

## Unusual Christmas Traditions, (Part 2)

by Scott Sosebee

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

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(Dec 25 2022) This will be the culmination of the Christmas-themed columns. I hope you have enjoyed them. I shall get back to “regular scheduled programming” next week.

We continue this week with our “tour” of unusual Christmas traditions in the United States. It has been an enlightening journey for me as I have learned quite a bit about how folks in other parts of the nation celebrate the holiday. I think that I have saved the best—and thus most unusual—for last.

**Louisiana’s Christmas Eve Bonfires:** Exterior Christmas light displays are an enduring part of the season in the United States. In Louisiana, one tradition certainly lights up the sky but not in a conventional fashion. In a way akin to the luminarias of the Southwest but much bigger and more spectacular, the Louisiana Christmas Eve bonfires are built on the levees of the Mississippi between Baton Rouge and New Orleans and also at festivals in Litcher and Algiers (individual families and neighbors also gather around bonfires on Christmas Eve). The bonfires are 20-30-foot-high pyramids of flaming logs with the intention of “lighting the way” for Papa Noel (the French equivalent of Santa Claus) on his once-a-year visit. The bonfires are clearly a French tradition, but beyond that its origins are unclear. Some say it came from the French Marist priests who came to Louisiana immediately after the Civil War to teach and minister in the most French-influenced state in the U.S. Still, others claim that it is a Cajun tradition brought to Louisiana by the Acadian refugees who made the trek to Louisiana from Canada in the middle of the eighteenth century. Whatever its roots, the Louisiana Christmas Eve bonfires are a sight to behold every December 24.

**SantaCons:** This may be one of the strangest traditions I have come across, but upon reflection perhaps it is a good representation of modern, secular, holiday practices. Essentially, the ritual calls for one to get drunk dressed as Santa Claus. In some of the areas that “celebrate” SantaCon, the drinking Santas’ intentions are to create a mischievous atmosphere, while in other regions it is just another exercise designed to promote

convivial community. Like so many of these strange traditions, how SantaCon began is a mystery. The most pervasive origin story is that it came from a Dutch tradition of leaving out sprits for Sinterklaas—Santa in The Netherlands—to have after he leaves gifts. But, such an derivation has been difficult for scholars to confirm. What is certain is that it became something of an informal “tradition” in New York by the turn of the twentieth century. Today, the New York SantaCon Society—yes, an organized group—stages a huge “pub crawl” in the City every year as a charity event. Through 2019 (it was suspended in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID pandemic), it averaged donating approximately \$500,000 to charity each year. SantaCon has also spread to the West Coast, with one of the weirdest of the episodes coming in San Francisco. A secret society in that city—the San Francisco Suicide Club—was dedicated to staging “pranks” throughout the city for fun. At Christmas, the Club dresses as Santa and sneaks into bars and “crashes” parties to incite good, spirited mayhem. Many of your drunken Uncles at family Christmas parties may be secret SantaCon revelers!

**Elfapalooza:** Other than Santa Claus, his legendary “helper” Elves may be one of the most iconic of secular Christmas symbols. A number of cities, worldwide, have initiated a celebration in which people come together dressed as elves to celebrate the season. Most of these traditions are relatively new, seemingly spurred on by the 2003 release of the film “Elf” starring Will Farrell and the late James Caan since photos appear to show most revelers dressed as “Buddy the Elf.” Mobile, Alabama has been holding its unique “Elfapalooza” in conjunction with the city’s Artwalk holiday tradition since 2015. In that year, Mobile residents were implored to come dressed as elves in an attempt to break a Guinness World Record of most people dressed as elves gathered in one place, set in Bangkok in 2014 with 1,762. The Mobile celebration came up a little short that year, so they have continued, and while they have yet to break the record, it has become an unusual tradition in the city every year since.

**The Tumbleweed Christmas Tree:** The American Southwest is a dry region and the driest part of the year is the winter. Such conditions produce something else unique to the American Southwest—the tumbleweed. Every year, beginning in around October and continuing through the spring, hundreds of thousands of these invasive Russian thistle bushes, pushed by the wind, pile up in ditches, along fence-lines, and against houses from Texas to the Mojave Desert. Chandler, Arizona, beginning in 1957, decided to make use of these ugly pieces of vegetation to begin a Christmas tradition unlike any other. City workers scoured the city and gathered about a thousand of the nuisance plants and then piled them up along a chicken-wire frame, decorated it with lights and other regional ornaments, and dubbed it the “Tumbleweed Christmas Tree.” It became a beloved tradition that continues today, and thousands of people turn out each year for unveiling the iconic attraction.

**National Lampoon's "Christmas Vacation:"** For many households, Christmas would not be Christmas if we did not at some point in the season watch the now cult classic "Christmas Vacation," starring Chevy Chase, Beverly D'Angelo, and Randy Quaid as "Cousin Eddie," who stole the show. It is estimated that as many as 50 million people watch the film at some point between Thanksgiving and Christmas Day in the U.S. on some platform, be it streaming, on a network, at a movie house, or—increasingly rare—on a DVD or similar format. When it debuted in theaters in December 1989, its producers hoped it would revive the series. While the original "Family Vacation" had done well, its sequel, 1985's "European Vacation" was a dud. Star Chevy Chase also released other less than stellar films over the next few years and it looked like his, and the series', runs were done. However, "Christmas Vacation" was a hit, spending two weeks at the top of box office charts and, after earning \$71,000,000 it remains the highest grossing of the "Vacation" series films.

There you have it, unusual Christmas tradition. I hope all have a great holiday season and that 2023 is a bright and prosperous year for all. Merry Christmas!

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