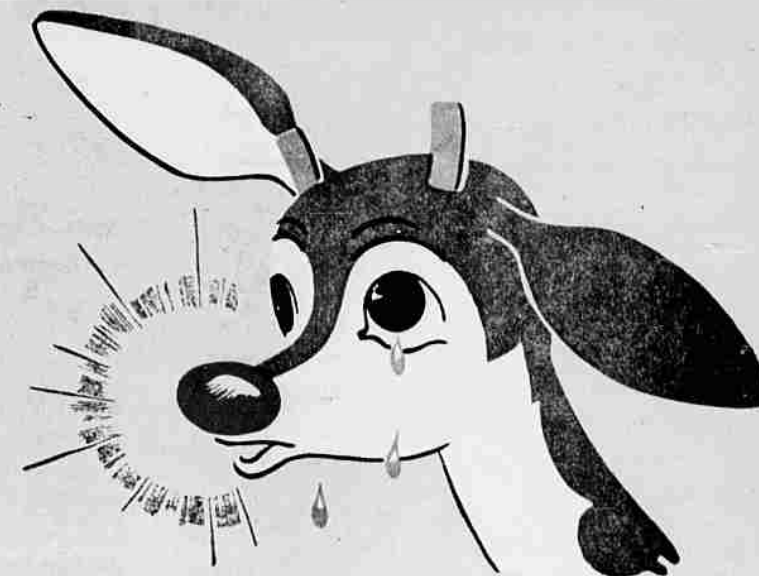




By ROBERT L. MAY as told to Alfred Balk

# HOW RUDOLPH CAME TO CHRISTMAS



Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer, has nuzzled his way into the hearts of the world's children; here his creator tells how this endearing animal was born

ALL OVER the world this Christmas, children are writing letters to Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer, remembering him in their prayers, and preparing holiday snacks of hay and vegetables for him.

Yet as Christmas traditions go, the bright-eyed, flop-eared little fellow is relatively a newcomer. It was only 24 years ago that a series of fortunate incidents brought Rudolph into being on my writing pad.

Since then, of course, he has become one of the best-known symbols of Christmas. More than four million copies of the Rudolph story have been purchased in a hard-cover edition—making it an all-time best seller. Some 300 different arrangements of the hit song based on the Rudolph story have been recorded, and their total sales in the United States alone have been 3.5 million—ranking it second only to "White Christmas" as a consistent seller.

What's more, Rudolph has been seen by millions in an animated cartoon and in a comic strip that is syndicated in 25 countries.

Wherever Santa is a part of Christmas, he and Rudolph seem inseparable. In fact, sociologist James H. Barnett, author of the recent study *The American Christmas*, says Rudolph is "

only original addition to the folklore of Santa Claus in this century."

The Red-Nosed Reindeer was born in Chicago when I was working in the advertising copy-writing department of Montgomery Ward & Co. About the only non-advertising writing I had done were little song parodies to amuse friends at parties. Certainly, few executives of the firm even knew I existed. But just before Christmas in 1937 I had an unusual opportunity to come to their attention.

In organizing entertainment for an office party, John A. Martin, a Ward's executive, found himself woefully short of singers, dancers, and other talent. I volunteered to help by contributing several parodies. Somewhat hesitantly, he agreed, and to my good fortune my efforts were so well received that I was invited to do an encore the next Christmas.

## A Very Special Reindeer

Thus, when H. E. MacDonald, the company's retail sales manager, got an idea for a Christmas promotional device for all the company's stores in 1939, he called me in.

"I'd like to provide a little booklet that could be given away to create good will," he said. "I thought of a children's story on the order of Ferdinand the Bull. Could you write a funny little story for us in verse?" I was flabbergasted, but I promptly accepted.

Then came the problem of working out a subject for the story. What should it be? An animal, of course, but what kind of animal? A reindeer seemed a logical choice, for reindeer more than any other animals are associated with the Christmas season and Santa Claus. But what would be special about the reindeer?

I pondered this question for many days.

The story, *The Ugly Duckling*, and others like it always had appealed to me. I had been small and shy throughout childhood and had known what it was like to be an underdog. My reindeer, then, would be an ugly duckling, shunned by others but vindicated in some way in a happy ending.

This happy ending for a Christmas reindeer story automatically suggested Santa Claus. So what could there be about a reindeer that would make him different from others yet especially useful to Santa?

Some kind of superstrength or speed? No, obviously that would win him respect, even awe. Perhaps eyes that shone in the dark and helped Santa find his way? That was it, something that would shine in the dark! But not the eyes. Again, that would be no handicap and certainly no reason for poking fun at him.

No, not shiny eyes, but how about a small reindeer with a big, red nose so bright that it actually glowed? With this in my mind, the outline of the plot became easy, and I jotted it down and rushed to MacDonald's office to read it to him. To my dismay, he threw up his hands in horror.

"Bob," he said, "we can't do it! A reindeer with a nose like that would be a monstrosity!"

But for some reason, I couldn't get the little red-nosed reindeer out of my mind. A few days later, I went down to the art department and asked a friend, Denver Gillen, who is now a prominent magazine illustrator, whether he could make a tasteful sketch of a reindeer with a nose so red that it glowed in the dark.

"I'll try," he promised, and, to help in his efforts, he and I visited the Lincoln Park Zoo the following Saturday. We showed the resulting sketches to MacDonald and the company's art di-

rector, and they liked them. The little reindeer had won a reprieve!

But he still had no name. It seemed advisable that it begin with "R" for alliterative purposes. Rollo? That sounded too happy for a reindeer with such an unhappy problem. Reginald? That seemed too sophisticated. How about Rudolph? That rolled off the tongue nicely with "red-nosed" and "reindeer," so Rudolph it was!

## The Reindeer That Almost Wasn't

But Rudolph's crises were only beginning. By working evenings and weekends, I completed the lengthy poem. Then came another shock. I was told that my story would be passed upon by a "round table of ordinary people"—clerks, secretaries, and others, all of whom worked for the man who had called the meeting. Knowing neither the writing field nor their boss' opinion of the story, they could be expected to protect themselves by being cautious and critical of the effort. And they were!

After hearing the story, they expressed strong reservations. Even the idea of a red nose was questioned as having connotations of alcoholism. With each shaft of criticism, my morale sank lower. It looked as if Rudolph might die right there. Then Carl Hacker, the company's display manager spoke up. "I think that every line that Bob May wrote is beautiful—just perfect," he said. "I think it would be a crime for any of us to change one word of it!"

Suddenly the whole atmosphere of the meeting changed. MacDonald, who was to make the final decision, agreed that the story should stand with only minor revisions—and Rudolph was saved again! For Christmas in 1939, 2.4 million copies of the story, cleverly illustrated by Denver Gil-

len, were distributed free in booklet form in company stores throughout the country. Rudolph's spectacular ride had begun.

World War II caused Rudolph to go into hibernation. But during the 1946 holiday season, the little reindeer rode again: 3.6 million copies of the booklet were produced and distributed free.

Then other extraordinary things began to happen. A large record firm asked my permission to make a "story" record about Rudolph. The copyright, however, was owned by my company, and corporations customarily forbid the transfer of company-owned rights. But champions of Rudolph within the firm went to work, the copyright was awarded to me—and the story record became a reality.

Like most authors, I also dreamed of my story appearing in a hard-cover "bookstore edition." Because six million paperback copies already had been given away free, no major publisher was interested. But Harry Elbaum, owner of a small New York firm, Maxton Publishing Co., had been attracted to the story and asked my permission to publish it in hard-cover form.

"All my life I've been kidded about my own nose," he explained, "so Rudolph won my sympathy from the start."

I granted him publication rights—and *Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer* became a record-breaking best seller.

Johnny Marks, composer of such hit songs as "Everyone's a Child at Christmas" and "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," read the story while in the Army during World War II. He noted the title in his idea book and in 1949 wrote his now-famous song.

Several vocalists turned down chances to record it. But Gene Autry liked the song, recorded

it for Columbia Records—and his version rocketed to the top of the hit parade.

Complimentary letters began to pour in from parents, teachers, and clergymen. All expressed appreciation for the story's moral values: kindness, patience, perseverance, tolerance, respect for the underdog.

One writer told how a girl, after hearing the song, resolved never to behave like a reindeer named Olive. Asked to explain, she replied, "I mean, like what she did to Rudolph. You know, 'Olive the other reindeer used to laugh and call him names.'"

A boy in Indianapolis was said to have insisted that nearby Camp Atterbury had been named in Rudolph's honor. Explained the boy: "It's right there in the song, 'Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Atterbury shiny nose!'"

## Rudolph Leads a Charmed Life

There were other stories, too, such as the one about the hunter who shot a deer, tied it across his auto hood, and parked the car while he ate dinner. When he returned, he found that some prankster had painted the deer's nose red and a crowd of angry children had gathered. "It's Rudolph!" shouted one. "You've killed him!" The hunter was reported to have escaped amid a bombardment of snowballs.

The children need not have worried, though. Rudolph seems to live a charmed life. Each Christmas, as my wife, my six children, and I join in placing a lighted, life-size figure of Rudolph on the lawn of our comfortable home—which we refer to as "The House That Rudolph Built"—we reflect on this anew. To me, everything connected with little Rudolph has the touch of a miracle about it.

