

# The INDEPENDENT

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## Opinion

### Have fun with a little Christmas trivia

#### *Santa Claus...*

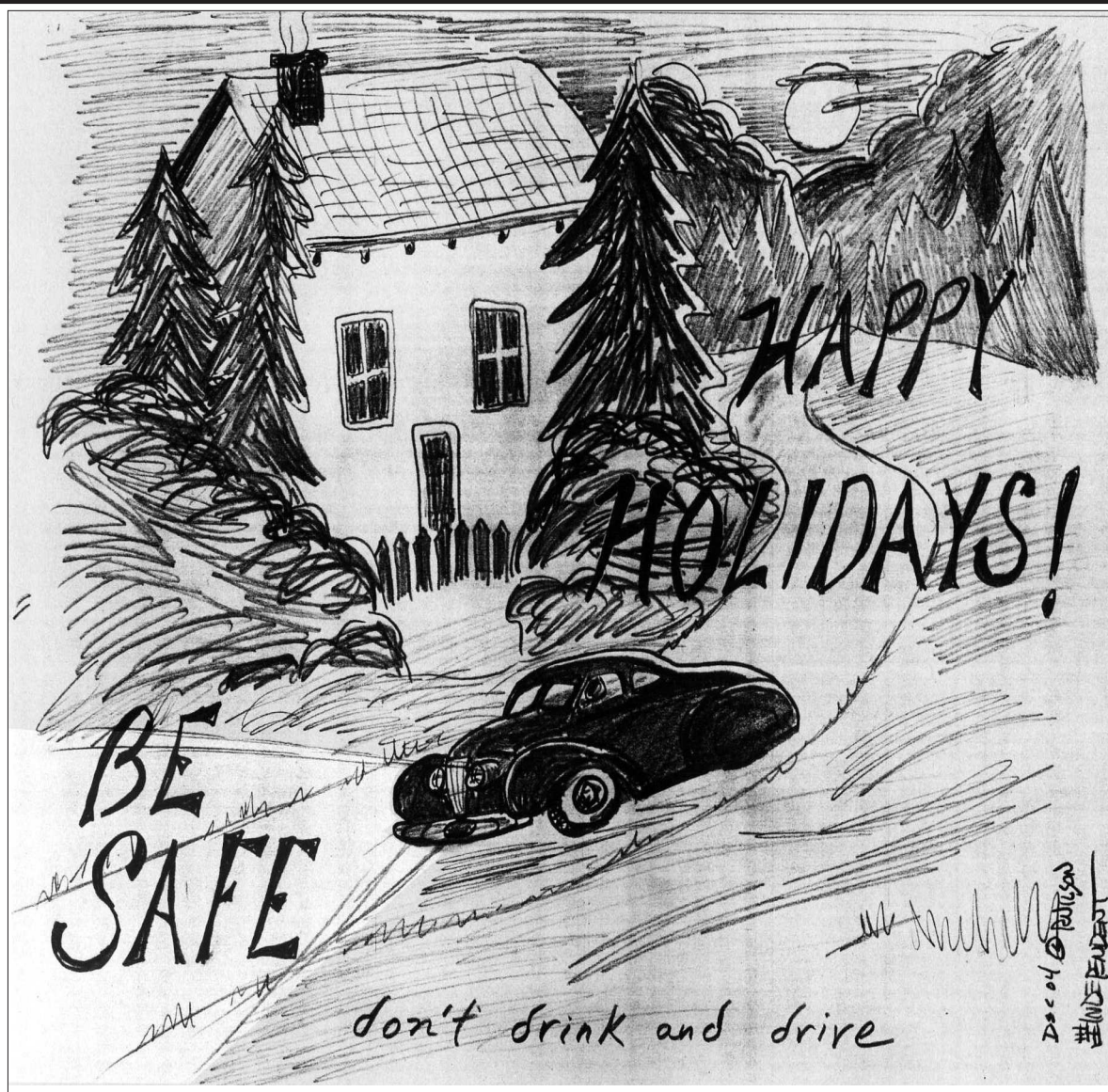
St. Nicholas, the original Santa Claus, was born in Turkey in the 4th century. He was very pious from an early age, devoting his life to Christianity, and became widely known for helping the poor. The Romans held him in contempt, however, and imprisoned him. When Constantine became emperor of Rome, he freed Nicholas, who was noted for his love of children and for his generosity. The Dutch kept the legend of St. Nicholas alive and, in 16th century Holland, children would place their wooden shoes by the hearth in hopes that they would be filled with a treat. The Dutch spelled St. Nicholas as Sint Nikolaas, which became Sinterklaas, and finally, Santa Claus. Clement Moore's 1822 poem, "A Visit from St. Nick," which was later published as "The Night Before Christmas," created the modern image of Santa Claus as a jolly fat man in a red suit.

#### *Xmas...*

This abbreviation for Christmas is of Greek origin. The word for Christ in Greek is Xristos. During the 16th century, Europeans began using the first initial of Christ's name, "X" in place of the word Christ in Christmas. Early Christians understood that X stood for Christ's name, but later Christians...who did not understand the Greek language...mistook "Xmas" as a sign of disrespect.

#### *Christmas Tree...*

This originated in Germany in the 16th century, when people decorated fir trees, both inside and outside, with roses, apples and colored paper. Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, is said to be the first to light a Christmas tree with candles. Legend says that one dark winter's night near Christmas, he was struck with the beauty of starlight shining through the branches of a small fir tree outside his home. He duplicated the starlight with candles attached to the branches of his indoor Christmas tree. Christmas trees were brought to America by the Pennsylvania Germans in the 1820's.



#### *The Date of Christmas...*

The idea of celebrating Christmas on December 25 originated in the 4th century. The Catholic Church wanted to eclipse the festivities of a pagan religion that they felt threatened Christianity. (Romans celebrated the birthday of their sun god in midwinter.) It was not popular, or even proper, to celebrate people's birthdays in those times, but church leaders decided that, to compete with the pagan celebration, they would order a festival in celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Although Jesus' birth is thought to be in the spring, (Luke referred to shepherds watching over their flocks day and night, which they did only at lambing time, in the spring.) December 25 was chosen for the birthday celebration as Christ's Mass, to compete head on with the pagan festival. Christmas caught on slowly in America. Early colonists considered it a pagan ritual and it was banned in Massachusetts.

#### *Mistletoe and Holly...*

Two hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Druids used mistletoe to celebrate the coming of winter. They would

gather this partially parasitic evergreen plant that grew on other trees and used it to decorate their homes. They believed the plant had special healing powers for everything from female infertility to poison ingestion. In Scandinavia, mistletoe was considered a plant of peace, under which enemies could declare a truce or warring spouses kiss and make-up. The custom of kissing under the mistletoe probably derived from this belief. The early church banned the use of mistletoe in Christmas celebrations because of its pagan origins. Instead, church fathers suggested the use of holly as an appropriate substitute for Christmas greenery.

#### *Poinsettias...*

Poinsettias are native to Mexico. They were named after America's first ambassador to Mexico, Joel Poinsett, who brought the plants to America in 1828. The poinsettia became associated with the Christmas season because 18th century Mexicans thought the plants were symbolic of the Star of Bethlehem. The actual flower of the poinsettia is small and yellow; surrounding the flower are large, bright red leaves, often mistaken for petals.