

A short history of a jolly fat guy

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He comes but once a year on his nocturnal flight to spread cheer and joy to the world.

Florida Weekly has it on good authority that his flight plan has been filed and he has clearance right into Southwest Florida.

So, whether you call him St. Nicholas, Father Christmas, Sinterklaas or just plain Santa, the jolly old man with his pack full of goodies will be tramping on roofs come

Christmas eve.

Yet the history of Old Saint Nick is as diverse and multicolored as the melting pot we call America.

Santa's origins go back to the fourth century when an Orthodox Turkish bishop became well-known for his generosity, especially to children. Years later, St. Nicholas of Myra was hailed as the patron saint of children and orphans. Even thieves prayed to the compassionate saint for guidance and protection.

The date of his death, Dec. 6, came to be celebrated as the beginning of the medieval Christmas season and the Roman Catholic Church declared it his feast day.

As time went on, adults began to dress in bishop's clothing, carrying a staff to emulate the good-natured St. Nicholas. They paraded from house to house, asking if the children had been good. Sweets and trinkets were the rewards.

In the 16th century, after the Protestant Reformation, the veneration of Catholic saints was for-

bidden. But people had become used to the annual visit of the gift-giving saint and they didn't want to lose the meaning he gave to the holiday.

Although the holiday now took on a nonreligious form, it was still a time for compassion.

In some countries, St. Nicholas Day and Christmas were merged into one celebration that reflected the generous nature of the season.

In England, he appeared as Father Christmas, in France he's known as Pere Noel, and in Germany he's Weihnachtsmann.

Santa's American history began with the first immigrants to the New World.

Scandinavians brought their gift-giving elves, the Germans gave us Christkindle (meaning Christ Child), who accompanied St. Nicholas on his annual rounds.

In the 17th century, the Dutch introduced Sinterklaas (meaning St. Nicholas) to the colonies. Many English-speaking children had trouble pronouncing the name and it evolved into today's Santa Claus.

Washington Irving described Santa Claus as a jolly Dutchman who smoked a long-stem clay pipe and wore baggy breeches. He would bound over the treetops in a horse-drawn wagon, dropping gifts down the chimneys of his favorites. That was in 1809.

In 1822, Clement Clarke Moore penned the immortal "A Visit From St. Nicholas," more commonly known as "The Night Before Christmas."

In his poem, Moore gave us the more traditional form of Santa Claus.

Although Moore's poem gave us a newer image of Santa, much of it was still left up to individual interpretation. Then in 1863, Thomas Nast, a German cartoonist for Harper's Weekly, published a drawing of a



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Artist Haddon Sundblom added the final touches to our modern image of Santa in 1931. Sundblom created an advertising campaign for the Coca-Cola Co. that firmly planted the current image in the minds of the public.

The Night Before Christmas

"He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack.
His eyes - how they twinkled! His dimples how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
And the beard of his chin was as white as the snow
The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
And the smoke it encircled his head like a wreath
He had a broad face and a little round belly,
That shook, when he laughed like a bowlful of jelly."

— Clement Clarke Moore,
"The Night Before Christmas"

portly Santa Claus in a red robe, with white hair and a long beard, smoking a long pipe.

Artist Haddon Sundblom added the final touches to our modern image of Santa in 1931. Sundblom created an advertising campaign for the Coca-Cola Co. that firmly planted the current image in the minds of the public.

The twinkle-eyed, cheery fellow is now recognizable to millions of children and adults throughout the world. ■

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