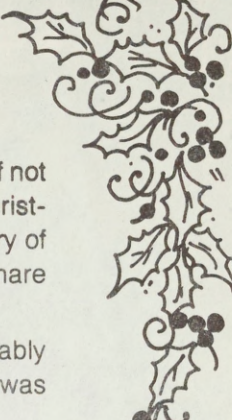




CHRISTMAS—1975



As I sat down the other night to write this annual Christmas message, I suddenly found myself not exactly in the right mood. The temperature outside was in the 50's and it just didn't seem like Christmas weather. I began thumbing through what proved to be an interesting book about the history of Christmas and the different ways in which it is celebrated in various countries. I would like to share with you some of the things I read. I hope you will find it as interesting as I did.

For example, did you know that in the early centuries of Christianity the birthday of Jesus probably was sometimes celebrated in May, sometimes in other months, and often in January? This was because the exact birth date of Christ has never been known.

It was in the fourth century that December 25 was named by Church authorities as the date of the Nativity. Why December 25? Some authorities believe it was the time when the winter solstice was celebrated in ancient Rome. In any event the choice of December 25 accounts for many of our Christmas customs for this date fell within the time of the big winter festivals and feasts, not only of Rome but also of the pagans in the north.

Here is how some countries celebrate Christmas. England's celebrations are much like ours. The tree is decorated Christmas Eve and stockings are hung in anticipation of a visit from Santa Claus or Father Christmas. Frequently, during the evening, a group of singers called "waits" will serenade a household. On Christmas Day there will be gifts and church and a tremendous noontime dinner with roast beef, or goose, and plum pudding.

Possibly, the most loved custom of an English Christmas is the burning of the Yule log—an immense block of wood that fills the fireplace. Burning of the Yule log comes to us from pagan times when the druids kept sacred fires burning.

Swedish children have their gifts and tree on Christmas Eve, and also a big Christmas dinner that night. Sometimes exciting gifts are thrown in the front doors by mysterious donors who run away before anyone can find out who they are.

In Norway, there is a Christmas tree and a grand feast. Gifts are often hidden away in different parts of the home for the children to find. In both of these northern countries, sheaves of grain are put on top of the houses or barns or are hung on poles in the yards so that the birds may also enjoy a Christmas feast.

Germany's great gift to the customs of Christmas was the decorated tree. Probably in early times, pagans honored trees during some of their festivities, but it is likely they were not used in connection with Christmas until the sixteenth century. Many people believe it was Martin Luther who thought of decorating the first Christmas tree, inspired by watching the beauty of brilliant stars against a dark sky one Christmas Eve.

In Holland and Belgium, Christmas itself is celebrated by church services. But, there is another day the children love—December 6 which is the feast day of St. Nicholas. It is said that during the evening of December 5, St. Nicholas, dressed in magnificent robes, comes riding on a horse and goes about asking whether children have been good or bad. If they have been good, they are sure to find their shoes full of gifts in the morning. If they are bad, they are liable to find rods of birch instead.

Christmas is primarily a church celebration in France. For adults, the day of feasting and visiting is New Year's. Children are not forgotten at Noel, or Christmas, however. On Christmas Eve, they leave their shoes by the chimney and will find them filled with gifts in the morning. The end of the Christmas season also brings excitement in the form of a special Twelfth Night cake within which has been baked some little token such as a bean or china figure. Whoever gets the piece of cake containing the token becomes "king" or "queen" for the rest of the party.

In Italy, a strict fast is kept for 24 hours before Christmas Eve. Then, on Christmas Eve, a splendid banquet is held followed by the exciting drawing of presents from the Urn of Fate. The Urn is a big crock filled with gifts. This is followed by Christmas Eve services in the church. As families go through the crowded streets, they may find them bright with bonfires and fireworks and some people carrying torches.

Italian children have another treat in store for them on Epiphany, which is January 6. The night before, the children hang up their stockings. During the night, a little old lady, Befana, is believed to come and leave gifts in the stockings of the good children and birch rods or charcoal ashes in those of the bad.

And, to bring our world travel of Christmas time celebrations to a close how about celebrating Christmas in the summer? That is exactly what happens in Australia since December 25 occurs during their summer. Often, a picnic is an important part of Christmas Day festivities there.

Yes, Christmas is celebrated in so many interesting ways throughout the world. That some of these customs have been passed down through the centuries is, in itself, an indication of the tremendous impact and lasting reverence of this most grand of all holidays.

May each of you have the merriest of Christmases and the most joyous and prosperous of New Year's.

