

“We Don’t Do that Anymore?” Some Forgotten Christmas Traditions (Part 2)

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

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(Dec 11 2022) Some Christmas traditions are cuddly, some downright weird (pickle ornaments?), and others engender great passion (Elf on the Shelf anyone?), but there are others that have, like Douglas MacArthur said about old soldiers, have just “faded away.” We began our list of such forgotten traditions last week and continue this week.

Appointing a Lord of Misrule: This is another one I had never heard of before until I searched for such traditions online. Like the “Feast of the Donkey” this one comes from the Middle Ages, but instead of originating in France, England is the source of this custom although it made its way across the channel and found popularity in France as well. Medieval royalty courts usually included a “jester” as an entertainment figure, and it was from that convention that this strange Christmas custom commenced. Popular in London and other English cities from the thirteenth century through the 1500s, a “Lord of Misrule” would ascend to the Mayor’s seat during the Christmas season. Usually a peasant, the “Lord” was chosen by lot to preside over the “Feast of Fools,” which came during Christmastime. The “Lord of Misrule” presided over a number of fetes and feasts, most of which included rich food and—most of all—copious amounts of alcoholic beverages. Tolerated by the Church in its earliest days, as the tradition gained popularity and widespread appeal its debauchery increased, which led the leader of the new Church of England, King Henry VIII, to abolish the tradition in 1541. His successor, Catholic Queen Mary I, reinstated the custom, but it was outlawed for good by Protestant Queen Elizabeth I in 1565.

“Trick or Treat” Caroling: While the tradition of singing Christmas carols remains a part of our contemporary holiday, a tradition that has become much less rare, at least in the U.S., is the practice of “caroling,” or going house-to-house (or other locations) and singing carols on the doorstep for the gift of a donation. Religious and charitable organizations used this practice as a way to both spread cheer but also to raise funds. What many may not know is that the origin of caroling has a more, let’s say, baleful nature. The practice of caroling, in its earliest years, was a lot more like Halloween’s “trick-or-treat” than the Yule season custom we remember. In 18th and early 19th centuries Europe the ritual of caroling was used as an occasion for the working-class poor citizens to come onto the grounds of wealthy landowners and request gifts. They would go house-to-house and sing Christmas carols, but not just one or two, but they would continue to sing until they were given either money or invited in for a drink. If the landowner refused either, then the “carolers” suggested that they could take the liberty to vandalize the owner’s house or landscape. Thus, it was usually easier to just pay them off. Not exactly something we would expect from the season of cheer!

Christmas Ghost Stories?: The telling of ghost or scary tales is also something else that we tend to associate with Halloween that has some roots in Christmas. Have you ever listened closely to the Christmas song “The Most Wonderful Time of the Year?” If so, you hear the line, “There’ll be scary ghost stories and tales of the glories,” and you might think, “What does that mean?” It seems that Christmas was often a time for gathering together and telling “ghost” stories. Perhaps you have wondered why the most popular Christmas tale of all-time, Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* is essentially a ghost story? It’s all Victorian England’s fault. The people of that era loved scary stories—it was one of their most pleasurable pastimes, and Christmas was their most favorite time to gather and tell and listen to such tales. Dickens knew that and so that is why he incorporated ghosts into his popular work.

Santa Claus as an Elf: Allow me to reference once again the Clement Moore poem “’Twas the Night Before Christmas” (which is actually titled “A Visit from St. Nicholas”): the poem references Santa as “a jolly old elf,” which for centuries was how he was depicted. That all changed in 1938 when Coca-Cola decided to inaugurate a new Christmas advertising campaign. The corporation wanted to spread their beverage as the “choice of Santa,” so they hired famed artist Haddon Sundblom to draw the Christmas icon. Sundblom kept Clement Moore’s description of Santa’s red and white fur lined suit, but instead of drawing him as an elf he made Santa Claus a six-foot tall grandfatherly looking figure with full human characteristics. Coca-Cola, at that time, spent more money on advertising than any corporation in the world and Sundblom’s image of Mr. Claus was spread all over the world on billboards, in magazines and newspapers, and shown on newsreels in movie houses. The Sundblom/Coca-Cola image became so pervasive that what Santa looked like changed completely to the way he is currently depicted.

I hope you have enjoyed the little tour of forgotten Christmas traditions. It has made me appreciate the ones we have even more, and let's hope that a hundred years from now a few of them still remain.

Next week we will look at some of the most unusual Christmas traditions in the United States.

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