

## **Enjoy a Treasured Family Moment by Sharing with Your Kids the True Meaning of Christmas**

--by Vivian Heard

Subdivision entrances and shopping centers were already reveling in fragrant holiday greenery and shimmering lights before we entered the month of December, causing many to attribute our yearly mad rush into Christmas to the gross commercialization of the holiday season. Certainly, visions of sugarplums start dancing in our heads earlier and earlier, with the impending obsession to shop till we drop or until retailers kick us out on December 24. And then by January, it's all but a blur.

But what if we stopped for a moment, turned back time, grabbed a chair by the fireplace and allowed ourselves and our children to appreciate what Christmas really means and how the simplest gifts and the simplest traditions really signify what Christmas is, why giving is so meaningful and why we began celebrating in the first place.

Though no one is quite sure of the exact date of Jesus' birth, December 25 was designated, in the fourth century, as the official date for the feast of The Nativity. Christmas was first observed in the United States colonies in 1607 but became a recognized holiday in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Dutch and other immigrants settled in the country, bringing a mixture of traditions from many cultures. The legal recognition of Christmas in the United States began in 1836, with Georgia declaring Christmas a legal holiday in 1850.

Right around this time, it became popular to bring in an evergreen tree and decorate it with lighted candles, a tradition begun by the Germans in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Martin Luther first introduced this concept when he brought a tree indoors and put candles on it to show his children how the stars twinkled beautifully through the trees at night.

Wreaths were always a part of the Christmas celebration, symbolizing the strength of life overcoming the forces of winter. Boxwood and bayberry were key in creating holiday wreaths during colonial times. To add color to the greenery, pomegranates and other brilliant fruits were added, along with pinecones and imported items such as pineapples and apples. After the twelfth day of Christmas, January 6, folks would take down their decorations, remove the fruit and add it to their holiday feast.

Christmas became a magical holiday for children when legends of St. Nicholas began circulating. St. Nicholas, who was born around 280 A.D., was a monk and bishop, but was most notably remembered as a giving, kind-hearted man who traveled the countryside to help the sick and poor. He loved children, and eventually became known as the patron saint of children. To honor him, the Dutch celebrated the feast of his death on December 6 with gifts, food and parties.

Known by a multitude of names over the years, including Sinter Klaas, Kris Kringle and Father Christmas, many know the man in the red suit and plump belly as Santa Claus, who loves to visit homes of children all over the world, leaving gifts and treats each

Christmas Eve. His generous spirit blended easily with early Christmas customs which included gift giving, the Yule log, caroling and mistletoe. And as more and more people adopted the tradition of gift giving, retailers began advertising “Christmas shopping” around the year 1820.

The mistletoe that hangs above our doorways is a tradition that began 200 years before Christ’s birth. Since mistletoe was an evergreen plant, it was gathered to decorate homes to bring cheer during the dead of winter. Some believed it had special healing powers, and others saw mistletoe as a plant of peace and harmony. The Scandinavians associated the plant with their goddess of love, and the custom of kissing under the mistletoe probably came from this belief.

The first Christmas cards were actually hand-written postcards, and the first printed card was designed by Henry Cole, a London publisher who decided he no longer had time to hand-write holiday messages. Collaborating with his friend and artist, John Horsley, the two designed a 3-panel, hand-colored card that simply stated, “Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You.”

In 1915, the first non-postcard Christmas greetings were introduced. These cards were higher quality and placed in an envelope. An 18-year-old man by the name of Joyce C. Hall was the mastermind behind this concept and founded a company called Hall Brothers, which we now know as Hallmark Cards.

There are many touching lessons to be learned when you take the time to share the history and the meaning of Christmas with your children. Each cherished Christmas tradition calls us all to kindness, generosity, harmony and love, virtues well worth teaching our kids this holiday season.

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