

The American Version of Santa Claus

The American version of the Santa Claus figure received its inspiration and its name from the Dutch legend of Sinter Klaas, brought by settlers to New York in the 17th century.

As early as 1773 the name appeared in the American press as "St. A Claus," but it was the popular author Washington Irving who gave Americans their first detailed information about the Dutch version of Saint Nicholas. In his *History of New York*, published in 1809 under the pseudonym Diedrich Knickerbocker, Irving described the arrival of the saint on horseback (unaccompanied by Black Peter) each Eve of Saint Nicholas.

This Dutch-American Saint Nick achieved his fully Americanized form in 1823 in the poem *A Visit From Saint Nicholas* more commonly known as *The Night Before Christmas* by writer Clement Clarke Moore. Moore included such details as the names of the reindeer; Santa Claus's laughs, winks, and nods; and the method by which Saint Nicholas, referred to as an elf, returns up the chimney. (Moore's phrase "lays his finger aside of his nose" was drawn directly from Irving's 1809 description.)

The American image of Santa Claus was further elaborated by illustrator Thomas Nast, who depicted a rotund Santa for Christmas issues of Harper's magazine from the 1860s to the 1880s. Nast added such details as Santa's workshop at the North Pole and Santa's list of the good and bad children of the world. A human-sized version of Santa Claus, rather than the elf of Moore's poem, was depicted in a series of illustrations for Coca-Cola advertisements introduced in 1931. In modern versions of the Santa Claus legend, only his toy-shop workers are elves. Rudolph, the ninth reindeer, with a red and shiny nose, was invented in 1939 by an advertising writer for the Montgomery Ward Company.

In looking for the historical roots of Santa Claus, one must go very deep in the past. One discovers that Santa Claus as we know him is a combination of many different legends and mythical creatures.

The basis for the Christian-era Santa Claus is Bishop Nicholas of Smyrna (Izmir), in what is now Turkey. Nicholas lived in the 4th century A.D. He was very rich, generous, and loving toward children. Often he gave joy to poor children by throwing gifts in through their windows.

The Orthodox Church later raised St. Nicholas, miracle worker, to a position of great esteem. It was in his honor that Russia's oldest church, for example, was built. For its part, the Roman Catholic Church honored Nicholas as one who helped children and the poor. St. Nicholas became the patron saint of children and seafarers. His name day is December 6th.

In the Protestant areas of central and northern Germany, St. Nicholas later became known as *der Weihnachtsmann*. In England he came to be called Father Christmas. St. Nicholas made his way to the United States with Dutch immigrants, and began to be referred to as Santa Claus.

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In North American poetry and illustrations, Santa Claus, in his white beard, red jacket and pompom-topped cap, would sally forth on the night before Christmas in his sleigh, pulled by eight reindeer, and climb down chimneys to leave his gifts in stockings children set out on the fireplace's mantelpiece.

Children naturally wanted to know where Santa Claus actually came from. Where did he live when he wasn't delivering presents? Those questions gave rise to the legend that Santa Claus lived at the North Pole, where his Christmas-gift workshop was also located.

In 1925, since grazing reindeer would not be possible at the North Pole, newspapers revealed that Santa Claus in fact lived in Finnish Lapland. "Uncle Markus", Markus Rautio, who compared the popular "Children's hour" on Finnish public radio, revealed the great secret for the first time in 1927: Santa Claus lives on Lapland's Korvatunturi - "Ear Fell"

The fell, which is situated directly on Finland's eastern frontier, somewhat resembles a hare's ears - which are in fact Santa Claus's ears, with which he listens to hear if the world's children are being nice. Santa has the assistance of a busy group of elves, who have quite their own history in Scandinavian legend.

: Ear Fell

Over the centuries, customs from different parts of the Northern Hemisphere thus came together and created the whole world's Santa Claus - the ageless, timeless, deathless white-bearded man who gives out gifts on Christmas and always returns to Korvatunturi in Finnish Lapland.

: North American Santa

Since the 1950s, Santa has happily sojourned at Napapiiri, near Rovaniemi, at times other than Christmas, to meet children and the young at heart. By 1985 his visits to Napapiiri had become so regular that he established his own Santa Claus Office there. He comes there every day of the year to hear what children want for Christmas and to talk with children who have arrived from around the world. Santa Claus Village is also the location of Santa's main Post Office, which receives children's letters from the four corners of the world.

Origins: Santa Claus is perhaps the most remarkable of all the figures associated with Christmas. To us, Santa has always been an essential part of the Christmas celebration, but the modern image of Santa didn't develop until well into the 19th century. Moreover, he didn't spring to life fully-formed as a literary creation or a commercial invention (as did his famous reindeer, Rudolph). Santa Claus was an evolutionary creation, brought about by the fusion of two religious personages (St. Nicholas and Christkindlein, the Christ child) to become a fixed image which is now the paramount symbol of the secular Christmas celebration.

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In 1804, the New York Historical Society was founded with Nicholas as its patron saint, its members reviving the Dutch tradition of St. Nicholas as a gift-bringer. In 1809, Washington Irving published his satirical *A History of New York*, by one "Diedrich Knickerbocker," a work that poked fun at New York's Dutch past (St. Nicholas included). When Irving became a member of the Society the following year, the annual St. Nicholas Day dinner festivities included a woodcut of the traditional Nicholas figure (tall, with long robes) accompanied by a Dutch rhyme about "Sancte Claus" (in Dutch, "Sinterklaas"). Irving revised his *History of New York* in 1812, adding details about Nicholas' "riding over the tops of the trees, in that selfsame waggon wherein he brings his yearly presents to children." In 1821, a New York printer named William Gilley issued a poem about a "Santeclaus" who dressed all in fur and drove a sleigh pulled by one reindeer. Gilley's "Sante," however, was very short.

On Christmas Eve of 1822, another New Yorker, Clement Clarke Moore, wrote down and read to his children a series of verses; his poem was published a year later as "An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas" (more commonly known today by its opening line, "'Twas the night before Christmas . . ."). Moore gave St. Nick eight reindeer (and named them all), and he devised the now-familiar entrance by chimney. Moore's Nicholas was still a small figure, however 97 the poem describes a "miniature sleigh" with a "little old driver."

Meanwhile, in parts of Europe such as Germany, Nicholas the gift-giver had been superseded by a representation of the infant Jesus (the Christ child, or "Christkindlein"). The Christkindlein accompanied Nicholas-like figures with other names (such as "PE8re NoEBI" in France), or he travelled with a dwarf-like helper (known in some places as "Pelznickel," or Nicholas with furs). Belsnickle (as Pelznickel was known in the German-American dialect of Pennsylvania) was represented by adults who dressed in furry disguises (including false whiskers), visited while children were still awake, and put on a scary performance. Gifts found by children the next morning were credited to Christkindlein, who had come while everyone was asleep. Over time, the non-visible Christkindlein (whose name mutated into "Kriss Kringle") was overshadowed by the visible Belsnickle, and both of them became confused with St. Nicholas and the emerging figure of Santa Claus.

The modern Santa Claus derived from these two images: St. Nicholas the elf-like gift bringer described by Moore, and a friendlier "Kriss Kringle" amalgam of the Christkindlein and Pelznickel figures. The man-sized version of Santa became the dominant image around 1841, when a Philadelphia merchant named J.W. Parkinson hired a man to dress in "Criscringle" clothing and climb the chimney outside his shop.

In 1863, a caricaturist for *Harper's Weekly* named Thomas Nast began developing his own image of Santa. Nast gave his figure a "flowing set of whiskers" and dressed him "all in fur, from his head to his foot." Nast's 1866 montage entitled "Santa Claus and His Works" established Santa as a maker of toys; an 1869 book of the same name collected new Nast drawings with a poem by George P. Webster that identified the North Pole as Santa's home. Although Nast never settled on one size for his Santa figures (they ranged

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from elf-like to man-sized), his 1881 "Merry Old Santa Claus" drawing is quite close to the modern-day image.

The Santa Claus figure, although not yet standardized, was ubiquitous by the late 19th century. Santa was portrayed as both large and small; he was usually round but sometimes of normal or slight build; and he dressed in furs (like Belsnickle) or cloth suits of red, blue, green, or purple. A Boston printer named Louis Prang introduced the English custom of Christmas cards to America, and in 1885 he issued a card featuring a red-suited Santa. The chubby Santa with a red suit (like an "overweight superhero") began to replace the fur-dressed Belsnickle image and the multicolored Santas.

At the beginning of the 1930s, the burgeoning Coca-Cola company was still looking for ways to increase sales of their product during winter, then a slow time of year for the soft drink market. They turned to a talented commercial illustrator named Haddon Sundblom, who created a series of memorable drawings that associated the figure of a larger than life, red-and-white garbed Santa Claus with Coca-Cola. Coke's annual advertisements featuring Sundblom-drawn Santas holding bottles of Coca-Cola, drinking Coca-Cola, receiving Coca-Cola as gifts, and especially enjoying Coca-Cola became a perennial Christmastime feature which helped spur Coca-Cola sales throughout the winter (and produced the bonus effect of appealing quite strongly to children, an important segment of the soft drink market). The success of this advertising campaign has helped fuel the legend that Coca-Cola actually invented the image of the modern Santa Claus, decking him out in a red-and-white suit to promote the company colors or that at the very least, Coca-Cola chose to promote the red-and-white version of Santa Claus over a variety of competing Santa figures in order to establish it as the accepted image of Santa Claus.

This legend is not true. Although some versions of the Santa Claus figure still had him attired in various colors of outfits past the beginning of the 20th century, the jolly, ruddy, sack-carrying Santa with a red suit and flowing white whiskers had become the standard image of Santa Claus by the 1920s, several years before Sundblom drew his first Santa illustration for Coca-Cola. As The New York Times reported on 27 November 1927:

A standardized Santa Claus appears to New York children. Height, weight, stature are almost exactly standardized, as are the red garments, the hood and the white whiskers. The pack full of toys, ruddy cheeks and nose, bushy eyebrows and a jolly, paunchy effect are also inevitable parts of the requisite make-up.

It's simply mind-boggling that at the beginning the 21st century, historians are still egregiously perpetuating inaccurate information like the following:

So complete was the colonization of Christmas that Coke's Santa had elbowed aside all comers by the 1940s. He was the Santa of the 1947 movie *Miracle on 34th Street* just as he is the Santa of the recent film *The Santa Clause*. He is the Santa on Hallmark cards, he is the Santa riding the Norelco shaver each Christmas season, he is the department-

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store Santa, and he is even the Salvation Army Santa!

As we just pointed out above, the modern Santa had "elbowed aside all comers" long before the 1940s, and well before Coca-Cola co-opted him as their wintertime advertising symbol. And we're at a loss to understand how anyone could have recognized the Santa of *Miracle on 34th Street*, a BLACK-AND-WHITE film, as the red-and-white Coca-Cola Santa.

All this isn't to say that Coca-Cola didn't have anything to do with cementing that image of Santa Claus in the public consciousness. The Santa image may have been standardized before Coca-Cola adopted it for their advertisements, but Coca-Cola had a great deal to do with establishing Santa Claus as a ubiquitous Christmas figure in America at a time when the holiday was still making the transition from a religious observance to a largely secular and highly commercial celebration. In an era before color television (or commercial television of any kind), color films, and the widespread use of color in newspapers, it was Coca-Cola's magazine advertisements, billboards, and point-of-sale store displays that exposed nearly everyone in America to the modern Santa Claus image. Coca-Cola certainly helped make Santa Claus one of the most popular men in America, but they didn't invent him.