

Holiday Traditions



How It All Started

Cherished holiday traditions return year after year, but what are their true origins?

Today, we closely associate the season with twinkling trees, hanging stockings, mistletoe and carol singing. But how did these customs originally get started? This look back puts the holidays in a historical context:

TREE DECORATING

Historians say the custom of decorating Christmas trees gained widespread popularity in 1846 when Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were photographed with their family tree for the London News. Prior to this, German Lutherans had been associated with the tradition since the 17th century, with evidence of Christmas trees appearing in Pennsylvania as early as 1820. An evergreen tree, the favorite choice among many, is said to symbolize good fortune by maintaining its vibrant greenery throughout the winter season.

SINGING CAROLS

The practice of singing religious carols in groups can be traced back to medieval times, as neighbors visited one another's homes to extend wishes of health and prosperity. The songs didn't begin to take on a Christmas theme in America until the 1800s. The early 1900s witnessed a significant rise in caroling in major U.S. cities, and the publication of



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commercial songbooks followed. That spread the new tradition far and wide. These festive gatherings originally served a charitable purpose, often raising funds for children's charities.

STOCKINGS ON FIREPLACE

The tradition of hanging stockings above the fireplace

can be traced back to the 1823 poem 'Visit from St. Nicholas' by Clement Clark. A well-known line states: "And filled all the stockings then turned with a jerk, and laying his finger aside of his nose and giving a nod, up the chimney he rose." This excerpt apparently inspired children to eagerly hang their stockings on Christmas Eve, anticipating that St.

Nicholas would fill them with gifts and treats.

UNDER THE MISTLETOE

Kissing under a mistletoe has roots that extend back several millennia. The Celtic Druids held the mistletoe plant in high regard, believing it possessed sacred powers to heal ailments and could even predict future events. Over time,

this reverence evolved into a Christmas tradition, as the plant was harvested during summer and often adorned homes during the holiday season. The custom of kissing beneath the mistletoe was originally noted in ancient Greece, where it was celebrated during the festival of Saturnalia and later incorporated into wedding ceremonies.

A Tradition of Giving

You may have noticed special Giving Tree ornaments that express someone's special needs this season.

Hoping to give back this season? Look for specially decorated Giving Trees, or Angel Trees, which offer us a chance to help other members of our community who may have fallen on hard times during the holidays. Instead of traditional ornaments, the trees have handwritten or printed donation requests. Someone may need something practical like new clothing and shoes for work or school – or something season-specific like a hoped-for toy for a child. You can make a meaningful difference in someone's life by participating in these worthwhile initiatives, while teaching important life lessons to younger people about compassion and charity.

GETTING INVOLVED

Giving Trees will include information on how and what to donate. If you'd like to give but haven't come across one of these special trees, contact charitable organizations, homeless shelters, churches and police and fire stations. You may find them in stores and shopping malls, grocery stores and other miscellaneous government buildings. Internet searches and social media may help with pinpointing the exact location and goals for local



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Giving Trees. Individual organizations may have differing rules about how to deliver the gifts, but they generally prefer that donations be dropped off at a certain location.

GIFT GUIDELINES

Follow the organization's shared guidelines so that your gift gets to its intended

recipient. If possible, note the recipient's underlying narrative and how your chosen gift would positively affect their life. While you should fulfill their specific request, consider enhancing the gift by providing more than they expect. For example, if a child has expressed a wish for a basic clothing item, perhaps include

several outfits or a new pair of shoes to create an element of surprise on Christmas morning.

SHARING THE EXPERIENCE

Create and stick to a budget so you don't have to rely on high-interest credit to complete your purchase, then

bring younger people into the process. Let children take part in the actual donation too, to instill important values.

Participating in these initiatives provides important lessons about giving, gratitude and budget management. They'll also be part of the holiday joy that comes from helping others.

Hanukkah's Historic Connections

Hanukkah, which takes place in November or December, commemorates the re-dedication of the temple in Jerusalem after its desecration in the Maccabean Revolt.

This symbolized the resilience and triumph of the Jewish people in deeply challenging circumstances. A prominent aspect of the tradition's narrative is the miracle of how a small amount of oil intended to last just one night somehow sustained a menorah's flame for eight days.

THE MENORAH

One of the most recognizable traditions associated with Hanukkah is the menorah, with its eight candles. One additional candle, known as the shamash, is used to light the others. This practice originated in Eastern Europe during the 1700s, as candles offered a more economical and cleaner source of illumination compared to traditional oil lamps that were prevalent in the Middle East centuries earlier. The adoption of the menorah in synagogues can be traced back to German communities, where this tradition initially gained popularity.

Latkes, which are potato pancakes, emerged as a significant part of Hanukkah



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celebrations in the mid-1800s, coinciding with the increased prevalence of potatoes in Eastern European diets. These culinary delights provided a convenient option for those who sought to celebrate the festival with readily available ingredients rather than homemade preparations. In the Middle Ages, latkes were made of cheese and grains.

CHOCOLATE COINS

Chocolate gelt, or foil-wrapped chocolate coins, are part of a traditional Hanukkah celebration, though where the tradition came from is unknown. In the early days in Yemen, Jewish mothers may have given their children a coin on each day of Hanukkah to buy sugar and red food coloring to make holiday wine.

Another possibility is from 19th Century Eastern Europe, when rabbis went from town to town to give Hebrew lessons and were paid with food like whiskey, grain or honey.

THE DREIDEL

This spinning top game may have come from a game from the 1500s that was played in Ireland and then moved to

Germany. "Dreidel" is a Yiddish word but the top also had other names, including "varfl," which means "something thrown." The four letters on each side of the top are now thought to symbolize the Hebrew words for a "great miracle happened there." This later evolved into different wording that shared game instructions.

Holiday Movie Classics

When we're not decorating, baking and hosting holiday parties, it's of great comfort to sit down with a cherished Christmas movie that's gone unseen for an entire year.

These holiday films will warm your heart and home, whether you are having a quiet evening alone or amid a bustling group of family and friends. This handy list has been split into three holly-jolly categories, beginning with "legendary favorites" from Hollywood's Golden Era. Recommendations also include eight classic favorites, mostly from the 1980s and '90s. Two choice remakes promise to double your movie-night fun.

LEGENDARY FAVORITES

1. 'It's a Wonderful Life' (1946): George Bailey's journey demonstrates the value of each individual's contributions.

2. 'A Charlie Brown Christmas' (1965): Charlie Brown embarks on a journey to discover the true meaning of Christmas.

3. 'White Christmas' (1954): Beloved musical numbers by Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney always inspire.

4. 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer' (1964): This classic



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stop-motion film introduced a new generation to Rudolph and his misfit friends.

CLASSIC TRADITIONS

1. 'A Christmas Story' (1983): Ralphie Parker dreams of receiving a Red Ryder carbine action 200-shot range model air rifle.

2. 'Elf' (2003): Buddy the Elf learns a shocking truth but never loses his holiday spirit.

3. 'The Polar Express' (2004): An acknowledged modern classic known for its stunning animation.

4. 'Home Alone' (1990): Young Kevin McCallister finds himself accidentally left behind during the holidays.

5. 'The Muppet Christmas Carol' (1992): Charles Dickens' tale is reworked with Kermit as Bob Cratchit and Michael Caine as Ebenezer

Scrooge.

6. 'The Nightmare Before Christmas' (1993): The Pumpkin King explores holiday enchantment after growing weary of Halloween.

7. 'The Santa Clause' (1994): A regular guy suddenly acquires this monumental holiday job.

8. 'National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation' (1989): Clark Griswold's ambitious plans

unravel in unexpected ways.

REMAKES OF CLASSICS

1. 'Miracle on 34th Street' (1947 and 1994): Both versions underscore how faith is an integral part of the holiday experience.

2. 'How the Grinch Stole Christmas' (1966 and 2000): The story of a holiday-hating hermit who comes to embrace the season.

The 12th Day of Christmas

You've heard the song "The 12 Days of Christmas," but you might not know its connection to an actual Christian celebration.

The final "day of Christmas" is known as Three Kings Day (or Epiphany) and it marks the date that three kings (also known as wise men) reached the infant Christ child, as described in the Bible's Book of Matthew. It's said that they followed a star to him, then presented gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. This is the traditional end of the Christmas season, particularly in Spanish-speaking countries and former Spanish colonies, and marks the beginning of the pre-Lenten season of Carnival.

KINGS DAY GIFTS

Celebrated on Jan. 6 each year, Three Kings Day is associated with parades, special cakes and, in the tradition of the wise men, gift-giving. In some cultures, it is customary for children to leave their shoes outside their doors, allowing the kings to fill them with presents. In a spirit similar to the tradition of feeding Santa's reindeer, some children celebrate Three Kings Day by placing shoeboxes filled with grass or hay outside for the camels that accompanied the kings.

LOCAL EVENTS

Communities worldwide celebrate Three Kings Day with parades. The largest of these happens on Twelfth Night (Jan. 5) in Barcelona, Spain. According to tradition, the ceremonial Three Kings arrive by sea and receive a warm welcome from the city's

mayor, who grants them the symbolic key to the city. New York plays host to its own decades-long tradition with a parade organized by El Museo del Barrio. The Carnival season in New Orleans begins on Twelfth Night, with the St. Joan of Arc walking parade. A streetcar parade is held from

the city's Riverbend area down historic St. Charles Avenue in the Garden District.

HISTORIC FOODWAYS

Another hallmark of this holiday is the food, particularly the traditional Three Kings Bread, known by various names and often featuring

unique ingredients. Commonly referred to as "roscon de reyes" or "galette des rois," this festive food can include a hidden coin, jewel, toy, doll or a charm which is said to bring good fortune to the child who discovers it. New Orleans' Lenten-season variation is simply called King Cake.



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A New Holiday Favorite

Most of our traditions are centuries old, but Elf on the Shelf changed that.

Some global versions of Elf on the Shelf – in which one of Santa’s helpers reports back on children’s behavior – has been around for some time. But a new tradition of placing them around our homes really took hold in the 21st Century after the 2005 publication of ‘The Elf on the Shelf: A Christmas Tradition,’ written by Carol Aebersold and Chanda Bell and illustrated by Coe Steinwart. Here’s how to join in the fun:

GETTING STARTED

Like so much with the holidays, there is a strong commercial aspect associated with the Elf tradition. But remember that you’re not limited to the commercially marketed versions. Any small figurine or stuffed animal can take on the role of an Elf, infused with a touch of Christmas magic.

To get the most out of the Elf on the Shelf experience, introduce him at the right time. If he begins appearing too early, the excitement of the game may diminish – and that would limit the creative possibilities for children. Typically, Elf makes his first appearance no earlier than Dec. 1, with many families welcoming Elf during the evening when the Christmas tree and decorations go up.

PERSONALIZING THINGS

Avoid setting expectations too high early in the season. Elf’s antics should be simple and manageable. Over-the-top hijinks may deplete your reservoir of creative ideas before the holiday arrives. If you find yourself stuck before Dec. 25, head over to sites like Pinterest to find out more about the creative adventures that other families have had.

Keep in mind that there are no official rules governing Elf traditions. Your Elf may appear in a new location each morning, or perhaps only surface when the children have demonstrated good behavior. If you establish a daily schedule, it might be necessary to set an alarm as a reminder.

You may want to keep notes so that none of his many escapades are repeated. The Elf might bring along small treats or notes.

There is no right or wrong approach to establishing an Elf tradition. The goal is simply to add a little more magic to the holiday season.



Traditions Around the World

Looking to change up your family's celebration with a touch of international flair?

Just as the U.S. has its long-held traditions, so do other countries around the world – and they can be refreshingly different. Some honor unique aspects of the season while others celebrate activities and folkways from their specific region. Here are a few to explore and possibly integrate into your own festivities this year:

BOOKS AND CHOCOLATE

In Iceland, an intriguing custom involves exchanging books on Christmas Eve, followed by an evening spent indulging in chocolate and reading. This practice is part of a festive season known as the Christmas Book Flood, or “Jolabokaflod.” The tradition is said to have contributed to a remarkable achievement in which Iceland publishes more books per capita than any other country worldwide, with a significant portion of sales occurring in the early holiday months of September and November.

THE HOLIDAY PICKLE

One well-known custom that's believed to have German origins is hiding a Christmas pickle in the tree. According to this tradition, the person who discovers the pickle-shaped ornament on Christmas morning is rewarded with an additional gift. The idea supposedly traces back to a Civil War

soldier from Bavaria who requested one last pickle before his demise in a moment of desperation – and was miraculously saved. Another narrative involves St. Nicholas saving two boys trapped in a pickle barrel. Others suggest that this tradition simply gained prominence through the sale of pickle-shaped ornaments that were originally introduced in Germany.

UNIQUE TREE DECORATIONS

In Poland, Christmas trees may be adorned with spider webs. This practice is rooted in a local legend that claims a spider wove a blanket for Jesus, leading many Polish people to view spiders as symbols of goodness and prosperity.

NATIVITY SCENES

In Peru, La Noche Buena marks the principal celebration of Christmas Eve. Following the Christmas Mass, families gather to share a substantial meal, exchange gifts and then they toast one another at midnight. Homes are adorned with intricately carved nativity scenes made from stone or wood, with gifts placed around the manger. Tradition holds that whoever is selected to place the figurine of baby Jesus in the manger will experience good fortune.

