



Photo by Sherlyn Bjorkgren

# Losing the True Meaning

BY STEPHEN MAHER

Sixty years ago Christmas was a different sort of season for Americans. People decorated their houses with greenery and prepared for Christmas Day, the official beginning of the holiday season, by cleaning, cooking and gearing up for family parties. Only children under the age of 12 received gifts although some adults gave each other handmade items called "holiday notions." And entertainment came from playing games, particularly Charades and Blind Man's Bluff, as well as Christmas dances and parties.

Today, the holiday season is spent bustling around from one store to another, buying gifts, food and decorations. In the age of the nuclear family, relatives call each other with the help of U.S. West or GTE. And entertainment on Christmas Day centers around the opening of gifts, and the watching of bowl games on television and movies on video cassette recorders.

For many people, the true meaning of Christmas has been lost under the glare of Madison Avenue-inspired advertising that urges consumers to buy, buy, buy and to wrap, wrap, wrap.

"Christmas is very rich in meaning. It's got all the pagan associations and all the Christian ones. And although that

was kind of an uneasy mix, people could go one way or another with that and find some satisfaction. But the commercialism has overwhelmed both aspects," says Jo Robinson, co-author of "Unplug the Christmas Tree," a book published by William Morrow in 1982 that helps families make Christmas more meaningful and less expensive.

Robinson, who also holds workshops around the country with co-author Jean Staeheli, believes the commercialism of Christmas has become a major problem.

"It takes time, money and energy away from everything else, which is where people ultimately find the meaning. It creates financial stress for the people who can least afford it. It gives children the message that that's all Christmas is. I just think it puts the whole thing on a really superficial, materialistic level," Robinson says.

"Most adults find themselves let down by the gift exchange. So you've got maybe two months of effort and expense for a two-hour unwrapping, which is going to leave everybody with mixed feelings."

The commercialization of Christmas is more or less an American phenomenon, according to Robinson. Canada, she says, has similar trappings, but the rest of the world doesn't celebrate Christmas with large numbers of gifts.

"I talked to an Englishwoman, and she said she couldn't believe to see all these grown-up women calling each other up the day after Christmas and

saying, 'What did you get, what did you get?' To her that was something only children would do. The emphasis on materialism was just amazing to her," Robinson says.

Gift-giving itself has Christian origins. The three wise men delivered gifts to the Baby Jesus, according to the Bible. In the Middle Ages, St. Nicholas became associated with the holiday season because of his reputation for kindness. Many Christian religions also stressed the belief that since God gave his only son, people should exchange gifts to imitate God's generosity.

There were other more secular reasons for gift-giving at Christmas, too. "There was the idea of generosity, the humanitarian idea of giving that (Charles) Dickens brought in, the love of children which made people give gifts to the kids," Robinson says.

Part of the problem with the holiday season today, according to Robinson, is that gift shopping has expanded from a two-week period to one that begins in October and peaks after Thanksgiving.

"Until about 1920 there wasn't much profit made from the celebration so there was very little involvement. In fact, merchants were anti-Christmas because people tended to stay away from the stores during the holiday season, and people didn't work. So it was the old Scrooge idea — that's why they didn't like Christmas. But now, of course, they've found a way to profit from it so they're the first ones out there," Robinson says.

At a time of year that can produce as much as one-third of a retailers' annual

sales and one-half of the profits, there are those who disagree with Robinson. "I'm sure some people feel that Christmas has become too commercial, although the people in retail businesses probably don't feel that way," says John Weston, assistant operating manager for Sears Roebuck and Co. store in Eugene.

In order to beat the high cost of goods, many people shop sales during September and October.

"I'd have to say that the real true Christmas buying doesn't start until after Thanksgiving. Obviously you have those people who come in and start early, which is wonderful. But we really don't push it," says Carol Ongstad, marketing manager of the Oregon division of Nordstrom.

Some retailers also have noticed people shopping for Christmas even earlier. Toys "R" Us, the nation's largest toy retailer, has found a surge in the number of Christmas shoppers in August because of the scarcity of items such as Cabbage Patch Dolls and Trivial Pursuit in past seasons.

With the expansion and hustle and bustle of the shopping season and all the hoopla that has been attached to gifts, Robinson believes gift-giving and gift-buying has become the central part of the holiday season.

"Christmas has almost been reduced to only the gift-buying and to events which are promoted by people who want you to buy something," she says. "One of the things we are seeing is that

Stephen Maher is assistant editor of Spectrum magazine.