

Book Notes:

Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer'



As we learned in the [previous Book Notes](#), it was Clement Clarke Moore in his 1823 *A Visit from St. Nicholas* who first named Santa's reindeer. It may well also have been Moore who gave Santa his reindeer and sleigh, for the Dutch folklore of the Hudson Valley was vague about Sinterklaas and his flying wagon's power source.

Two years before Moore, an anonymous poem, "*Old Santeclaus with much delight*," first depicted Santa in a sleigh pulled by a reindeer; yes, *a* reindeer. There was only one. The poem was published by William Gilley in 1821, but he identified neither an author nor an illustrator. Some sources attribute the poem to Moore, but its simpler, if not cruder, diction and meter suggest an author other than Moore.

Regardless of who wrote "*Old Santeclaus with much delight*," not only did Moore in "*A Visit from St. Nicholas*" give Santa eight reindeer, he also named them. As the opening stanza of "*Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*," which Moore did not write, proclaims, "You know Dasher and Dancer and Prancer and Vixen/Comet

and Cupid and Donner and Blitzen ...” [1]

But Rudolph was nowhere to be seen.

Who is Rudolph, “the most famous reindeer of all”?

Where did he come from?

Who created Rudolph – star of song, theatrical cartoons, comic books, animated television specials, feature-length films, and his own personal U.S. postage stamp?

How did he become more famous than his eight older peers?

Gene Autry and television helped, but we’re getting ahead of the story.

For more than a hundred years, Santa did very well with only eight reindeer to pull his sleigh until 1939 when, in order to cut costs, Montgomery Ward, one of America’s two pioneering mail order and department stores, decided to produce themselves the children’s coloring books their in-store Santas gifted children. They assigned the project to create the coloring book and accompanying story to Robert L. May, an advertising department staffer. [2]

As recounted by Mark Powell in *The Washington Examiner*, scion of a prosperous Jewish family and a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Dartmouth College, May and his wife Evelyn moved to Chicago in the 1930s after the Great Depression shattered his family’s finances. [3] At Montgomery Ward, May wrote copy for the company’s many catalogs, which at the time challenged Sears and Roebuck’s catalog as the nation’s preeminent sales vehicle. Montgomery Ward and Sears’ catalogs were the Amazon.com of their time.

Although he had a job, no small thing during the Great Depression, May’s fortunes deteriorated after the birth of their daughter Barbara. Evelyn developed cancer and her medical bills further burdened the family. Amidst this gloom, May took up the task of creating a children’s Christmas story. [4]

His 4-year-old daughter loved the deer in the Lincoln Park Zoo, so, May decided, a deer it would be to help power Santa’s sleigh. As Deborah Whipp notes in her *“The History of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,”* May combined his experience as a small, shy child taunted by other children with his recollection of *“The Ugly Duckling”* story “to create the adventure of a misfit reindeer with a glowing red nose.” [5]

But why Rudolph, why the red nose?

May toyed with naming Rudolph either Rollo or Reginald, but settled on Rudolph. Regarding the nose, as Powell relates, May conceived of the red nose as making Rudolph different than the other deer. They teased him. They excluded him. But one day “while staring out of his office window, thick fog from Lake Michigan blocked the view.” May had an inspiration. He thought, “A bright red nose would shine through fog like a spotlight.” [6] Rudolph would save Christmas by guiding Santa’s sleigh through the foggy night!

At first, May’s bosses did not like the story, associating a bulbous red nose “with

the overindulgence of alcohol.” [7] Eventually, they were won over. “During the 1939 Christmas season, 2.4 million copies of *“Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer”* were distributed ... by 1946, six million copies were in circulation.” [8] Rudolph, his red nose glowing through the night, was on his way to becoming an enduring piece of American folklore. For, as Ronald D. Lankford, Jr. says in his *Sleigh Rides Jingle Bells & Silent Nights: A Cultural History of American Christmas Songs*, Rudolph’s story is “the fantasy story made to order for American children: each child has the need to express and receive approval for his or her individuality and/or special qualities. Rudolph’s story embodies the American Dream for the child, written large because of the cultural significance of Christmas.” [9]

Here is the poem/story in its entirety:

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer

You know Dasher and Dancer and Prancer and Vixen
Comet and Cupid and Donner and Blitzen
But do you recall
The most famous reindeer of all?

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer
Had a very shiny nose
And if you ever saw it
You would even say it glows

All of the other reindeer
Used to laugh and call him names
They never let poor Rudolph
Join in any reindeer games

Then one foggy Christmas Eve
Santa came to say
"Rudolph, with your nose so bright
Won't you guide my sleigh tonight?"

Then how the reindeer loved him
As they shouted out with glee
"Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer
You'll go down in history"

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer
Had a very shiny nose
And if you ever saw it
You would even say it glows

All of the other reindeer
Used to laugh and call him names
They never let poor Rudolph
Join in any reindeer games

Then one foggy Christmas Eve
Santa came to say
"Rudolph, with your nose so bright
Won't you guide my sleigh tonight?"

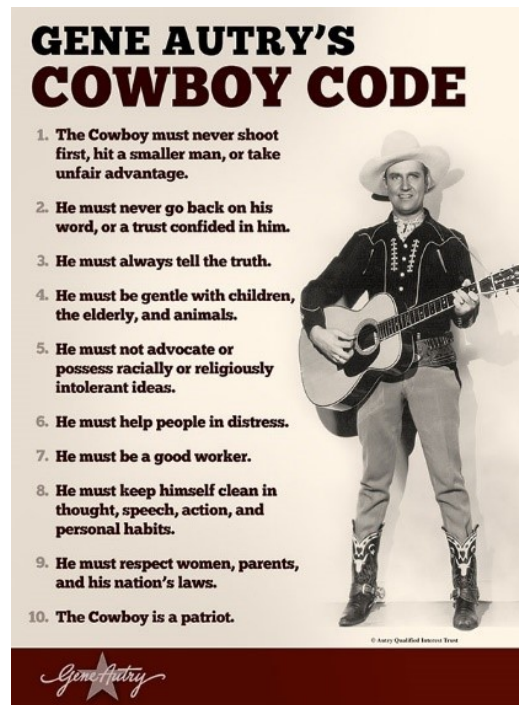
Then how the reindeer loved him
As they shouted out with glee
"Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer
You'll go down in history". [10]

Dying just before Rudolph was completed, May's wife never heard the final version. At first, although the story and coloring book were a huge success, May did not benefit. The rights were owned by Montgomery Ward. In a true Christmas story fashion, in 1947, "Someone took the matter directly to Ward's big boss, the notoriously crusty, tough-as-nails Sewell Avery ... something touched Avery's heart. To everyone's astonishment," he gave May the rights to Rudolph. [11]

In 1949, Rudolph embarked on his career as an American show business icon. May's brother-in-law, songwriter Johnny Marks, turned Rudolph into a song. At first no one wanted to record it for fear of getting lost in the crush of Christmas songs, especially one aimed at children. Gene Autry, urged on by his wife, recorded the song. One of the best-selling songs of all time, it topped the charts in 1949, selling two million copies. [12]

A Hollywood legend, Gene Autry's signature song was "*Back in the Saddle Again*," which can be found [here](#).

Known as the singing cowboy, Autry, along with Roy Rogers, Sky King, Hopalong Cassidy, the Lone Ranger, and the Cisco Kid, dominated early Boomer TV in the late 1940s and 1950s. In addition to "Rudolph," Autry also made the classic recordings of "*Frosty the Snowman*," "*Here Comes Santa Claus*," and "*Up on the House Top*." As cornball as it reads, on the right as well as the left, our fractious times could benefit from more people adhering to **Gene Autry's Cowboy Code**:



[13] A copy of Gene Autry's definitive version of "*Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*" can be found [here](#).



[14] And, on that note, “Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night.”



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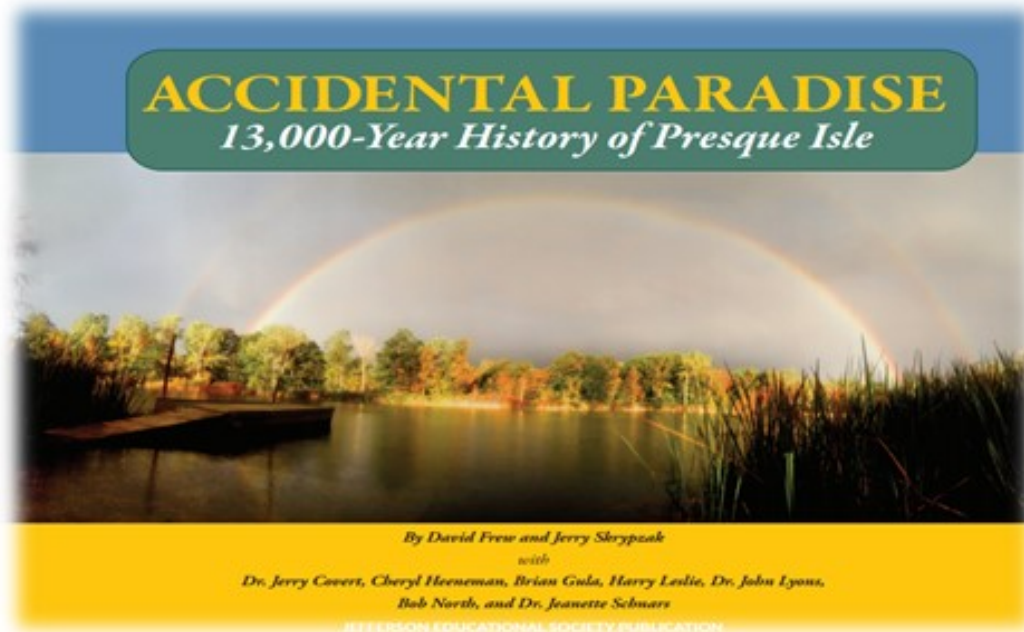
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End Notes

1. Marks, Johnny. “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” lyrics ©St. Nicholas Music, Inc. at **LyricFind** available at https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS890US890&q=rudolph+the+red+nosed+reindeer+lyrics&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwilgZSzc7tAhUyq1kKHZkgAK0Q1QloAHoECBAQAQ&biw=1680&bih=907 accessed December 15, 2020.
2. “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolph_the_Red-Nosed_Reindeer accessed December 15, 2020.
3. Powell, Mark J. “The Jewish man who created a Christmas classic,” **The Washington Examiner** (December 20, 2017) available at <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/the-jewish-man-who-created-a-christmas-classic> accessed December 15, 2020.
4. Ibid.
5. Whipp, Deborah. “The History of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” at **Altogether Christmas.com** available at <https://www.altogetherchristmas.com/traditions/rudolph.html> accessed December 15, 2020.
6. Powell, “The History of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” above.
7. Whipp, “The History of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” above.
8. Ibid.
9. Lankford, Ronald D. *Sleigh Rides Jingle Bells & Silent Nights: A Cultural History of American Christmas Songs* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2013) at Internet Archive available at <https://archive.org/details/sleighridesjingl0000lank/page/86/mode/2up> accessed December 15, 2020.
10. Marks, Johnny. “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” lyrics ©St. Nicholas Music, Inc. at **LyricFind** available at https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS890US890&q=rudolph+the+red+nosed+reindeer+lyrics&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwilgZSzc7tAhUyq1kKHZkgAK0Q1QloAHoECBAQAQ&biw=1680&bih=907 accessed December 15, 2020.
11. Powell, “The History of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” above.
12. Kim, Wook. “Yule Laugh, Yule Cry: 10 Things You Didn’t Know About Beloved Holiday Songs,” **Time** (December 12, 2017) available at <https://entertainment.time.com/2012/12/17/yule-laugh-yule-cry-10-things-you-didnt-know-about-beloved-holiday-songs/slide/rudolph-the-red-nosed-reindeer/> accessed December 15, 2020.
13. Image property of **Gene Autry.com** available at https://www.geneautry.com/geneautry/geneautry_cowboycode-code.html accessed December 15,

Newly Published JES Book Available Now!

Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The much-anticipated new book on Presque Isle by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – “**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**” is on sale exclusively through the end of the year at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at **301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505** will also handle sales *Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

Books also will be available in January at other locations, including the Jefferson Educational Society. For more information, send an email to aperino@TRECf.org.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

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In Case You Missed It

'Twas the night before Christmas... written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

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Neighborhood Bars and Clubs: Where Were Our Dads from 3:30 to 6? written by prolific author, historian, and Jefferson presenter, Dr. David Frew.

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