



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

Boughs of holly

Now that the nominally Puritan tradition of Thanksgiving is in the bag, it's interesting to look forward to the next big holiday extravaganza — Christmas — which was actually banned by those same Puritans in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Fundamentalists across the spectrum never seem to tire of drawing up bans on activities they don't like, particularly the fun ones. Governor Bradford, a dour if not practical guru of the first colonial take on communal living, punished several Puritans for playing ball on "Foolstide" by clapping them in stocks, which was also the New World's first openly Humbug move.

As late as 1712, Cotton Mather, a New England fire-brand, decried Christmas to his flock, writing that "the feast of Christ's nativity is spent in reveling, dicing, carding, masking, and in all licentious liberty ... by mad mirth, by long eating, by hard drinking, by lewd gaming, by rude reveling!" In other words, it was fun. And in those days any ideas about fun sat on the polar opposite end of devotion. It wasn't until 1870 that President U.S. Grant, a man who enjoyed his libations without shame, made Christmas a federal holiday. But Christmas, as a holiday, has deep historical roots that pre-date Christianity as a world religion.

Begin with the Romans, who celebrated a festival known as Saturnalia, which was essentially Mardi Gras on steroids, a state holiday and a time when no citizen could be punished

for wreaking havoc in the Republic. The celebration shared a common theme with Christianity, however, in notions of salvation and rebirth, with the same tragic requirement of death.

During Saturnalia, the Roman authorities — and "authorities" should always be considered a suspicious bunch — chose an "enemy of the Roman people" and anointed him the "Lord of Misrule." After a week of mandatory fun, he was killed on December 25, in an act they believed would eliminate various forces of darkness. It's likely that is the only reason we celebrate Christmas on December 25.

In the 4th century, church leaders — hungry for souls and undoubtedly the financial boon that came with them — enticed large numbers of pagans to convert by dangling the promise that they could retain elements of their cherished Saturnalia.

The Christmas tree, which is generally accepted as a 17th century German contribution to Christmas celebrations, most likely has its root in ancient northern European winter solstice festivities. In the long, dark, northern European winters, in William Manchester's words "a world lit only by fire," various tribes of pre-Christian peoples often brought boughs and other greenery inside to cheer things up and combat the seemingly endless gloom. The word "pagan" itself has a root in the Latin word for villager, but at least one language scholar finds a corollary in an old Germanic word for "field."

The next big stop on the big Christmas tour is naturally Santa Claus, whose principle origin — as we know it — is with St. Nicolas, a fiery, skinny, defender of church doctrine from the town of Myra, in Roman Turkey. Defiant during the "Great Persecution" of Christianity, he was rescued from ignominy by the Emperor Constantine, who elevated the faithful and salvaged St. Nicolas' reputation for generosity.

It is likely that Santa's

method of delivering happiness — from the sky — is a nod to the ancient, long-bearded Norse God Odin, who oversaw the feasting season of Yule, and led the Wild Hunt, a ghostly procession of hunters in the sky. Flying reindeer and long-bearded hosts aside, it is interesting that actually seeing the Wild Hunt was a portent of catastrophe.

And then there is Krampus. In the early and, it seems, poorly organized attempts to make this Christmas holiday into the orgy of free-enterprise and family fights that we all enjoy today, it was thought unseemly for St. Nick, a kindly man after all, to spend much time on children who had been naughty. Krampus fills a role for the bad kids, allowing Sinterklaas, as the Dutch would have it, to focus his energies on the righteous.

Ultimately, Christmas needs a villain, much as Saturnalia did, though we can perhaps divine some evolution in our collective world view by looking at the happier and more modern contributions of Ebenezer Scrooge — led by a ghost to examine his past and reconcile his faults — and The Grinch, whose heartfelt conversion to the Christmas spirit on the outskirts of Whoville spares us the ancient requirements of bloodshed for retribution.

How any of this became Black Friday riots, Shopping Mall Santas, and an endless commercial assault on our psyches escapes me, but in the quieter moments, next to the Christmas tree and the candles, with a cupful of hot cider under a — pray for it — fresh blanket of snow, we can rest assured that in many ways the new is still the old.

More importantly, we can take a deep breath and remember that this whole event, as confusing as the messages become, is really about coming inside to the light and the warmth, in our own dark winters, to look ahead to spring and the season of rebirth, and to share our appreciation for the precious time we spend together on this earth.



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