

THE WORLD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
CHRISTMAS

GERRY BOWLER



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Southern counterpoint to the Civil War cartoons of Thomas Nast, who had made Santa Claus into a firm supporter of the Union. Clack's depiction of little rebel girls desolate at their desertion by Santa Claus shows how important a figure he had become in the imaginations of American children. The American Civil War did much to accelerate the reception of Christmas in the United States as a holiday representing homecoming and family.

Gentle Camel of Jesus Legend says that when the youngest of the camels in the caravan of the Three Wise Men moaned with exhaustion, the baby Jesus took pity on it and gave it eternal life and the mission of delivering presents every Christmas to the children of the Middle East.

"Gentle Mary Laid Her Child" A carol by American Joseph S. Cook, 1919.

Gentle Mary laid her Child
lowly in a manger.
There He lay, the Undeified,
to the world a stranger.
Such a Babe in such a place,
can He be the Savior?
Ask the saved of all the race
who have found His favor.

Angels sang about His birth,
wise men sought and found Him.
Heaven's star shone brightly forth
glory all around Him.
Shepherds saw the wondrous sight,
heard the angels singing.
All the plains were lit that night,
all the hills were ringing.

Gentle Mary laid her Child
lowly in a manger.
He is still the Undeified,
but no more a stranger.
Son of God of humble birth,
beautiful the story.
Praise His name in all the earth.
Hail! The King of Glory!

Geography and Christmas The Christmas season has given names to various parts of the world. Here are a few of the places with Yule-related names:

- Advent: WV
- Angel City: FL
- Bells: TN, TX
- Bethlehem: CT, GA, IN, IO, KY, MD, NH, NC, PA, SD, TX, South Africa, Virgin Islands, Wales. (Portuguese and Spanish versions of "Bethlehem" have been attached to the following places. Belém: Brazil, Mozambique, Portugal; Belén: Argentina, Colombia, Nicaragua, Paraguay)
- Carol City: FL
- Christkindl: Austria
- Christmas: FL, MI
- Christmas Atoll: Pacific Ocean
- Christmas Bay: TX
- Christmas Cove: Maine
- Christmas Creek: Western Australia; TX
- Christmas Island: Indian Ocean
- Christmas Lake: OR
- Christmas Mountain: Alaska

- Christmas Pass: Zimbabwe
- Christmas Ridge: undersea Pacific
- Christmas Valley: OR
- Eggnog: UT
- Eggnog Branch: TX
- Épiphany: SD
- Evergreen: AL, CO, LA, NC, VA
- Holly: CO, MI, WV
- Joseph City: AZ
- Mistletoe: KY
- Natal: BC, South Africa, and Brazil
- Navidad: NM, Mexico, and Chile
- Nazareth: KY, MI, PA, TX
- Noel: MO, VA
- North Pole: AK, NY
- Partridge: KS, KY
- Reindeer Island: SK
- Reindeer River: SK
- Reindeer Lake: NWT
- Reindeer Station: NWT
- Rudolph: OH, WI
- Saint Mary's City: MD
- Saint-Nicholas: Belgium, France, and Quebec
- Santa: ID, Peru
- Santa Claus: GA, IN, ID
- Shepherd: MI, TX
- Silver Bell: AZ
- Snow: OK
- Snow Hill: MD
- Snowflake: AZ
- Star City: SK, WV
- Three Wise Men Peaks: UT
- Virgin: UT
- Winter: WI
- Wiseman: AZ
- Wreath Hill, WY
- Yule Bay: Antarctica
- Yule Island: Papua New Guinea
- Yule River: Western Australia

Germany The approach of Christmas in Germany is signalled by the observance of traditions associated with a number of saints' days. *ST. MARTIN'S DAY*, on November 11, provides a warm-up for the gift-giving and festivities to come. *St. Andrew's Day*, November 30, marks the real beginning of the Christmas season in Germany. It is when many *CHRISTMAS MARKETS* open for business; it is the first of the *klopfelnächte*; and its eve is popular in German folklore for divination, especially to identify one's future spouse. One way of fortune-telling was to throw a shoe at a door at midnight – if the shoe pointed toward the door the young woman would marry within the year – or to toss an apple peel over the shoulder in the hope that its shape would reveal the initial of a future husband.

On December 1 Germans put up Advent calendars (a German invention) and the first of the 24 windows are opened to reveal a picture, verse, or piece of candy. The family's Advent wreath is taken out in preparation for lighting the first candle on the first Sunday of Advent.

St. Barbara's Day is December 4, when many bring in the branch of a fruit tree, the *Barbarazweig*, and encourage it to bloom before Christmas. In some areas it is also the day to bake *Kletzenbrot* (a fruit cake).

December 6, the feast of *St. Nicholas*, is when most of the gift-giving used to be carried out in Germany. Though much

of that has been shifted to Christmas Eve, St. Nicholas's visit is still looked forward to by German children. The saint will often appear in person, clad in his bishop's robes, and ask how the little ones have behaved during the previous year. The children may also be called upon to perform a little song or say a prayer before being given their small gift. Nicholas will often be accompanied by a menacing figure, often called KNECHT RUPRECHT, but who also might go by the name of Hans Muff, Pelzebock, Krampus, or countless regional variations. His job is to threaten the children with a switch or the possibility of being stuffed into his sack and spirited away to wherever it is that bad children go. Those children who do not get to meet St. Nicholas by day will leave out their shoes at night to be filled with treats.

In Catholic parts of Germany, the nine days before Christmas is a time to honour the Virgin Mary and the search of the Holy Family for lodging. In the *Frauentragen* ("Carrying the Virgin"), the torch-bearing faithful carry an image of Mary through the village to the home of a family who will host it for that night. The *Herbergsuche* ("Searching for Lodging") re-enacts the story of Mary and Joseph seeking a room at the inn in Bethlehem as statues of the holy couple are carried from house to house. In some places children dress up as Joseph and Mary or carry a Nativity scene and go from door to door collecting money for charity.

Germans have produced some of the most beautiful Christmas music ever written, and visitors to the country can hear such masterpieces as J.S. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* or sing such German-language carols as "Es ist ein' Ros' entsprungen," "Von Himmel Hoch," "Wie schön Leuchtet der Morgenstern," or "Stille Nacht" (written in Austria). Groups of carollers still go door-to-door in various parts of the country, and where the custom was once a BEGGING VISIT they now raise money for charity.

Christmas Eve is traditionally when the family's Christmas tree is set up and decorated away from the prying eyes of the children. Though other countries lay claim to the invention of the Christmas tree, it is generally accepted that it was in Germany that the custom took hold and then spread to the rest of the world. The idea that the 16th-century reformer

Martin Luther was the first to put lights on the tree is not now given much credence, but there is no doubt that Germans still love to decorate their trees with real candles. When all is ready a bell is rung and the tree and the presents under it are revealed to the young ones, who are told that the gift-bringer has just come. (Protestant areas tend to be visited by the *Weihnachtsmann*, a Santa Claus figure, while Catholic families are served by the Christkind, the Christ Child, who is envisaged as a white-clad maiden.) In addition to the gifts under the tree, each family member receives a plate of goodies. A church service, carol singing, and a feast are also on the Christmas Eve agenda. The large meal is centred on goose or turkey, with many regional variations such as sausage, red cabbage, noodles, and carp. Desserts are legion: the most famous ones are *stollen*, a rich Christmas bread; *lebkuchen*, gingerbread; *marzipan*; cinnamon stars; and *springerle* cookies. Eating to excess is encouraged; a nickname for Christmas Eve is *Dickbauch*, or fat stomach, because of the tradition that those who do not eat their fill on Christmas Eve will be haunted by demons in the night.

Many Germans spend part of Christmas Eve visiting family graves and placing candles over the resting places of the dead.

December 25 and 26 are both holidays in Germany and are spent in more feasting, relaxing, and visiting friends. This is also the beginning of the *Rauhnächte*, smoke nights or rough nights, a time to combat the forces of evil and cleanse the home of their influence. The house is smoked with incense, and numerous ceremonies take place in the streets with wildly costumed characters shouting and making noise.

Festivities in Germany continue through *Silvester*, New Year's Eve, which folk celebrate with great gusto, throwing parties and enjoying fireworks, to Epiphany. While some Germans are taking down their Christmas trees, others celebrate January 6 with parades of STAR BOYS imitating the Magi and collecting money for charity or safeguarding the house and farm for the coming year by chalking each home with the initials of the Wise Men. They might also attend Three Kings parties, where the Bean King and Queen are chosen by lot.

Gift-bringers Though North Americans are familiar with the figure of Santa Claus, he is just one of a number of gift-bringers around the world, and Christmas Eve, the night of his descent down the chimney, is just one of a number of days on which the gift-bringer arrives during the Christmas season.

The original gift-bringer, the founder of the feast, was ST. NICHOLAS. Though displaced from many of the countries he used to visit, he is still a welcome sight in the Netherlands and other parts of Europe on December 5 and 6. He can be recognized by his bishop's attire, and he tends to travel by white horse or mule accompanied by such helpers as Black Peter.

Secularized descendants of St. Nicholas, who for the most part appeared first in the 19th century, include Santa Claus (who was a North American manifestation before his franchise went global), Father Christmas (popular in Great Britain and parts of the British Commonwealth), Père Noël (francophone lands), the *Weihnachtsmann* of parts of Germany, Baba Noel in the Middle East, and the Scandinavian gift-bringers, such as Joulupukki, Julemand, and Jultomten. The appearance of these gentlemen is rather similar – red-clad, fur-trimmed, bearded fellows of a portly build – and they all tend to work on the night of December 24-25. Most secular of all is Grandfather Frost, a Communist version of Santa Claus, who was offered by Soviet authorities as a New Year's replacement for the Christmas givers the state wished to suppress. He has been



Germany A medieval representation of the Adoration of the Magi is depicted on this German Christmas stamp.