

1945

## U. S. Christmas, 1956 Combines Customs of the Centuries

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# U. S. CHRISTMAS, 1945

## *Combines Customs of the Centuries*

*Symbols from all over the world are combined  
in our American Christmas says Louise Stuckert*

**T**HE evergreen tree with colorful lights shining from branches weighted down with gay ornaments and silvery tinsel is one of the many symbols of an American Christmas.\* The origin of the decorated spruce is the union of two elements. The first was a pagan custom of adorning houses with trees and winter greenery. This idea was imported to the Nativity Festival from the Roman Kalends of January where evergreens were used widely as a symbol of good luck. Second and most important was a wonderful legend that told how, on the night that Christ was born, all the trees in the forest, despite snow and ice, bloomed and bore fruit.

Martin Luther introduced the first Christmas tree, decorated with cut paper and candles, into the domestic celebration of Christmas.

The belief of Saint Nicholas, dates back to the third or fourth century. St. Nick was a son of wealthy parents. With his inheritance he joyfully, but secretly, bestowed his riches on poor, needy families. After his death many traditions sprang up and his birthday, December 6, was celebrated by prayer and festivity.

Tradition of St. Nick was carried on, but his birthday was pushed up to that of Christ's. In America Saint

Nicholas was wonderfully transformed by early settlers into Santa Claus. Saint Nick lost his legendary pale face and took on the tint of rosy apples; from a lean, ascetic man he became a fat, jolly old fellow and more a humanist than a saint. He added to this, a cap and suit of brilliant red, trimmed with ermine. He traded his gray horse for a reindeer and sleigh and became the human symbol of the Yuletide season for the children.

"'Twas the night before Christmas," undoubtedly did much to make Santa Claus or Saint Nicholas and the colorful stocking, hanging from the fireplace, popular with young Americans.

Customs come and customs go, but those of Christmas remain forever. The custom of sending Yuletide greeting cards, or even using lighted candles, are an inherent part of the Christmas atmosphere. Cards help produce the Christmas spirit and good cheer.

Christmas cards were originated in 1846 in England by Joseph Lundall, a London artist. They were printed by lithography and colored by hand, and were the usual size of ladies' calling cards. In 1862, Christmas card manufacturing gained a foothold and experiments were made with ordinary calling cards. Inscriptions of Merry Christmas and Happy New Year were tried on the cards.

Gradually more complex ideas and intricate shapes and designs were used and until today Christmas cards still are the essence of good cheer and convey the Yuletide spirit.

The tradition of lighted candles is a carry-over from the Middle Ages, when one single, large candle was set up in remembrance of the Star of Bethlehem. In some countries it was believed that the lighted candle was there to light the Christ Child on his way.

Christmas carols were at first Yuletide drinking songs and then they were welcomed aids to cheerful piety. Carols were adopted by Saint Francis of Assisi and his comrades to diffuse religious knowledge among the common people. They were bright, homely songs that praised the Child of Bethlehem.

There can be little doubt that midnight mass on Christmas Eve originated in a belief that the Birth of our Lord occurred about midnight.

The mode of saluting or more modernly — kissing — under a sprig of berried mistletoe may be a "naughty child" of the *pox vobiscum*, the kiss of peace, which was practiced in the ancient church, in token of the divine embrace of man in Christ, which made of believers one loving household of faith.

The holly and ivy wreaths, which adorn modern front doors, were once believed to have the power to bring the woodland spirit into the home.

*Holly leaves and ribbon-wound Christmas candles surround the madona figurine in a decorative theme for a fireplace mantle*

