

# Santa Claus' First Press Agent



Why so much Christmas tradition comes to us from Washington Irving (left), an imaginative historian.

By CLARK KINNAIRD

WITHOUT Irving there would be no Santa Claus," a learned professor said. He meant Washington Irving, the creator in *The Sketch Book of Rip Van Winkle*, the Headless Horseman, and other legendary characters of the Catskill Mountains.

The evidence indicates Irving indeed had much to do with Santa Claus' being a particularly New York contribution to American mythology. And, yes, to world mythology. One English

historian wrote that "the conversion of St. Nicholas into Santa Claus seemed to have first occurred, believe it or not, in the United States." Another English historian noted that the amalgamation of the identity of Father Christmas, "who has a respectable ancestry in the mummers' plays" with Santa Claus was "accomplished through the agency of Washington Irving and Clement Clarke Moore."

Clearly, Irving prepared for

Moore's verses. *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, to strike a responsive chord and have the effect described by the second of the English historians quoted above: "For most American children, and more recently for many English ones, that poem says all there is to be said about Christmas, St. Nicholas, or Santa Claus."

However, Irving said it first, in a work entitled *History of New York, from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*, which he published under the pseudonym 'Diedrich Knickerbocker.' That is the book, Dr. Charles Williams Jones affirmed, which was "the source of all the legends about Saint Nicholas in New Amsterdam . . . Here are the descriptions of festivities on Saint Nicholas' Day in the colony. Here is the description of Santa Claus bringing gifts to children—parking his horse and wagon on the roof while he slides down the chimney."

TO UNDERSTAND fully why "Knickerbocker's" *History of New York* should have been so influential, it is necessary to know that Christmas observance in any manner had been opposed or discouraged in New England since Pilgrim and Puritan times, because the festivities were regarded as pagan or Roman. This feeling also prevailed among the Scotch Presbyterians who settled in middle and Southern colonies, and naturally had its reflection among the English in New York.

The Dutch settlers of New Amsterdam had brought over the custom of observing St. Nicholas' Day, December 6th, as a festive day. San Nicholasas (say it rapidly and you have Sannaklaas)

made rounds that date on his white horse Slepner, to demand from children an accounting of their conduct. Those adjudged good and worthy were rewarded with gifts, those deemed otherwise were switched.

Irving made the departure from the Dutch placement of San Nicholasas on a white horse for the visitations to children. How could Santa carry enough in one bag for all the children? Irving gave Santa a horse and wagon. In New York in those days, wheels were replaced with sleigh-runners for winter travel. Sleighs flew like the wind on frozen, icy ground. It was not too fantastic for Santa's sleigh to zoom up upon roof-tops where snow was banked high against the walls, or for Santa to descend via the warm chimneys to fireplaces where only embers glowed at night. Settlers to labor firewood was costly in whor or pennies, did not have roaring fires. And covert visits at night relieved the kindly Santa of the necessity of interviewing the children and switching them for katzenjam-

mering of which they certainly had been guilty, as healthy children.

THE Knickerbocker *History* came from Irving's pen after he had established himself in New York as a lawyer and anonymous essayist for local newspapers and literary reviews. He amused himself and others with "Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle, Gent.," followed by "Salamagundi: The Whim-Whams and Opinions of Launcelot Langstaff and Others." In these series, Irving satirized society, manners and literature in the booming city of New York.

A volume entitled *Picture of New York, or the Traveller's Guide Through the Commercial Metropolis of the United States*, was a new publication. In it young Dr. Samuel L. Mitchell gave a somewhat pedantic and offensive description of the city's founders and developers. Parodying the Mitchell volume, in the guise of an equally stuffy Dutchman, Diedrich Knickerbocker, Irving mock-seriously and with

fictional digressions chronicled the annals of the New Amsterdam colonists.

But the heart of the book, in more than one sense, was the accounts of jolly old customs of the Dutch, such as observance of San Nicholasas' Day, New Year tipping merriment, bowling-on-the-green at taverns, kaezzen, "pulling the goose," skittles, and other frivolities somewhat out of character with the staid conduct of the Stuyvesants, Beekmans, De Peysters, Roosevelts and other Dutch aristocracy of Irving's time.

Irving's *History* naturally produced cholera among the Dutch burgher descendants whose sense of humor was shorter than their pedigrees.

Aside from its reception by humorless Dutch scions, the *History*, published in 1809 in two volumes, had an astonishing success. It went through printing after printing and was translated into six languages (including Dutch). In addition to fostering "Father Knickerbocker" as the personification of New York City,

the volumes begot the name 'knickerbocker' for loose-fitting breeches, gathered in at the knee, worn by boys, cyclists, sportsmen, etc., and at one time by women as an undergarment. (George Cruikshank's illustrations for the Irving jasper depicted the Dutch burghers in such breeches.)

UNTIL the publication of the *Knickerbocker History*, as Dr. Jones emphasizes, St. Nicholas had been as unwelcome at many homes as a "parasitic germ." With the circulation of the volumes, and respectability the book acquired through its literary acceptance internationally as a comic masterpiece, San Nicholasas, Sannaklaas, Santa Claus, was looked upon in a less serious, more kindly light. The public was prepared for the verses *A Visit from St. Nicholas* and the stories of Charles Dickens to have their effect in amalgamating Santa Claus with Christmas and overcoming of Puritan and other prejudices against Christmas observance.



"Sannaklaas" on Dec. 6, in old New Netherland, as depicted in a 19th century drawing by Oscar Pletsch, engraved by H. Gunter. Note the thin burgher in

the blanket-like cloak carries a switch with which to give a swat or two to any child not deemed to have been good as he or she should have been. (K.F.S.)



Gullian Verplanck, one Dutch scion who didn't get mad at Irving's "History," had this portrait of Irving's Santa Claus painted for him by R. W. Weir in 1837.



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