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The American Way of Christmas (Part Two): *Christmas Presents and Christmas Trees*



Have you done all your Christmas shopping, wrapped your presents, and listened to a Christmas carol?

Have you decorated your Christmas tree and lit it with festive lights?

Have you been naughty or nice, checked your list twice, and sent it to Santa?

Have you ever wondered, “Where did all these customs begin?”

As we saw in last week’s ***Book Note***, the development of *The American Way of Christmas* corresponds closely to Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s theory of

an "invented tradition." In "inventing a tradition," at critical moments in their history a people seeking a common identity borrow from existing customs and practices and adapt them to current needs and conditions. Then by adding new practices and behaviors to them the people create a new "tradition." [1] Which is precisely what 19th century Americans did in an almost perfect expression of ***The American Tapestry Project's*** concept of the protean American story.

The American Tapestry Project asserts that among the tapestry of America's many stories two predominate. One is an exclusive, essentialist story that says America is a white, Christian patriarchy that is fixed in character, immutable, and immune to change. The other is a protean story that says America is in a perpetual state of becoming as it seeks to perfect its experiment in self-government all the while continually expanding the inclusiveness of the ***"We"*** in America's founding documents – ***"We the People…."*** [2] As Penne Restad says in ***Christmas In America: A History***, "We know … that Americans began to celebrate Christmas widely only in the last half of the nineteenth century …" [3] She continues:

> Even as Americans framed the holiday, they revealed a self-conscious awareness that it was significantly different from earlier celebrations of Jesus' birth … the holiday matured in an era marked by the Civil War and titanic social change any explanation of our Christmas must draw upon … the efforts to accommodate an unprecedented heterogeneity in the nation …" [4]

Although Christmas only became a national holiday in 1870 as part of an attempt at national reconciliation and the creation of a shared national identity after the Civil War when President Ulysses S. Grant signed a proclamation on June 24 declaring it a federal holiday, [5] Christmas' role as an integral component of national identity creation reaches back to the early 19th century. Seeking to create an American national culture distinct from the British, one of the customs Americans made their own was Christmas. They created *The American Way of Christmas* by taming Christmas' ancient raucous carnival customs, by creating a non-denominational Protestant holiday with Roman Catholic and German borrowings, and by bringing it into the American *Home* as a domesticated, child-focused, celebration of love and family.

Since time immemorial Christmas had always been both a spiritual holy day and a mid-winter carnival celebrating the life force at the winter solstice. In early America, however, the carnival aspects could get out of hand with mummers accosting neighbors for alcoholic drinks, such as eggnog, the firing of guns into the night sky, and other licentious behavior. "Mummers" derived from the medieval custom of going door-to-door offering a song in exchange for a drink. Americans tamed the mummers by turning them into the more benign Christmas carolers singing on the village green.

Eggnog originally was a potent alcoholic drink that transformed many a Christmas celebration into something more boisterous. Allegedly George Washington's recipe (it isn't), compare this early 19th century recipe for eggnog with the bland concoction you might find at your local Giant Eagle or Wegmans. The recipe directs you to take "One quart cream, one quart milk, one dozen tablespoons sugar, one pint brandy, ½ pint rye whiskey, ½ pint Jamaica rum, ¼ pint sherry – mix liquor first, then separate yolks and whites of 12 eggs, add sugar to beaten yolks, mix well. Add milk and cream, slowly beating. Beat whites of eggs until stiff and fold slowly into mixture. Let set in cool place for several days. Taste frequently." [6]

As Christmas became a *Home*bound, domestic holiday, 19th century Americans transformed eggnog into a temperance drink.

In the 1830s and 1840s, New Englanders, by rebuffing the old Puritan hostility to Christmas, created an American non-denominational, Protestant Christmas holiday. They merged the old southern Anglican, now Episcopalian, customs, tinged with a Roman Catholic hint of the Feast of the Nativity and St. Nicholas as gift giver, with their own evolving sense of *Home*.

Early 19th century America was a society awash in change and controversy: the growing abolitionist sentiment creating rancor between the North and the South; a rapidly changing economy from a home-based, handicraft society to a manufacturing economy outside of the home; and the first major wave of non-English, non-Protestant immigrants – the Roman Catholic Irish and Germans.

To escape the roiling turmoil these changes wrought, Penne Restad says, "Americans molded the idea of home into a spiritual and metaphorical sanctuary from the awesome changes that modern life brought them." [7] In the *Home*, woman as the keeper of social order found support in the concept of Jesus' birth and his identity as a self-sacrificing human governed by love. Since neither Protestants nor Roman Catholics celebrated Jesus' birth as a sacrament, Christmas became an ecumenical holiday drawing all together. Jesus' role as the protector of children cemented the holiday as a *Home*bound holiday available to all Americans.

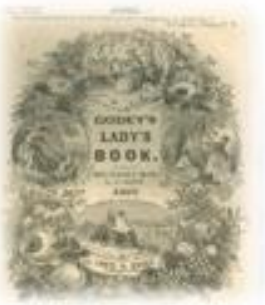
How did this happen?

It happened in two ways. First, as Bruce David Forbes says in his ***Christmas: A Candid History***, working from the bottom up, Christmas developed like a rolling snowball picking up bits and pieces of different customs and practices as the people themselves created their new holiday. In many ways, with the adoption of artificial trees, movies, and plays like ***Elf, National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*** and ***Home Alone***, and various 21st century riffs on older Christmas carols, Americans are still inventing and reinventing *The American Way of Christmas*. Secondly, it happened, as Stephen Nissenbaum says in his ***The***

Battle for Christmas about the adoption of Christmas trees, when "Information about the Christmas tree was diffused by means of commercial literature … It was by reading about Christmas trees … that many thousands of Americans learned about the custom. [8]

So, it wasn't "either/or," it was "both/and" as 19th century Americans developed *The American Way of Christmas* by adopting one and another's folk customs and by reading about real and imagined Christmas customs in newspapers, magazines, and books. We will see this process at work in the evolution of Christmas gift giving, the adoption of the Christmas tree, and Santa Claus' emergence out of the tradition of St. Nicholas, Krampus, Kris Kringle, and the Dutch Sinter Klaas.

What were early 19th century Americans reading as they invented *The American Way of Christmas*? Well, they were reading many things, but the work of three individuals stand out – Washington Irving, Charles Dickens, and Sarah Josepha Hale.

Washington Irving, one of American literature's first stars, created such memorable stories as "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." While one can't say that Irving invented Christmas, his contribution to the creation of *The American Way of Christmas* is immense. First, he set in motion the "snowball," to borrow Forbes' metaphor, that ultimately culminates in the Santa Claus Thomas Nast and later Coca-Cola made an American icon.

In his 1809 ***A Knickerbocker's History of New York***, Irving describes the old Dutch custom of Sinter Klaas, the Dutch pronunciation of St. Nicholas. The patron saint of children and frequently thought of as the father of Christmas, St. Nicholas is the gift giver. For more than a millennium and a half, Europeans have celebrated St. Nicholas' feast day, December 6, as the day St. Nicholas brought gifts to children.

Irving describes Sinter Klaas as a short, stout little man with a short stemmed pipe riding in a flying wagon drawn by a single horse over old New York City – "knickerbocker country" – landing on rooftops and sliding down chimneys to

deliver presents to good children and birch switches to bad children. Irving's Sinter Klaas could be judgmental; remember Santa Claus knows who has been naughty or nice. The nice children get a treat; the naughty children get a lump of coal or a switch left by their bedside for their parents to chasten them. [9]

Secondly, Irving's greatest contributions to *The American Way of Christmas*, however, are the Christmas stories in his ***The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*** Later published separately as ***Old Christmas,*** it includes five stories about Crayon's experience of an old-fashioned English Christmas with the Bracebridge family. The stories are "Christmas" in which Crayon muses on the meaning of Christmas and how it ought to be celebrated; "The Stage Coach" in which Crayon travels with the Bracebridge children to their father's manor house, Bracebridge Hall; "Christmas Eve," in which Crayon celebrates the holiday with Squire Bracebridge; "Christmas Day" during which Crayon experiences Christmas allegedly in the old tradition; and concludes with "Christmas Dinner" offered in the old style. [10]

The organizing conceit of the stories is that Squire Bracebridge seeks to restore the old ways of celebrating Christmas in which the Squire and people meet as equals, gifts are exchanged, carols are sung, dances danced in the manor hall decorated as in olden days with holly and mistletoe, and an elaborate feast is shared by one and all. The spirit is one of generosity and joy. None of these customs are actually old, for Irving, having reflected in the first story about what Christmas ought to be, then creates four stories illustrating a genuine Christmas celebration. It is not one of excess and revelry, but a *Home*bound celebration of generosity and sharing. Irving's vision of Christmas became – for many people, still is – the archetypal American expression of Christmas at *Home*.

In addition to Washington Irving, Americans were also reading Charles Dickens. Although an Englishman, inspired by Irving's vision, Dickens' ***A Christmas Carol*** sanctified the American sense of Christmas as a *Home*bound holiday. Although its Cratchit family setting complete with a low-key *Bracebridgian* Christmas feast completed Irving's vision, it is Scrooge's redemption that elevated the story and by extension the American *Home*bound Christmas into a spiritual experience of public generosity and family.

James Barnett points out that although Dickens makes fleeting religious references, ***A Christmas Carol*** is essentially a secular "literary sermon against selfishness and a panegyric on brotherhood and benevolence, especially at Christmas." [11] It became the living embodiment of the idea of *Home* and family as society's spiritual sanctuary. Remember, after Scrooge's night journey of redemptive becoming, the story does not end with him dining with the Cratchits.

Upon awakening a new person – he is born again, to borrow a phrase – Scrooge makes a large donation to charity, for redemption must be made public, and sends

a large turkey to the Cratchits. Scrooge then reunites with his nephew Fred's family to celebrate the Christmas feast. In this sense, the celebration is both a literal feast upon which to dine and a spiritual feast of transformation. To show that his redemption is not simply symbolic, Dickens has Scrooge the next day give Bob Cratchit a large raise and begins to be a father figure to Tiny Tim. In ***A Christmas Carol***, Dickens defined the spirit of Christmas as the spirit of compassion and generosity.

In an 1837 reflection on Christmas for the ***Monthly Repository***, Leigh Hunt commented on the inexhaustibility of Christmas topics. [12] There is simply no end of potential topics to examine. Last year we did four ***Book Notes*** on Christmas carols, which can be found at Book Notes - Jefferson Educational Society (jeserie.org) and here we are well on our way to adding three more! To keep things at some reasonable length, let's conclude this ***Book Note*** with a look at two American Christmas customs – gift giving and Christmas trees. Next week we'll examine the evolution of Santa Claus.

In early America, the primary gift giving days were New Year's Day and Valentine's Day. The latter maintained primacy of place until well into the late 19th century, but New Year's Day gave way to Christmas in the early 19th century. One could argue that New Year's Day was and still is a part of the Christmas season, which at its most inclusive stretches from the first Advent Sunday in December until Epiphany on January 6 (the Twelfth Day of Christmas whose eve is Twelfth Night). In English culture, prior to the rise of the modern Christmas during the Victorian Age, the primary gift giving day was Twelfth Night.

In both America and Britain, the focus of the giving of gifts originally was between master and servant with the master bestowing the gift as both gesture of gratitude and as a means of preserving the social hierarchy. Gradually, gift giving shifted to exchanges between adults in which the recipient was usually a woman receiving a gift from her suitor or husband. Again, the gift was a token of esteem, if not love, but it also reaffirmed the husband as head of the household. Men were not thought the proper recipients of gifts. Typical gifts given to women were very similar to 21st century gifts: jewelry and other personal items. [13]

As gift giving shifted to an interpersonal level, two other things resulted. First, the focus shifted to the *Home* and to children. Second, the increase in gift giving created a new commercial culture of specialty shops and notion stores. The emerging Christmas shopping and gift giving season became the foundation of a new consumer culture. Previously children's Christmas gifts had been homemade – either some token of food or a sweet or a practical gift like knitted mittens. But as the seasonal gifts shifted from New Year's and were bestowed on children the presents themselves had to become more special.

This was achieved in two ways: the gifts themselves became more expensive, more special, and they were wrapped. Wrapping Christmas presents gives them an air of "specialness" and mystery – *what is in the package?* Harriet Beecher Stowe noted the shift in Christmas culture in her own lifetime in her Christmas story "Christmas; or The Good Fairy." Stowe wrote that in her childhood a child would have been glad to receive a bit of candy, but by the 1840s only fancy store bought books and toys occasioned a child's delight. [14] Children's gifts, then as now, focused on toys, but another was actually more popular.

Christmas "Gift Books" were given to people of all ages, but in particular to children. They were educational tools that also served as powerful socializing agents. "Gift Books" were a genre unto themselves; they were "mixed anthologies of poetry, stories, essays, and (frequently) pictures." [15] Printed photographs were rare; their inclusion made a book special. More importantly for the development of a consumer culture driven by Christmas spending, always published at the end of the year "Gift Books," the 19th century's "video game," "were the very first commercial products of any sort that were manufactured specifically, and solely, for the purpose of being given away by the purchaser." [16]

And how were the gifts distributed?

Usually on Christmas Eve, but sometimes Christmas morning, by parents as a key part of the day's celebration. In the drawing room, whose doors were closed to keep the children out, the parents erected the Christmas tree atop a table and festooned it with small gifts while placing others on the table or on the floor beside it. Then, when all was prepared, the doors were flung open, the children permitted to enter and see the glittering tree with its candles and the presents arrayed under and beside it. The children's excitement and delight filled the *Home*.

Except for the size of the tree, some things never change. It could be Christmas 2022, but in the 1830s and 1840s, Christmas trees and gifts became a new American tradition.

Where did Christmas trees come from?

We noted in Part One of *The American Way of Christmas* that decorating homes with plants that remained green all year is an ancient custom. The Romans decorated their homes with evergreens celebrating the Saturnalia; northern Europeans used mistletoe and holly as religious symbols to ward off witches, ghosts, and other ills. Early Christians simply adopted these pagan customs.

The immediate ancestor of the American Christmas tree was German. In the 16th century, German Christians would bring fir trees into their homes and decorate them "with roses, apples, wafers, tinsel, and sweetmeats." [17] By the way, *Tannenbaum* does not mean Christmas tree; it means fir tree. The German for Christmas tree is *Weihnactsbaum*. The Germans also invented tinsel. It is sometimes said that Martin Luther first brought a tree into his home and decorated it, but the custom predated Luther. More accurately, the legend is that Luther was the first to place lit candles on a tree. According to the legend, one winter evening as he walked home Luther gazed in wonder at the stars winking amidst the forest trees. Returning home, he decorated his family's *Weihnactsbaum* with lit candles. [18]

How did Christmas trees come to America?

There are multiple theories and innumerable claimants for the honor of displaying the first American Christmas tree. Almost every American town with any significant German heritage in its history claims to have first displayed Christmas trees. Regardless, Christmas trees came to America with the first German settlers in Pennsylvania in the 18th century and with Hessian soldiers brought to America by the British during the American Revolution. The Hessian General Friedrich Riedesel and his wife first displayed a Christmas tree in 1781. The first depiction of a Christmas tree in American art is in the sketchbooks of John Lewis Krimmel in 1812 or 1813 representing a family celebrating Christmas in the Moravian tradition. [19]

But the American tradition of Christmas trees really begins when Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of ***Godey's Lady's Book***, saw in the ***London Illustrated News*** an image of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's table top Windsor Castle

Christmas tree in 1848. Prince Albert, of German ancestry, brought the German custom of Christmas trees to England in the late 1830s. Hale, the most influential woman of the 19th century and the defining arbiter of American cultural taste during the era, Americanized the image by removing Queen Victoria's tiara and Albert's mustache and royal sash. [20] Hale then published it repeatedly in ***Godey's Lady's Book*** over the years promoting the new American tradition. In addition to the Christmas tree, Hale invented and promoted numerous American customs, such as white wedding gowns for brides and the popularity of the polka. Her influence was such that mid-19th century American women would make no cultural decision until they had read what "Mrs. Hale recommended." Of course, Hale's greatest contribution was convincing President Abraham Lincoln to make Thanksgiving Day a national holiday.

So, the Christmas tree perfectly illustrates Christmas as an "invented tradition" combining the spirit of folk customs with the power of modern media as Hale intentionally created the new and enduring American tradition of the Christmas tree. Following Hale's path, the first White House Christmas tree was displayed by President Franklin Pierce in 1856 for Sunday School children at a nearby church; the first Christmas tree for the private pleasure of the President's family was erected in 1889 for President Benjamin Harrison; and the first publicly displayed Christmas tree occurred during the William Howard Taft administration. [21]

"Inventing Christmas" – it's an ongoing American custom. Promoted by a media giant – Sarah Josepha Hale's ***Godey's Lady's Book*** – and like a "snowball" accumulating new bits and pieces as it grows, the top down-bottom up evolution of the Christmas tree from a table top two-to-three foot small pine to floor standing six, seven feet, and even taller incarnations, to gigantic outdoor displays such as the Rockefeller Center tree (where the first tree was erected in 1931 by construction workers – see image at beginning of this ***Note***) to artificial trees of every hue and size, the Christmas tree is the perfect symbol of American cultural creativity.

Next week we'll explore the ultimate American Christmas creation – the invention of a global icon – Santa Claus!

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"First Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree, 12/24/1931" at **Untapped New York** available The First Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree Was Started by Site Construction Workers - Untapped New York (untappedcities.com) accessed December 8, 2022. *"Winslow Homer, The Christmas Tree"* at **Wikimedia Commons** available File:Winslow Homer - The Christmas Tree - 1942.1217.b - Cleveland Museum of Art.tif - Wikimedia Commons accessed December 7, 2022.
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"The Christmas Tree, Godey's Lady's Book" at **Wikimedia Commons** available at File:The Christmas Tree - Godey's Lady's Book, 1850.jpg - Wikimedia Commons accessed December 12, 2022.

End Notes

1. For a more complete analysis of "invented tradition," cf. Eric Hobsbawm, *"Introduction"* in Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, Eds. **The Invention of Tradition**. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983 available at **Google Books** at The Invention of Tradition - Google Books) accessed December 11, 2022.
2. For a fuller discussion of my concept of the two meta-threads in ***The American Tapestry Project***, see **Book Notes #102** *"1968/2022. The Seeds of Our Discontents (Part One)* available at Roth Book Notes 2022.pdf (jeserie.org).
3. Restad, Penne L. **Christmas In America: A History**. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. viii.
4. Ibid, pp. viii-ix.
5. White, Ron. *"Remember it was a President, Ulysses S. Grant, who made Christmas a national holiday,"* **New York Daily News** (December 23, 2017) available at Remember it was a President, Ulysses S. Grant, who made Christmas a national holiday – New York Daily News (nydailynews.com) accessed December 11, 2022.
6. *"George Washington's Christmas Eggnog"* at **Almanac** available at George Washington's Christmas Eggnog Recipe | The Old Farmer's Almanac accessed December 11, 2022.
7. Restad, pp. 42-43.

8. See Bruce David Forbes, **Christmas: A Candid History** (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 45-64-5 and Stephen Nissenbaum, **The Battle for Christmas** (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), p. 177.
9. Irving, Washington. **A Knickerbocker's History of New York**. (Delhi Open Books, Kindle Edition).
10. Irving, Washington. **Old Christmas**. (New York: Start Publishing, 2012 Kindle Edition).
11. Barnett, James. **The American Christmas**. (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1954), p. 15.
12. Referenced in Leigh Eric Schmidt's **Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays.** (Princeton, NJ Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 106.
13. For a detailed discussion of gift giving and the preservation of the social order, see Nissenbaum **cited above**, p. 136. Nissenbaum and Restad are also both very informative on the rise of gift giving to children – see Nissenbaum, pp. 132-175 and Restad, pp. 57-74.
14. Stowe's story is noted in Nissenbaum, **cited above**, p. 134.
15. Nissenbaum, **cited above**, p. 141.
16. Ibid., p. 143.
17. Dundon, Alice. *"A Brief History of the Christmas Tree,"* at **Culture Trip** available at A Brief History of the Christmas Tree (theculturetrip.com) accessed December 12, 2022.
18. Forbes, **cited above**, p. 50.
19. *"Christmas tree"* in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at Christmas tree - Wikipedia accessed December 12, 2022.
20. Kirkpatrick, Melanie. **Lady Editor: Sarah Josepha Hale and the Making of the Modern American Woman.** (New York: Encounter Books, 2021), pp. 172-174.
21. *"White House Christmases Past"* at **The White House Historical Association** available at White House Christmases Past - White House Historical Association (whitehousehistory.org) accessed December 12, 2022.

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