

Santa Claus has a long and cherished history

by Mark Pavilons

For children and adults around the world, Santa Claus is the epitome of the holiday season.

While Christ is the reason for the season, Claus is a close second.

In his famous response to a letter from a child, Francis P. Church explained in the New York newspaper, The Sun:

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. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence.?

Santa is as real as the feelings in our hearts and minds. He's as concrete as love and joy and wide-eyed wonderment.

As I child, I heard his footsteps on our roof and heard his sleigh and troop of reindeer take off, en-route to the next house.

He is, in fact, documented in history.

Santa Claus was originally called Saint Nicholas, who became the patron saint of children. Saint Nicholas of Myra, was born around 280 AD in the Roman town of Patara, in what is now Turkey. Nicholas was born to a wealthy Christian family, and his parents raised him to be devout in his faith. Nicholas decided to dedicate his life to helping others, especially the poor, the sick, and those in need.

Nicholas became a bishop in Myra and gained a reputation for his generosity and kindness. He was known for acts of charity that he often performed secretly, emphasizing humility in giving. His popularity grew, and upon his death on Dec. 6, 343 AD, the people of Myra commemorated his life with an annual feast. The date of his death became known as the Feast Day of Saint Nicholas, celebrated throughout Europe as a day of giving and charity.

I remember well when my mom talked about Niklolaustag (Nicholas Day) that took place on December 6. When she was a child, goodies were placed in shoes outside her bedroom door. When she awoke in the morning, these brought a smile to her face and ushered in the holiday season.

We tried to relive the tradition for her on occasion and my wife carried on with it for our kids.

St. Nicholas made his debut into American popular culture in the late 18th century. In December 1773, and again in 1774, a New York newspaper reported that groups of Dutch families had gathered to honor the anniversary of his death.

The name Santa Claus evolved from Nick's Dutch nickname, Sinter Klaas, a shortened form of Sint Nikolaas. In 1804, John Pintard, a member of the New York Historical Society, distributed woodcuts of St. Nicholas at the society's annual meeting. The background of the engraving contains now-familiar Santa images including stockings filled with toys and fruit hung over a fireplace.

Gift-giving, mainly centered around children, has been an important part of the Christmas celebration since the holiday's rejuvenation in the early 19th century. Stores began to advertise Christmas shopping in 1820, and by the 1840s, newspapers were creating separate sections for holiday advertisements, which often featured images of the newly-popular Santa Claus.

In 1841, thousands of children visited a Philadelphia shop to see a life-size Santa Claus model. It was only a matter of time before stores began to attract children, and their parents, with the lure of a peek at a 'live' Santa Claus.

In the early 1890s, the Salvation Army needed money to pay for the free Christmas meals they provided to needy families. They began dressing up unemployed men in Santa Claus suits and sending them into the streets of New York to solicit donations. Those familiar Salvation Army Santas have been ringing bells on the street corners of American cities ever since.

Perhaps the most iconic department store Santa is Kris Kringle in the 1947 classic Santa Claus movie *Miracle on 34 Street*.

The Macy's Santa has appeared at almost every Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade since it began in 1924, and fans of all ages still line up to meet the Macy's Santa in New York City and at stores around the country, where children can take pictures on Santa's lap and tell him what they want for Christmas.

In 1822, Clement Clarke Moore, an Episcopal minister, wrote a long Christmas poem for his three daughters entitled *An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas*, more popularly known as *'Twas The Night Before Christmas*.

Moore's poem, which he was initially hesitant to publish due to the frivolous nature of its subject, is largely responsible for our modern image of Santa Claus as a *'right jolly old elf'* with a portly figure and the supernatural ability to ascend a chimney with a mere nod of his head! His poem helped popularize the now-familiar image of a Santa Claus who flew from house to house on Christmas Eve in *'a miniature sleigh'* led by eight flying reindeer to leave presents for deserving children. *An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas* created a new and immediately popular American icon.

Santa's all-important list was first mentioned in the 1934 carol, *'Santa Claus is Coming to Town'*. *Rudolph* the most famous reindeer of all was born over 100 years after his eight flying counterparts. The red-nosed wonder was the creation of Robert L. May, a copywriter at the Montgomery Ward department store.

In 1939, May told the story of Rudolph, a young reindeer who was teased by the other deer because of his large, glowing, red nose. But, when Christmas Eve turned foggy and Santa worried that he wouldn't be able to deliver gifts that night, the former outcast saved Christmas by leading the sleigh by the light of his red nose.

The rest, as they say, is history.

I've heard the laughter and chuckle of that jolly old elf myself. I've even invited him in and shared his cookies from time to time.

May you never be too grown up to search the skies on Christmas Eve!