

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

December 21, 1950

Christmas in America

Most of us think of the celebration of Christmas as going back without a break to the year one. True it does go back a long way in many lands, But when the Christmas spirit first came to America, it received a severe setback.

Less than 100 years ago Christmas was not even a legal holiday in many parts of the United States. Massachusetts did not legalize it until 1856. In many churches it was not recognized as a feast day as late as the Civil War. It did not enter most Sunday Schools until the '60's, according to some historians.

The Dutch brought St. Nicholas to New York where he became the American Santa Claus. The hanging of the stocking came in with the story that once St. Nicholas had dropped a purse down the chimney and it had fallen into a stocking that happened to be hanging at the fire to dry. Germans brought the Christmas tree to Pennsylvania. They also brought a person in a fur coat named Pelnickel who, unlike Santa, carried whips for the bad children as well as gifts for the good ones.

In the South, Christmas had a warmer welcome from the start. Captain John Smith celebrated it with the Indians in Virginia. In Slavery days an old Indian custom showed up. The Negroes like the English servants were given extraordinary liberties. For weeks, much of their work was suspended and they were allowed to go visiting.

In Missouri, the "Lord of Misrule" crops up again in the "schoolmaster's riot" when pupils threw their schoolteacher out of the room. In South Carolina, firecrackers became part of the Christmas celebration. At Mt. Vernon, soon after the Revolution, there were magnificent Christmas dinners presided over by the Washingtons.

Finally the children began to ask for Christmas. In 1822, Clement Moore's famous poem, "Twas the night before Christmas" swept the country, making Santa Claus real to millions of children. The English admit that America introduced Santa Claus to them.

The Saint Nicholas of Moore's poem made Santa easy to understand. In it he is elf-size (like the Little People of the fairy tales) so that he could slip down a chimney without much trouble. The full-sizes Santas seen in

department stores, are more puzzling, especially to children living in cities and in apartment houses.

America has made up for her slowness about Christmas. Nowhere in the world today is the celebration happier or more abundant. We do not care what happened in England in the sixteenth century. It does not matter to us that holly, mistletoe, yule logs, feasting were part of Druid or other pagan festivals. Because mistletoe once hung over doorways where greetings were given to long absent friends, it is good today. We have taken the Christmases of the world and united them. In our homes and churches can be found the trees of Germany, the creches of France, the Italian Bambino and presipio. On our walls are the greens of England and Scandanavia. We have given Santa Claus to a large part of the world. We have invented the community tree and carols are sung on the air waves all day.

Perhaps we can bring for the New Year of 1951 to a troubled world a sense of Peace and Good Will Toward Men.

The first American Christmas card appeared in 1875. It was the work of a reformed chromo painter named Louis Prang. As religious subjects were tabu until the 20th century, birds, flowers, pretty girls, and pottery were the stock in trade of the early Christmas cards in America.

There are many historical accounts of Christmas trees. The first description that we find is in "The Nut Cracker," a fairy tale by Fouque and Hoffman. It has been said that the marriage of Queen Victoria to a German prince led to the introduction of the tree into England, but that is certainly not true for the custom was introduced in England long before and trees were used in England before the 17th century.

Little Dutch children were taught to put their wooden shoes by the fire on Christmas Eve because Santa Claus would leave no gifts unless he saw shoes all in a row.

Holly is said to symbolize the crown of thorns and the red berries are like drops of blood. Mistletoe comes down to us straight from the Druids of ancient Briton who celebrated the great feast at the time of the winter solstice. The idea that mistletoe brought happiness to those it covered, may have been the reason for the custom of using it in decoration. The Scandanavians gave us the yule log in their feast of Juul when a great fire was kindled in honor of Thor. It is a custom to save

a brand from each year's Christmas fire to light the next one.

Merry Christmas!