

# Independent Evangelist

LE it's happening



Follow the Leader

Phil Conybear – Writer

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Vol. 1 Issue 10 Mary Conybear - Editor



*And there were in the same country shepherds  
abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock  
by night.*

*And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and  
the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and  
they were sore afraid.*

*And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold,  
I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be  
to all people.*

*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a  
Savior, which is Christ the Lord.*

*And this [shall be] a sign unto you; Ye shall find the  
babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a  
manger.*

*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude  
of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,  
Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace,  
good will toward men.*

*Version: KJV Luke 2: 8-14*

Welcome to the December newsletter. December is a cold, weary month and it's hard to adjust to the beginning of winter but there is a giddy, somewhat electrical feeling of excitement in the air. Christmas is at hand.

I enjoy Christmas shopping even though it wears me out. I cherish the fellowship among family and friends and the music is everywhere. Even TV is worth watching with all of the Christmas specials. Pour me some eggnog and break out the lights; I'm ready!

This whole month is reserved for the greatest birthday party in the world. No birth ever rocked the world more, before or since, than the birth of Christ.

When I read the words of Luke, I try to picture myself standing with the shepherds. I wouldn't have handled it so well.

I would have been so taken aback by the angel of the Lord and the multitude saying, "Glory to God on the highest, and peace on Earth and good will toward men" that I would have forgotten the rest of the message. I would have been so overwhelmed there is no telling what city I would have went to.

Archaeologists have dug around and argued about the location of the inn and the manger.

Scientists and astronomers have debated about the star they saw. They have said it may have been a supernova or an alignment of stars or maybe a comet.

They can save their debates and stories for the Science Channel. It does make for good entertainment but the fact remains; Christ the Lord was born and it's time to remember that.

In light of that, this newsletter will be entirely about Christmas. The politics and problems of the world have to take a month off.

When I searched my clip art file for an appropriate picture to accompany the following poem, I found some bizarre clips that gave me ideas for this month's stories. You'll see what I mean as I explore the traditions incorporated into the celebration of the birth of Christ, the Lord.

I hope you enjoy it.

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day  
Their old, familiar carols play,  
And wild and sweet the words repeat  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

*- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*



Some of the traditions of the Christmas season used to baffle me. I had to ask, what on Earth is a Yule log and where did mistletoe come from? Why do we give each other gifts? It's not our birthday.

I did some homework and I want to share my findings. Some traditions seemed silly until I read about them. I hope I got it right and you enjoy all of it.

### *What is advent?*

Advent was originally a Latin word that translated into "the coming". Advent was developed as the four-week period before Christmas Eve to encourage Christians to reflect on the meaning of Christmas and prepare themselves spiritually for the coming New Year.

The Advent Wreath, candle, and calendar are all tools to help Christians do this.

The Advent Wreath is a Lutheran custom that originated in Eastern Germany. They are formed into circles symbolizing the circle of life, rebirth with the upcoming New Year, and God's unending love for his followers. They are made of Evergreen branches (from Christmas tree firs, with all the symbolism associated with Christmas trees) and the green color is to remind followers of the renewal that will come with spring.



Advent candles often come in groups of four candles, with two different colors. The three purple candles stand for sorrow, penance, and expectation of eternal life. Purple was also the historic color of royalty and this color is to remind followers that God is the ultimate royalty and is to be obeyed above all men.

The last candle is normally red or white in color and symbolizes joy and hope. Candles are lit every day during the four weeks of Advent.

The Advent calendar was created to also help followers focus on the meaning of the Christmas season and is often seen with closed doors for each day of the Advent season.

One the first day of Advent, the first set of doors are opened and there will be a message (and often a picture) to reflect upon for that day. The next day the second set of doors is opened, etc. providing a new message of hope and reflection every day up to Christmas Eve.

This was a very good visual way for children to see and understand the passing of the days and be ready when Christmas had finally arrived. It is believed that the Advent calendar evolved from a German tradition of hanging up 24 small bags containing a treat or gift, which the children in the family got to open each day from December 1st to December 24th – Christmas Eve.

### *The Date of Christmas*

The idea to celebrate Christmas on December 25 originated in the 4th century. The Catholic Church wanted to eclipse the festivities of a rival pagan religion that threatened Christianity's existence.

The Romans celebrated the birthday of their sun god, Mithras during this time of year. Although it was not popular, or even proper, to celebrate people's birthdays in those times, church leaders decided that in order to compete with the pagan celebration they would themselves order a festival in celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Although the actual season of Jesus' birth is thought to be in the spring, the date of December 25 was chosen as the official birthday celebration as Christ's Mass so that it would compete head on with the rival pagan celebration.

Christmas was slow to catch on in America. The early colonists considered it a pagan ritual. The celebration of Christmas was even banned by law in Massachusetts in colonial days. I found that part to be very bizarre.

### *The Christmas Tree*

The Christmas Tree originated in Germany in the 16th century. It was common for the Germanic people to decorate fir trees, both inside and out, with roses, apples, and colored paper.



It is believed that Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, was the first to light a Christmas tree with candles. While coming home one dark winter's night near Christmas, he was struck with the beauty of the starlight shining through the branches of a small fir tree outside his home. He duplicated the starlight by using candles attached to the branches of his indoor Christmas tree.

The Christmas tree was not widely used in Britain until the 19th century. It was brought to America by the Pennsylvania Germans in the 1820's.

### *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 as a shorthand form of the word.

Although the early Christians understood that X stood for Christ's name, later Christians who did not understand the Greek language mistook "Xmas" as a sign of disrespect.



## **Poinsettias**

Poinsettias are native to Mexico. They were named after America's first ambassador to Mexico, Joel Poinsett. He brought the plants to America in 1828.

The Mexicans in the eighteenth century thought the plants were symbolic of the Star of Bethlehem. Thus the Poinsettia became associated with the Christmas season. The actual flower of the poinsettia is small and yellow. But surrounding the flower are large, bright red leaves, often mistaken for petals.

## **The Candy Cane**

Candy canes have been around for centuries, but it wasn't until around 1900 that they were decorated with red stripes and bent into the shape of a cane. They were sometimes handed out during church services to keep the children quiet.



One story that is often told about the origin of the candy cane is as follows:

In the late 1800's a candy maker in Indiana wanted to express the meaning of Christmas through a symbol made of candy. He came up with the idea of bending one of his white candy sticks into the shape of a Candy Cane.

He incorporated several symbols of Christ's love and sacrifice through the Candy Cane. First, he used a plain white peppermint stick. The color white symbolizes the purity and sinless nature of Jesus.

Next, he added three small stripes to symbolize the pain inflicted upon Jesus before His death on the cross. There are three of them to represent the Holy Trinity. He added a bold stripe to represent the blood Jesus shed for mankind.

When looked at with the crook on top, it looks like a shepherd's staff because Jesus is the shepherd of man. If you turn it upside down, it becomes the letter J symbolizing the first letter in Jesus' name. The candy maker made these candy canes for Christmas, so everyone would remember what Christmas is all about.

## **CHRISTMAS CARDS**

A form of Christmas card began in England first when young boys practiced their writing skills by creating Christmas greetings for their parents, but it is Sir Henry Cole who is credited with creating the first real Christmas card.

The first director of London's Victoria and Albert Museum, Sir Henry found himself too busy in the Christmas season of 1843 to compose individual Christmas greetings for his

friends. He commissioned artist John Calcott Horsley for the illustration. The card featured three panels, with the center panel depicting a family enjoying Christmas festivities and the card was inscribed with the message "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You."

## **HOLLY, IVY & GREENERY**



In Northern Europe Christmas occurred during the middle of winter, when ghosts and demons could be heard howling in the winter winds. Boughs of holly, believed to have magical powers since they remained green through the harsh winter, were often placed over the doors of homes to drive evil away.

Greenery was also brought indoors to freshen the air and brighten the mood during the long, dreary winter.

Legend also has it that holly sprang from the footsteps of Christ as he walked the earth. The pointed leaves were said to represent the crown of thorns Christ wore while on the cross and the red berries symbolized the blood he shed.

## **MISTLETOE**



Mistletoe was used by Druid priests 200 years before the birth of Christ in their winter celebrations. They revered the plant since it had no roots yet remained green during the cold months of winter.

The ancient Celts believed mistletoe to have magical healing powers and used it as an antidote for poison, infertility, and to ward of evil spirits. The plant was also seen as a symbol of peace, and it is said that among Romans, enemies who met under mistletoe would lay down their weapons and embrace.

Scandinavians associated the plant with Frigga, their goddess of love, and it may be from this that we derive the custom of kissing under the mistletoe. Those who kissed under the mistletoe had the promise of happiness and good luck in the following year.

## **CHRISTMAS STOCKINGS**



According to legend, a kindly nobleman grew despondent over the death of his beloved wife and foolishly squandered his fortune. This left his three young daughters without dowries and thus facing a life of spinsterhood.

The generous St. Nicholas, hearing of the girls' plight, set forth to help. Wishing to remain anonymous, he rode his white horse by the nobleman's house and threw three small pouches of gold coins down the chimney where they were fortuitously captured by the stockings the young women had hung by the fireplace to dry.

## Santa Claus

Santa Claus has become the human face of Christmas. Pictures will be seen everywhere of the old man with long white beard, red coat, and bag of toys. Children are taught that he brings them presents the night before Christmas (or in some countries on December 6th - St. Nicholas' Day), and many children up to the age of 7 or 8 really believe this is true.

In most countries, it is said that he lives near the North Pole, and arrives through the sky on a sledge (snow-cart) pulled by reindeer. He comes into houses down the chimney at midnight and places presents for the children in socks or bags by their beds or in front of the family Christmas tree.

In shops or at children's parties, someone will dress up as Father Christmas and give small presents to children, or ask them what gifts they want for Christmas. Christmas can be a time of magic and excitement for children.

The original Santa Claus, St. Nicholas, was born in Turkey in the 4th century. He was very pious from an early age, devoting his life to Christianity. He became widely known for his generosity for the poor.



But the Romans held him in contempt. He was imprisoned and tortured. But when Constantine became emperor of Rome, he allowed Nicholas to go free. Constantine became a Christian and convened the Council of Nicaea in 325. Nicholas was a delegate to the council.

He is especially noted for his love of children and for his generosity. He is the patron saint of sailors, Sicily, Greece, and Russia. He is also, of course, the patron saint of children.

The Dutch kept the legend of St. Nicholas alive. In 16th century Holland, Dutch 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 corrupted to Sinterklaas, and finally, in Anglican, to Santa Claus.

In 1822, Clement C. Moore composed his famous poem, "A Visit from St. Nick," which was later published as "The Night Before Christmas." Moore is credited with creating the modern image of Santa Claus as a jolly fat man in a red suit.



In the 20's a standardized version of Santa was established in the U.S. but it was finally made popular by a commercial illustrator, Haddon Sundblom who worked for Coca Cola. His illustrations have become the most memorable and beloved images of Santa. Ho Ho Ho!

## Christmas Carols

The Apostles sang songs of praise, many based on the Psalms. As founders of the churches, their enthusiasm inspired their new congregations into song. But unfortunately they did not leave us any copies of the musical scores.

One of the earliest known Christmas songs is from the 4th Century, *Jesus refulsit omnium*, composed by St. Hilary of Poitiers. During the 12th Century, St Francis of Assisi formally introduced Christmas carols to church services.

As patron of the arts, he inspired the composers and poets of the day to deliver Christmas music. The lighter joyous Christmas songs were introduced many years later in Renaissance.

The earliest known copy of an English carol was written by Ritson about 1410. Throughout the years, monks also contributed significantly in composing music themes from the Bible.

When Johannes Gutenberg started his printing press rolling in 1454 copies of carols could be distributed fairly freely. However, keep in mind that Christmas celebrations were suppressed by puritans at that time. However, many of the Christmas carols that we know today are not quoted directly from the Bible and were composed fairly recently.

Christmas carols were banned between 1649 and 1660 in England by Oliver Cromwell who thought that Christmas should be a solemn day. (Cromwell also abolished the monarchy.)

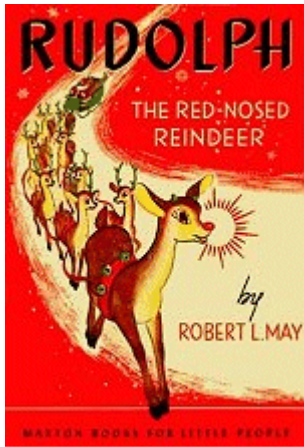
When Protestants, inspired by Martin Luther, took to the joy of Christmas carols, many had to flee Europe under pressure from the Catholic Church. They took the Christmas carols with them to their new homes across the world. In 1649, John de Brebeur wrote the first American Christmas carol, called *Jesus is Born*.

In many European countries there is a tradition of groups of people going from door to door in the community and singing outside their houses. These groups of Christmas Carolers were rewarded for bringing joy into the hearts of the listeners by being invited into their houses for meals or a drink.

The name Christmas Carol is said to have originated because a young girl named Carol went missing in London, one cold winter night. As her friends went from door to door searching for her, in a manner similar to the Christmas Singers, the name Christmas Carol began to be used and is today an essential part of the Christmas Festival.

Christmas carols have become a tapestry of the Christmas season. It was a huge subject to research and there is no way one column could do them justice so join the carolers and sing out loud as you can.

## RUDOLPH THE RED-NOSED REINDEER



The Chicago-based Montgomery Ward company, department store operators, had been purchasing and distributing children's coloring books as Christmas gifts for their customers for several years. In 1939, Montgomery Ward tapped one of their own employees to create a book for them, thus saving money.

34-year old copywriter Robert L. May wrote the story of Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer in 1939, and 2.4 million copies were handed out that year. Despite the wartime paper shortage, over 6 million copies had

been distributed by 1946.

May drew in part on the story "The Ugly Duckling" and in part from his own experiences as an often taunted, small, frail youth to create the story of the misfit reindeer. Though Rollo and Reginald were considered, May settled on Rudolph as his reindeer's name. Writing in verse as a series of rhyming couplets, May tested the story as he went along on his 4-year old daughter Barbara, who loved the story.

Sadly, Robert Mays wife died around the time he was creating Rudolph, leaving Mays deeply in debt due to medical bills. However, he was able to persuade Sewell Avery, Montgomery Ward's corporate president, to turn the copyright over to him in January 1947, thus ensuring May's financial security.

May's story "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" was printed commercially in 1947 and in 1948 a nine-minute cartoon of the story was shown in theaters. When May's brother-in-law, songwriter Johnny Marks, wrote the lyrics and melody for the song "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer", the Rudolph phenomenon was born.

Turned down by many musical artists afraid to contend with the legend of Santa Claus, the song was recorded by Gene Autry in 1949 at the urging of Autry's wife. The song sold two million copies that year, going on to become one of the best-selling songs of all time, second only to Bing Crosby's "White Christmas". The 1964 television special about Rudolph, narrated by Burl Ives, remains a holiday favorite to this day and Rudolph himself has become a much-loved Christmas icon.

### Gift Giving

The tradition of gifts seems to have started with the gifts that the wise men (the Magi) brought to Jesus. As recounted in the Bible's book of Matthew, "On coming to the house they saw

the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh."

No one was really in the habit of exchanging elaborate gifts until late in the 1800s. The Santa Claus story combined with an amazing retailing phenomenon that has grown since the turn of the century, has made gift giving a central focus of the Christmas tradition.

### The 12 Days of Christmas

The 12 days of Christmas are the 12 days that separate Christmas day on December 25 from Epiphany, which is celebrated January 6. Depending on the church, January 6 may mark Christ's baptism (the Catholic tradition), or it may mark the day that the wise men visited the baby Jesus with their gifts.

In the past, there was a tradition of giving gifts throughout the 12 days, rather than stacking them all up on the morning of December 25. That tradition, as you might imagine, has never really caught on in America! We just aren't that patient. The song, (The 12 Days of Christmas) however, demonstrates that some people once stretched out their gifts over the full 12 days.

### Yule Logs



"Yuletide" for "Christmastime" is a term derived from the Yule log, which in olden days was a huge log used as the foundation of the holiday fires. Bringing the Yule log in was, as recently as the 19th century,

as much a part of the pre-Christmas festivities as putting up an evergreen tree today.

"Yule" can be traced back to the Middle English "Yollen" (cry aloud) and is thought to date from early Anglo-Saxon revels in celebration of the discovery (after the winter solstice) that nights were becoming shorter.

Up until the 19th century, the custom of burning the Yule log flourished in England, France, and Germany and among the South Slavs. Out of oak, families carved a heavy, wood block. They placed it into the floor of their hearth. It glowed throughout the year under the flames of household fires. Gradually it became ash.

### Eggnog

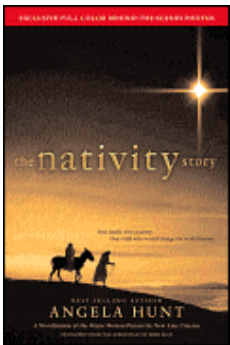
The history of eggnog starts in England. Nog is an old English word that was used to describe a kind of strong beer back in the seventeenth century. It was often used to toast ones health. It was also called an egg flip. It was a drink more commonly enjoyed by the upper class mostly because there was no refrigeration and all the farms belonged to the big estates.

Those who could get milk and eggs to make eggnog mixed it with brandy or Madeira or even sherry.

But, it became most popular in America, where farms and dairy products were plentiful, as was rum which was far more affordable than the heavily taxed brandy.

An English creation, eggnog descended from a hot British drink called a posset, which consists of eggs, milk, and ale or wine. The recipe for eggnog (eggs beaten with sugar, milk or cream, and some kind of spirit) has traveled well, adapting to local tastes wherever it has landed. In the American South, bourbon replaced ale (though nog, the British slang for strong ale, stuck).

### Book Corner



It's a difficult task to retell the biblical nativity story in a fresh way. After all, it has been novelized, brought to stage and screen, and is the stuff of endless children's Christmas pageants. Yet this companion novel to the New Line Cinema feature film (which will hit theaters December 1) should find a place on the bookshelf as a fresh and viable retelling.

The Nativity Story is the very human, very dramatic, and uniquely inspiring saga of a journey of faith. Best-selling author Angie Hunt, who most recently wrote *Magdalene*, a historical fiction novel of the story of Mary Magdalene that was tied to *The Da Vinci Code* movie, now focuses on Mary, the mother of Jesus.

She has adapted the screenplay for *The Nativity Story* into a powerful, historical novel. Her moving novelization of this film tells the extraordinary tale of two common people, Mary and Joseph, a miraculous pregnancy, an arduous journey, and the history-defining birth of Jesus.

Brought to life with an unprecedented attention to detail and commitment to historical accuracy, Hunt tells how from humble beginnings, great things can come.

### TV Viewing for December



This is a personal favorite. Poor Charlie Brown searches for the true meaning of Christmas only to find that even his own dog is caught up in the commercialism of the season. Just as he is at wits end, Linus comforts him with the answer as he quotes Luke 2: 8-14.

It was originally turned down by the TV studios for being too religious.

### Silent Night

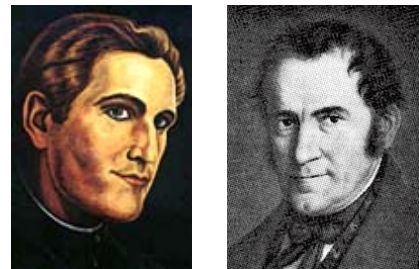
The world's most famous Christmas song, "Silent Night," comes to us from Austria. Called "Stille Nacht" in its original German, this beautiful Christmas carol is now sung and enjoyed around the world in hundreds of languages.

On a cold Christmas Eve in 1818 pastor Joseph Franz Mohr (1792-1848) walked the three kilometers from his home in the Austrian village of Oberndorf bei Salzburg to visit his friend Franz Xaver Gruber (1787-1863) in the neighboring town of Arnsdorf bei Laufen.

Mohr brought with him a poem he had written some two years earlier. He desperately needed a carol for the Christmas Eve midnight mass that was only hours away. He hoped his friend, a school teacher who also served as the church's choir master and organist, could set his poem to music. And one of the many amazing things about this carol is that Franz Gruber composed the "Stille Nacht" melody for Mohr in just a few hours on that December 24, 1818.

Recent flooding of the nearby Salzach River had put the church organ out of commission, so Gruber composed the music for guitar accompaniment. A few hours after Gruber finished his composition, he and Mohr stood before the altar of the St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf to perform their own work.

A local choir group backed them up as the sounds of the brand new carol broke the silence of that "Stille Nacht."



### Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber

I hope I didn't bore anyone with my research of Christmas traditions. My intent was to make the December newsletter one big Christmas card.

The research helped me understand things I grew up with and never questioned. I realize that all of the traditions we take for granted evolved as ways to celebrate the most significant birthday ever.

At first it seemed like there were too many traditions and they only distracted us from the true meaning of Christmas, but now it seems there aren't enough ways to say, Happy Birthday, Jesus!

**Merry Christmas to all!**

## *Virgins & Angels*

Two daughters had been given parts in a Christmas pageant at their Church. At dinner that night, they got into an argument as to who had the most important role.

Finally the 14 year old said to her 8 year old younger sister, "Well, you just ask Mom. She'll tell you it's much harder to be a virgin than it is to be an angel."

## *Lawyers! Go figure!*

"We respectfully request, and entreat, that due and adequate provisions be made this day and the date hereinafter subscribed, for the organizing of such methods and allocations and distribution as may be deemed necessary to properly assure the reception by and for said petitioner of such quantities of baked cereal products as shall, in the judgment of the aforementioned parishioners, constitute a sufficient supply thereof."

INTERPRETATION of Legal Jargon: "...give us this day our daily bread."

## *Santa Sightings!*



## *Be careful hanging lights!*

