

You shouldn't have!

An inquiry into the shady past of Christmas

by Teresa O'Connor

Christmas may be one of America's favorite holidays, but it's rather surprising how little we tend to know about the day. Not convinced? Here are seven of the strangest and most surprising facts about this popular holiday.

Birth of the sun: Christmas and the winter solstice have more in common than you think. The birth of Jesus was assigned to various dates for more than 300 years, but never much celebrated. In the fourth century A.D., Roman Emperor Constantine moved the holiday officially to Dec. 25. The Julian calendar used at the time erroneously considered Dec. 25 the winter solstice. Many early civilizations, including Ancient Rome, believed this occasion—the year's longest night—symbolized the birthday of the sun and the return of the light. This annual celestial event was extremely important for these early cultures, depending as they did on the natural elements to survive. The joyous occasion seemed an appropriate day to celebrate Christmas.

The giving tradition: Today, it's hard to imagine Christmas without gifts. But it wasn't always so. The tradition dates back to the Ancient Roman festival of *Saturnalia*, held on the days leading up to the winter solstice. *Kalends* of January, the New Year, was another important gift-giving

event. As the Greek Libanius explained, "The impulse to spend seizes everyone... a stream of presents pours itself out on all sides." As a result, the early Church considered gift giving to be a pagan holdover and frowned upon the practice for centuries. Gifts were given on Twelfth Night (January 6) instead.

A slow start: Christmas ranked low as a holiday for centuries. Many traditions had pre-Christian roots, and the early Church wasn't keen to accept them. It wasn't until

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the late Middle Ages that the holiday became popular. Towns and cities often appointed a Lord of Misrule who presided over the Christmas entertainment. He dressed in colorful clothing, and directed elaborate processions, plays and festivities. The largest feasts often included roasted peacock and swan—painted with saffron and "refeathered" right before serving.

Against the law: Christmas merriment came to an abrupt halt when the holiday was declared illegal during the English Reformation (1640s-1660). Citizens were forbidden to decorate, sing carols or even prepare the traditional roast goose. Even in America, it was a penal offense to observe Christmas in New England. The law was declared in 1659 and continued until the 19th century, when the influx of German and Irish immigrants lessened such puritanical strictness. In Scot-

land, Christmas was banned for nearly 400 years, from the 1580s until the 1950s. It wasn't until 1958 that it became an official public holiday.

The start of Santa: Santa Claus and Rip Van Winkle share important similarities. Washington Irving, the author of "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," introduced Santa Claus to the United States. Irving adapted legends about a Dutch Saint Nicholas to create an American tradition. In his best-selling 1809 *Knickerbockers' History of New York*, he gave the first literary description of Saint Nicholas in this country. The legend traveled fast. Before long, the character evolved into the loveable Santa Claus we know today.

Oh, Christmas tree: The Christmas tree got off to a rocky start in America. German settlers brought their rich tradition to this country, and trees were found in Pennsylvania settlements as early as 1747; but they weren't accepted by mainstream society. In fact, many considered Christmas trees dangerous pagan symbols as late as the 1840s. The custom finally caught on when the popular English Queen Victoria and her German husband, Prince Albert, were seen with a tree in the *Illustrated London News* in 1846. Before long, the tradition spread throughout England, Europe, Russia and the United States. By the 20th century, the Christmas tree was firmly entrenched in our nation's culture.

Xmas not so bad: Those eager to keep "Christ" in Christmas needn't worry about using "Xmas." "X" is the first letter in the Greek word for Christ: *Xristos*. Saying or writing Xmas is actually quite appropriate, when you think about it. ■