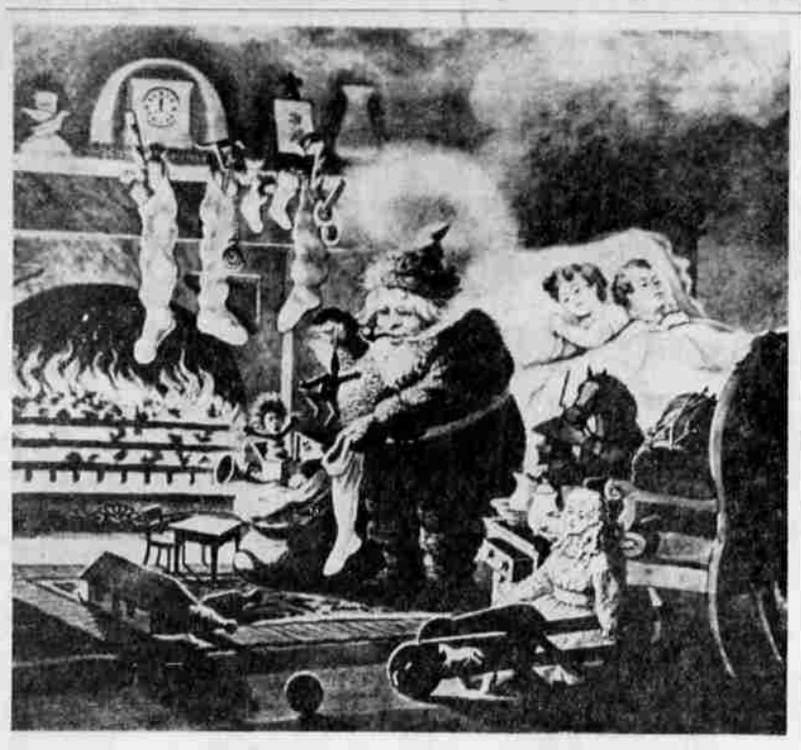

Centuries Old Legends Tell Much About Beginnings Of Yule Customs

Who was the first child to hang his stockings on the mantel in anticipation of a visit from St. Nick? Who sent the first Christmas card? Sang the first carol? Tossed tinsel on the tree? Shared the first kiss under mistletoe? Enjoyed the first sip of wassail?

The answers lie in the centuries-old legends of Christmas.

First to gather about the wassail bowl—today, the traditional Christmas punch bowl—were the ancient Saxons. The word "wassail" is a Saxon toast meaning "be whole" or "have health." Through the years, the word came to mean any liquor used to toast health—especially the spiced drinks served at Christmas celebrations in the Middle Ages.

The basis of the mistletoe legend is an old Scandinavian myth which tells of the god Balder's narrow escape from death.

Loki, a malicious giant and menace to peace in the kingdom of Odin, ruler of the Norse gods, sought a way to destroy the beloved Balder.

Aware of the danger to her son, Frigga, Balder's mother, secured a charm which made him immune to injury from fire, water, air, or anything on earth. The only thing she overlooked was an unimportant, harmless plant—mistletoe.

Learning this, Loki made an arrow of mistletoe and mortally wounded Balder. In desperation, Frigga begged the gods to intercede and save her son—which they did. The grateful mother decreed that, from that moment on, the plant would be a symbol of love.

The mistletoe kiss is thought to be a survival of an ancient Norse marriage rite associated with the legend.

Not as old, but even more complex, is the legend of the Christmas stocking. We found many different versions in the Esquire Socks Library of Footlore. And the only fact we can clearly establish is that the first Christmas stocking was fashioned of woolen shreds—long before the days of Dacron blends.

One of the versions tells of the Bishop of Myra, a kindly clergyman who lived in 4th Century Asia Minor and later became St. Nicholas.

One Christmas, the Bishop learned of an impoverished merchant in his city who had two lovely daughters—both unmarried because their father couldn't afford dowries.

The compassionate Bishop, determined to help, dropped two bags of gold coins down the merchant's chimney on Christmas Eve. Coincidentally, the family stockings were hanging on the mantel to dry and the gold landed in the hosiery. St. Nick, the legend goes on, has been dropping gifts in stockings ever since.

The story, though plausible, has one loophole. Further research in the Esquire Socks Library uncovered the fact that hose were not made with feet until the 11th Century, some 700 years after the Bishop's bounty. Did St. Nick go around dropping gifts into bottomless stockings for 700 years?

A much more likely legend is the one crediting St. Francis of Assisi with the introduction of community carol singing. The word "carol" means "to dance in a ring." It is said that St. Francis staged a manger scene one Christmas with real people and animals. The onlookers were so delighted with what they saw that they burst into happy song. Those first carolers became as important to St. Francis' Christmas celebrations as modern carolers are to ours.

The origin of the Christmas tree can be traced back to the deeds of another good saint—Winifred. It is said he hewed down a giant oak to prevent a human sacrifice a group of heathens were holding in its shadow.

A tall, young fir suddenly appeared in the oak's place and St. Winifred proclaimed it a miracle and said that from that day forward, families would gather about a fir tree—not for wicked deeds — but to glorify God.

And if St. Winifred gave us the Christmas tree, Martin Luther gave us the custom of decorating it. While strolling through the countryside one Christmas Eve, Luther was awed by the sight of the snow-tipped evergreens sparkling in the moonlight. At home, he tried to recreate the scene for his family by placing candles on their Christmas tree . . . and we've been decorating our evergreen boughs at Christmastime ever since.

Our Christmas card custom is of relatively recent origin. The first was sent in 1843 by Henry Cole, English educator and art patron. It bore the now-classic greeting, "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You!"

FIRST CHRISTMAS ROSE

The Christmas Rose, a winter blooming plant, first sprang up from the tears of a little girl who cried because she did not have a gift to offer the Christmas Child. The child picked the flowers and while kneeling at the crib, Jesus' hands touched the petals and a delicate pink appeared on the flowers. This lovely legend is documented by Rust Craft in its exclusive "Legend Series" of greeting cards.

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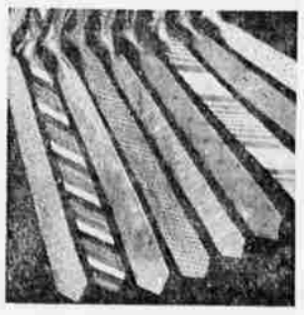

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