

Happy Holidays !

The customs, symbols, celebrations and history of the holidays in December are a mixture of religious, cultural, and secular traditions. The three most popular American celebrations this December will be Christmas (December 25), Hanukkah (December 20-28), and Kwanzaa (December 26-January 1). Christmas is a Christian holy day which celebrates the birthday of Jesus – Hanukkah is the Jewish Festival of Lights and remembers the rededication of the second Jewish Temple in Jerusalem – Kwanzaa is a relatively new seven day festival that celebrates African and African American culture and history.

Christmas was officially acknowledged in 1870 when the U.S. Congress made it a federal holiday and today it is a worldwide cultural and commercial phenomenon recognized and celebrated by more people than any other holiday.

Most United States Christmas traditions are actually an adaptation or derivation of hundreds of years of traditions from around the globe. Although it would likely take several hundred pages to describe the origins of our Christmas customs, the following are a sample of the fascinating histories of just a few. However, historians don't always agree and some traditions do not have written records as their origins evolved from ancient lore.

Christmas Tree

The fir tree has a long association with Christianity, beginning in Germany almost 1,000 years ago when legend asserts that St. Boniface came across a group of pagans worshipping a very large oak tree. In anger, he had several men cut down the oak tree and to his amazement a young fir tree sprung up from the roots of the oak tree. St. Boniface interpreted this as a sign of the Christian faith. However, it was not until sometime in the 16th century that fir trees were brought indoors for the Christmas celebration.

Another prominent legend is that Martin Luther began the tradition of decorating trees to symbolize Christmas and the light of Jesus. About 1500 he was walking in the woods and was struck by the beauty of a group of small evergreen trees covered with light snow. Their branches shimmered in the moonlight and this inspired him to set up a little fir tree, decorated with candles in his home.

Christmas Cards

The Christmas card is a Victorian creation, which began as a kind of stationery. The first card, drawn by artist John Horsley, was produced by Sir Henry Cole who worked for the British Postal Service. His card was a depiction of a Christmas scene framed in three panels and underneath the artist's drawings was printed the now familiar phrase "*A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You*". Before this card were notes written by school boys in England as greetings to their parents at Christmas and also sent as proof of their progress in the art of writing.

Gifts

One of the main reasons cited for the custom of giving and receiving presents at Christmas is because the Three Wise Men gave gifts of Frankincense, Gold and Myrrh to Jesus. Other stories about giving gifts to children are related to the legends of St. Nicholas who was a bishop/monk who lived in the fourth century AD

in a place that today is the country of Turkey. His parents died when he was young and left him a lot of money which he chose to share.. As a champion of children and the poor, he was legendary for his kindness, generosity and for giving secret gifts. By the Renaissance, St. Nicholas was the most popular saint in Europe.

Santa Claus

St. Nicholas first appeared in American popular culture sometime at the end of the 18th century as Dutch families celebrated the anniversary of his December 6th death. The name Santa Claus is believed to have evolved from his Dutch nickname “Sinter Klaas”, a shortened form of Sint Nikolaas (Dutch for Saint Nicholas). In 1823 the famous poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas”, better known now as “Twas the Night Before Christmas”, was published. In 1861 political cartoonist Thomas Nash used this story to create the first likeness of Santa Claus that matches today’s image of a cheerful man with a white beard and large belly, holding a sack of toys and dressed in a red suit trimmed with white fur.

There are countless more legends and symbols of the December holidays and their observances around the world are celebrated in many different ways. The Delta College Planetarium has a holiday show titled “Season of Light”, narrated by National Public Radio’s Noah Adams. This program showcases many of the world’s holiday customs and explores how diverse cultures light up the season. The show recounts the historical religious and cultural rituals practiced during the time of the winter solstice – not only Christian and Jewish, but also Celtic, Nordic, Irish, Mexican and Hopi Indian. It also takes a look at some of our more light-hearted seasonal traditions including kissing under the mistletoe, gift giving, songs and carols, Santa Claus, Father Christmas, and more.

This show will be the focus of a special program Friday, December 16th sponsored by the Delta College *50+...Just Like Gold Program*. You are invited to participate in this two hour program which will include lunch, the planetarium show and a review of some of the more popular holiday symbols we include today in our celebrations. Make your reservation now to join us for the informative and fun program by calling the Delta College LifeLong Learning Office (989) 686-9444.



May this season surround you by giving you gifts that cannot be bought, wrapped with paper and tied with ribbon, and giving you renewed hope, laughter and smiles, wonder in learning, and joy from sharing love and kindness.

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