

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Origin Of Santa Claus

"Santa Claus" with prancing reindeer and sleigh was pictured for the first time in America - or anywhere else - in 1821 when he made his debut in a colorful little booklet, "The Children's Friend."

This early booklet, now exceedingly rare with only two copies known to exist, is reproduced in a special color portfolio in the December 1960 issue "American Heritage." The story is written by Duncan Emrich, formerly chief of Folklore Section at the Library of Congress. He was, when the article was published, Cultural Affairs Officer at the American Consulate General in Calcutta, India.

The name "Santa Claus" was first introduced into America by Washington Irving in 1809, 12 years before "The Children's Friend", made its appearance according to American Heritage." Irving's "Knickerbocker Holiday" contained 25 references to Santa Claus or St. Nicholas.

The gift giver, however was still a figure of the church, as was his earliest ancestor, St. Ever, was still a figure Nicholas of Patara in Asia Minor. A decade later "Santa Claus" seems to have become disassociated from the Santa Claus that had acquired a reindeer which he drove with much delight over chimney tops and tracks of snow.

If it had not been for Clement Moore, however, who apparently drew inspiration for "Dasher, Dancer, Donder, Blitzen, and friends from "The Children's Friend", the magazine points out, the sleigh, reindeer, and perhaps even Santa himself might have quickly expired.

Moore's poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas" or as it is widely known, "The Night Before Christmas," used several sources: St. Nicholas came from Irving and resembled the fat, Jolly Dutch burgher with his white beard, red coat, white leather belt and leather boots, and from "The Children's Friend" came from reindeer to which were added seven more to make up the immortal eight.

Moore's poem quickly took hold in this country. By 1891 even President Harrison announced that he planned to dress up as Santa Claus for his children. What's more he urged every American, father to do likewise.

Accompanying the American Heritage reproduction of the early booklet is a full story of the evolution of Santa Claus from a little known, Near Eastern Saint into the jolly, secular, Christmas gift-giver we know today.

The editor of American Heritage writes: "In 1821 there appeared in New York a small juvenile called "The Children's Friend" which contained eight quatrains devoted to "Santaclaus," who it exhibited riding in a sleigh drawn by exactly one prancing reindeer. So far as we know this was the first reference to the reindeer and sleigh now associated with Santa Claus.

They are both purely American inventions, and never existed in any European tradition. Only two copies of "The Children's Friend" are known to exist, one of the American Antiquarian Society, and the other was loaned to American Heritage by its owner, Mary Cable.

Both the sleigh and the reindeer, and even Santa himself - might have quickly expired If it had not been for Clement C. Moore, an Episcopal clergyman in New York City and son of the Bishop of New York.

In the year 1822, at Christmas season, Moore wrote a poem for his children. The poem was "A Visit from St. Nicholas," or, as it is widely known now, "The Night Before Christmas." At first Moore thought the poem below his dignity and would not acknowledge authorship of it until 1837 when it was published in a compilation of local poetry, according to the story in American Heritage.