The Origin of “Xmas”

The familiar abbreviation for Christmas originated with the Greeks. X is the first letter of the Greek word for Christ, Xristos. By the sixteenth century, “Xmas” was popular throughout Europe. Whereas early Christians had understood that the term merely was Greek for “Christ’s mass,” later Christians, unfamiliar with the Greek reference, mistook the X as a sign of disrespect, an attempt by heathen to rid Christmas of its central meaning. For several hundred years, Christians disapproved of the use of the term. Some still do.

The Origin of the Poinsettia

The adoption of the poinsettia as the Christmas flower is relatively recent, dating from 1828. Native to Mexico, the plant, a member of the spurge family. At least as early as the eighteenth century, Mexicans called the plant “flower of the blessed night,” because of its resemblance to the Star of Bethlehem. This is the first association between the plant and Christmas.

In 1828, Dr. Joel Roberts Poinsett, the first United States ambassador to Mexico, brought the plant into the States, where it was renamed in his honor. By the time of his death in 1851, the poinsettia’s flaming red color had already established its Christmas association.

The Origin of Mistletoe

The custom of embracing under a sprig of mistletoe, if not actually kissing under it, originated in ancient Britain around the second century B.C., among the Druids, the learned class of the Celts.

Two hundred years before Christ’s birth, the Druids celebrated the start of winter by gathering mistletoe and burning it as a sacrifice to their gods. Sprigs of the yellow-green plant with waxy white berries were also hung in homes to ensure a year’s good fortune and familial harmony. Guests to a house embraced under the auspicial sprig. Twigs of the evergreen outside a house welcomed weary travelers. And if enemies chanced to meet under a tree that bore mistletoe (a parasite on deciduous and evergreen trees), they were required to lay down their arms and forget their differences for a day.

Mistletoe was a plant of hope, peace, and harmony not only for the Celts but also for the Scandinavians, who called it mistletein. Its name derived from mista, meaning “dung,” since the evergreen is propagated by seeds in birds’ excrement. For the Scandinavians, mistletoe belonged to Frigga, goddess of love, and the kissing custom is thought to be rooted in this romantic association.

The Origin of the New Year’s Resolution

Four thousand years ago, the ancient Babylonians made resolutions part of their New Year’s celebrations. While two of the most popular present-day promises might be to lose weight and to quit smoking, the Babylonians had their own two favorites: to pay off outstanding debts and to return all borrowed farming tools and household utensils.

The Origin of Rudolph

In 1939, the Montgomery Ward department store in Chicago sought something novel for its Santa Claus to distribute to parents and children. Robert May, a copywriter for the store, suggested an illustrated poem, that families would want to save and reread each holiday season. May conceived the idea of a shiny-nosed reindeer, a Santa’s helper. And an artist friend, Denver Gillen, spent hours at a local zoo creating whimsical sketches of reindeer at rest and at play.

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OK, we have the spring and summer events behind us so now it is fall and winter event time.

Stop by the Art’s Alliance Holiday Bazaar on Nov 17 and purchase those items from our gift shop which includes: A large collection of Lidabelle Wylie’s original paintings and prints; my wildlife photography; books from local authors and think about those Museum Gift Shop gift certificates and of course memberships. The museum will also be open. Remember that our holiday savings are on through New Years Eve. December 1st will be our Community Caroling from 5pm to 7pm with s’mores and more including Santa for the kid in all of us.

How’s the restroom project coming? Since you asked, it is (kind of) on track. Tulare County, who is doing the construction, is reviewing all plans from our architect now and bid packages will be available soon for contractors. We are still hoping for a January construction start with finish in June.

We are also on track for our all new water system which will be providing potable water to the museum, Bequette house, restrooms and barn. Construction starts in two weeks with Meeker Energy Solutions with completion in mid December. It includes two—7,750 gallon tanks for fire suppression and one—5000 gallon tank for potable water. We are replacing the old water system that has served us “well” and is not big enough to handle four locations.

It’s also that time of year when I will be sending out our yearly donation request, so start checking your (snail) mail think about that year end tax donation which would help a lot with our project.

And finally…… Season’s Greetings from all of us at the Three Rivers Historical Society and Museum.

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And Now Again Comes Christmas
By Thelma Crain from her book “Sunbeams & Buzzards”
Letters From Three Rivers

Editors Note: Thelma was raised in Three Rivers, CA. Her creative letter writing style is famous within her family circle. Luckily many of the literary gems were saved for posterity or perhaps the recipients were just compulsive packrats. The following is but a sample of her “letters from Three Rivers.”

And now again comes Christmas, sneaking stealthily in through the back door of the year, bringing with it blatant commercialism and glitter to mesmerize the weary but not too wary buyer. The market place is awash with a sea of useful and useless items, their necessity touted loudly in newspaper and television ads, many aimed at innocent children whose helpless parents are rendered powerless to cope with the resulting pleas and demands of their offspring.

A Christmas tree is a must and usually holds forth in a space of importance sometimes resulting in the moving of heavy furniture to accommodate its presence. Lights and ornaments are retrieved from such places as the attic or basement if it can be remembered where they were last put. Bulbs must be checked to determine which are missing or have burned out and perhaps a decision as to whether a new strand should be added.

Now about the Christmas repast. What to serve this year. Roast turkey usually leads the list with ham following not too far behind in the culinary parade with dressing, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, creamed onions, green peas, cranberry sauce, mince pie, pumpkin pie, plum pudding, fruit cake and much more.

On Christmas day the family and those invited to share in the festivities descend upon the feast with voracious appetites and before one can say “bon appetite” the toothsome victuals have been laid to waste and gone to waist as well as to other parts of the anatomy.

Now comes the time of reconing with entertaining that overstuffed feeling and pangs of indigestion and the frantic rush to the medicine cabinet to find some relief before jockeying for a soft place to go down for a much needed nap. It is not a time of peace and quiet with the younger children becoming acquainted with their wagons, wind-up toys, guns and musical instruments including the ever-present drum.

After the nap it is now time to assault the left over refreshments which by now have lost some of their original appeal.
The Origin of Rudolph, cont.

Montgomery Ward executives approved the sketches and May’s poem, but nixed the name Rollo or Reginald, the first two names considered for his name. May considered other names to preserve the alliteration, and finally settled on Rudolph, the preference of his four-year-old daughter. That Christmas of 1939, 2.4 million copies of the “Rudolph” booklet were handed out in Montgomery Ward stores across the country.

“Rudolph” was reprinted as a Christmas booklet sporadically until 1947. That year, a friend of May’s, Johnny Marks, decided to put the poem to music. One professional singer after another declined the opportunity to record the song, but in 1949, Gene Autry consented. Gene Autry’s version is second only to Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas” as the best-selling record of all time.

The Origin of the Fork, Spoon and Knife

Fork: Romans ate with their fingers, as did all European peoples until the dawning of a conscious fastidiousness at the beginning of the Renaissance. Still, there was a right and a wrong, a refined and an uncouth, way to go about it. Commoners grabbed at his food with five fingers; a person of breeding politely lifted it with three fingers—never soiling the ring finger or the pinkie.

Our word “fork” comes from the Latin furca, a farmer’s pitchfork. Small forks for eating first appeared in eleventh-century Tuscany, and that they were widely frowned upon. The clergy condemned their use, arguing that only human fingers, created by God, were worthy to touch God’s bounty. Not until the eighteenth century did the French nobility increase their use of forks. The fork became a symbol of luxury, refinement, and status. There were, however, two table implements that just about everyone owned and used: the knife and the spoon.

Spoon: Spoons are millennia older than forks, and never in their long history did they, or their users, suffer ridicule as did forks and their users.

The shape of early spoons can be found in the origin of their name. “Spoon” is from the Anglo-Saxon spon, meaning “chip,” and a spoon was a thin, slightly concave piece of wood, dipped into porridge or soupy foods not liquid enough to sip from a bowl.

In Italy during the fifteenth century, “apostle spoons” were the rage. Usually of silver, the spoons had handles in the figure of an apostle. Among wealthy Venetians and Tuscans, an apostle spoon was considered the ideal baptismal gift; the handle would bear the figure of the child’s patron saint. It’s from this custom that a privileged child is said to be born with a silver spoon in its mouth, implying, centuries ago, that the family could afford to commission a silver apostle’s spoon as a christening gift.

Knife: In the evolution to modern man, Homo erectus, an early upright primate, fashioned the standardized stone knives for butchering prey. Since that time, knives have been an important part of man’s weaponry and cutlery. They’ve changed little over the millennia, and even our “knife” is recognizable in its Anglo-Saxon antecedent, cnif.

Crossing Knife and Fork:
The custom of intersecting a knife and fork on a plate at the conclusion of a meal began in seventeenth-century Italy.

Today some people regard it as a practical signal to a hostess or waitress that we’ve finished eating. But it was introduced by Italian nobility as a religious symbol—a cross. The gesture was considered not only good manners but also a pious act of thanksgiving for the bounty provided by the Lord.

Community Caroling

Sat, Dec 1st
5pm to 7pm
Did You Know!

We now have an eGift Card program at the museum. You can come by or go on-line and purchase eGift Cards in any amount that can be used in store or on-line.

https://squareup.com/store/3rmuseum