

Your Name

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Intermediate Computers

July 4, 1776

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Christmas: World Traditions

Christmas as we know it today is a Victorian invention of the 1860s. Probably the most celebrated holiday in the world, our modern Christmas is a product of hundreds of years of both secular and religious traditions from around the globe. Click around this map to learn about traditions from different regions and, along the way, learn about the history of this most cherished of holidays.

Sweden. '*God Jul!*' Most people in Scandinavian countries honor St. Lucia (also known as St. Lucy) each year on December 13. The celebration of St. Lucia Day began in Sweden, but had spread to Denmark and Finland by the mid-19th century.

In these countries, the holiday is considered the beginning of the Christmas season and, as such, is sometimes referred to as "little Yule." Traditionally, the oldest daughter in each family rises early and wakes each of her family members, dressed in a long, white gown with a red sash, and wearing a crown made of twigs with nine lighted candles. For the day, she is called "Lussi" or "Lussibruden (Lucy bride)." The family then eats breakfast in a room lighted with candles.

Any shooting or fishing done on St. Lucia Day was done by torchlight, and people brightly illuminated their homes. At night, men, women, and children would carry torches in a parade. The night would end when everyone threw their torches onto a large pile of straw, creating a huge bonfire. In Finland today, one girl is chosen to serve

as the national Lucia and she is honored in a parade in which she is surrounded by torchbearers.

Light is a main theme of St. Lucia Day, as her name, which is derived from the Latin word *lux*, means light. Her feast day is celebrated near the shortest day of the year, when the sun's light again begins to strengthen. Lucia lived in Syracuse during the fourth century when persecution of Christians was common. Unfortunately, most of her story has been lost over the years. According to one common legend, Lucia lost her eyes while being tortured by a Diocletian for her Christian beliefs. Others say she may have plucked her own eyes out to protest the poor treatment of Christians. Lucia is the patron saint of the blind.

Finland. *'Hyvää Joulua!'* Many Finns visit the sauna on Christmas Eve. Families gather and listen to the national "Peace of Christmas" radio broadcast. It is customary to visit the gravesites of departed family members.

Norway. *'Gledelig Jul!'* Norway is the birthplace of the Yule log. The ancient Norse used the Yule log in their celebration of the return of the sun at winter solstice. "Yule" came from the Norse word *hweol*, meaning wheel. The Norse believed that the sun was a great wheel of fire that rolled towards and then away from the earth. Ever wonder why the family fireplace is such a central part of the typical Christmas scene? This tradition dates back to the Norse Yule log. It is probably also responsible for the popularity of log-shaped cheese, cakes, and desserts during the holidays.

Jamestown, Virginia. According to reports by Captain John Smith, the first eggnog made in the United States was consumed in his 1607 Jamestown settlement. Nog comes from the word *grog*, which refers to any drink made with rum.

Germany. *'Froehliche Weihnachten!'* Decorating evergreen trees had always been a part of the German winter solstice tradition. The first "Christmas trees" explicitly decorated and named after the Christian holiday, appeared in Strasbourg, in Alsace in the beginning of the 17th century. After 1750, Christmas trees began showing up in other parts of Germany, and even more so after 1771, when Johann Wolfgang von Goethe visited Strasbourg and promptly included a Christmas tree in his novel, *The Suffering of Young Werther*. In the 1820s, the first German immigrants decorated Christmas trees in Pennsylvania. After Germany's Prince Albert married Queen Victoria, he introduced the Christmas tree tradition to England. In 1848, the first American newspaper carried a picture of a Christmas tree and the custom spread to nearly every home in just a few years.

Mexico. *'Feliz Navidad!'* In 1828, the American minister to Mexico, Joel R. Poinsett, brought a red-and-green plant from Mexico to America. As its coloring seemed perfect for the new holiday, the plants, which were called poinsettias after Poinsett, began appearing in greenhouses as early as 1830. In 1870, New York stores began to sell them at Christmas. By 1900, they were a universal symbol of the holiday.

In Mexico, paper mache sculptures called pinatas are filled with candy and coins and hung from the ceiling. Children then take turns hitting the pinata until it breaks, sending a shower of treats to the floor. Children race to gather as much of the loot as they can.

England. *'Merry Christmas!'* An Englishman named John Calcott Horsley helped to popularize the tradition of sending Christmas greeting cards when he began producing small cards featuring festive scenes and a pre-written holiday greeting in the

late 1830s. Newly efficient post offices in England and the United States made the cards nearly overnight sensations. At about the same time, similar cards were being made by R.H. Pease, the first American card maker, in Albany, New York, and Louis Prang, a German who immigrated to America in 1850.

Celtic and Teutonic peoples had long considered mistletoe to have magic powers. It was said to have the ability to heal wounds and increase fertility. Celts hung mistletoe in their homes in order to bring themselves good luck and ward off evil spirits. During holidays in the Victorian era, the English would hang sprigs of mistletoe from ceilings and in doorways. If someone was found standing under the mistletoe, they would be kissed by someone else in the room, behavior not usually demonstrated in Victorian society.

Plum pudding is an English dish dating back to the Middle Ages. Suet, flour, sugar, raisins, nuts, and spices are tied loosely in cloth and boiled until the ingredients are "plum," meaning they have enlarged enough to fill the cloth. It is then unwrapped, sliced like cake, and topped with cream.

Caroling also began in England. Wandering musicians would travel from town to town visiting castles and homes of the rich. In return for their performance, the musicians hoped to receive a hot meal or money.

In the United States and England, children hang stockings on their bedpost or near a fireplace on Christmas Eve, hoping that it will be filled with treats while they sleep. In Scandinavia, similar-minded children leave their shoes on the hearth. This tradition can be traced to legends about Saint Nicholas. One legend tells of three poor sisters who could not marry because they had no money for a dowry. To save them

from being sold by their father, St. Nick left each of the three sisters gifts of gold coins. One went down the chimney and landed in a pair of shoes that had been left on the hearth. Another went into a window and into a pair of stockings left hanging by the fire to dry.

France. '*Joyeux Noël!*' In France, Christmas is called Noel. This comes from the French phrase *les bonnes nouvelles*," which means "the good news" and refers to the gospel.

In southern France, some people burn a log in their homes from Christmas Eve until New Year's Day. This stems from an ancient tradition in which farmers would use part of the log to ensure good luck for the next year's harvest.

Italy. '*Buone Natale!*' Italians call Christmas Il Natale, meaning "the birthday."

Australia. In Australia, the holiday comes in the middle of summer and it's not unusual for some parts of Australia to hit 100 degrees Fahrenheit on Christmas day.

During the warm and sunny Australian Christmas season, beach time and outdoor barbecues are common. Traditional Christmas day celebrations include family gatherings, exchanging gifts and either a hot meal with ham, turkey, pork or seafood or barbeques.

Ukraine. '*Srozhdestvom Kristovym!*' Ukrainians prepare a traditional twelve-course meal. A family's youngest child watches through the window for the evening star to appear, a signal that the feast can begin.

Canada. Most Canadian Christmas traditions are very similar to those practiced in the United States. In the far north of the country, the Eskimos celebrate a winter

festival called sinck tuck, which features parties with dancing and the exchanging of gifts.

Greece. *'Kala Christouyenna!'* In Greece, many people believe in kallikantzeri, goblins that appear to cause mischief during the 12 days of Christmas. Gifts are usually exchanged on January 1, St. Basil's Day.

Central America. A manger scene is the primary decoration in most southern European, Central American, and South American nations. St. Francis of Assisi created the first living nativity in 1224 to help explain the birth of Jesus to his followers.

"The History of Christmas." July 4, 1776. <http://www.history.com>.



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