable sun, on December 25. For some, Mithra's birthday was the most sacred day of the year.

During the early years of Christianity, the birth of Jesus was not celebrated. Easter was the main holiday. In fact, it wasn't until the fourth century that church officials decided to institute the birth of Jesus as a holiday.

The Bible does not mention the date of Jesus' birth, a fact that the Puritans pointed out in order to deny the legitimacy of the celebrations. There is some Biblical evidence that He was born in the spring (why would shepherds be herding their sheep in the dead of winter?), however Pope Julius I chose December 25. It is commonly believed that this date was chosen in order to incorporate the traditions of the Saturnalia festival. Called the Feast of Nativity, it spread to Egypt by 432 and on to England by the late sixth century. By the end of

the eighth century, the celebration of Christmas, or Christ's Mass, had spread all the way to Scandinavia. Today, in the Greek and Russian orthodox churches, Christmas is celebrated 13 days after the 25th, which is also referred to as the Epiphany or Three Kings Day. This is the day it is believed that the three wise men finally found Jesus in the manger.

By holding Christmas at the same time as the traditional winter solstice festivals, the church leaders increased the chances that Christmas would be popularly embraced. However, they gave up their ability to dictate how it would be celebrated. By the middle ages, Christianity had replaced most of the pagan celebrations and religions. On Christmas, people attended church in the morning, then celebrated raucously in a drunken, carnival-like atmosphere similar to today's Mardi Gras. The poor would demand food and drink from the rich, who would readily give to them. If they did not, they would be terrorized by mischief. Christmas became the time of year when the upper classes could repay their real or imagined "debt" to society by entertaining less fortunate citizens.

Religious reformations of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century changed the way Christmas was celebrated in Europe. In 1645, Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan forces took over England. They had vowed to rid England of all decadence. As a result, Christmas was cancelled. Charles II brought back Christmas when, by popular demand, he was restored to the throne.

In 1620, English separatists known as Pilgrims came to America. They were even more orthodox than the Puritans. As a result of this, Christmas was not a holiday in early America, and anyone caught celebrating Christmas was severely punished.

In Boston, from 1659 to 1681, Christmas was outlawed. Anyone showing the Christmas spirit was fined five shillings. This abandonment of Christmas was not consistent throughout the colonies. Captain John Smith reported that the Jamestown settlement celebrated Christmas and that a good time was enjoyed by all and passed without incident.

After the American Revolution, English customs fell out of favor. This included Christmas. In fact, Congress was in session on December 25, 1789; the first Christmas under the new constitution. Christmas wasn't declared a Federal holiday until June 26, 1870.

Americans reinvented Christmas and changed it from the raucous, carnival-like holiday into a family-centered day of peace and nostalgia. But what was it that peaked Americans' interest in Christmas during the 1800's?

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period of class conflict and turmoil. Unemployment was high and gang rioting by the disenfranchised classes often occurred during the Christmas season. In 1828, New York city council instituted the city's first police force in response to a Christmas riot. This catalyzed certain members of the upper classes to begin changing the way Christmas was celebrated.

In 1819, *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, gent.*, was written by the best selling author Washington Irving. It was a series of stories about the celebration of Christmas in an English

manor house. The sketches feature a squire who invited the peasants into his home for the holiday. In contrast to the problems faced in American society, the two groups mingled effortlessly. In Irving's mind, Christmas should be a peaceful, warm-hearted holiday bringing groups together across lines of wealth or social status. Irving's book, however, was not based on any holiday celebration he had attended – in fact, many historians say that Irving's account actually "invented" tradition by implying that it described the true customs of the season.

Also around this time, English author Charles Dickens created the classic holiday tale, *A Christmas Carol*. The message – the importance of charity and good will towards all humankind – struck a powerful chord in the United States and England. It showed members of the Victorian society the benefits of celebrating the holiday. Families also became less disciplined during the 1800's. They became more sensitive to the emotional needs of children, and Christmas provided families with a day they could lavish attention – and gifts – on their children without appearing to “spoil” them.

Americans began to embrace the Christmas celebrations as a perfect family holiday. Old customs were unearthed as people began looking toward recent immigrants and Catholic and Episcopalian churches to see how the day should be celebrated. During the next 100 years, Americans built their own Christmas traditions that included pieces of many other customs, including decorating trees, sending holiday cards, and gift-giving.

Although most people thought they were celebrating Christmas the way it had been done for centuries, Americans had really re-invented a holiday to fill the cultural needs of a growing nation.