

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS

The spirit of merry-making and the giving of presents which characterizes our Christmas have their origins in the Roman feast called the Saturnalia. This was a festival in honor of the God Saturn. It began about the middle of December and was made the occasion for general rejoicing and the exchanging of gifts. Almost any society known to us throughout history has had a festive celebration during the winter solstice. Consequently, many customs have come down to us through the ages.

The use of mistletoe dates back to the time of the Druids, who hung twigs of it above the doors of their dwellings as emblems of good luck. It was regarded as a sacred plant and was never allowed to touch the ground, hence the reason for hanging it even today. The Druids name for mistletoe meant "heal all". The origin of kissing under the mistletoe is generally attributed to the ancient Scandinavians where it symbolized that the goddess of love and marriage will never permit lovers to be harmed.

The ancient Egyptians, Hindus, Persians and many other nations celebrated religious festivals during the month of December and it was customary with all of them to deck their houses with greens and with garlands. The modern evergreen and trimmings help make the indoor scene like that of the forest sanctuaries of olden days. The custom of decorating Christmas trees is said to have come from Germany. At one time trees were decorated outdoors with voluntary offerings to the god of fire. Evergreen twigs are still used for trimmings and decorations because of the old superstition that forest elves and fairies came into the house with the evergreen and freed the inhabitants from harm. Evergreen sheltered these spirit beings outdoors during inclement weather.

The Norsemen celebrated their Yule feast during the latter part of December in honor of the chief god Woden. The principal feature of this festival was the burning of the great log. Therefore, to this day the Yule Log is a familiar feature of Christmas celebration among many people in England. It was perhaps, the Norsemen who first brought the evergreen tree into the house. It was to them a symbol of their god by reason of its vitality and perpetual vigor.

Santa Clause is none other than Saint Nicholas, a Bishop who lived at Myra, in Asia Minor during the fourth century. Bishop Nicholas distributed gifts to the poor and sweets to the children. The modern equivalent is good cheer, goodwill and the joy of children who ask him to fill their Christmas



stockings with gifts.

The burning of candles at Christmastide is another custom derived from the Roman Saturnalia. Not only were candles used for the purpose of illumination during the festival, but they were also exchanged as gifts in token of cheerfulness and good health. It is also probably that the employment of candles was derived from the Jewish Feast of the Dedication which was held about the same time of the year as the Saturnalia. The burning of the candles was one of the incidents of that feast.

Christmas has not always been celebrated on December 25. Prior to the third century it was celebrated at various times. In 1650 the Puritans in Massachusetts banned Christmas, believing that the frivolity and feasting were too closely associated with pagan rituals. If only the Puritans could see our tacky decorations and blinking lights outlining houses, silly parties and excessive drinking and commercialization of Christmas which is not only looked forward to by the merchant, but also the consumer! Surely the one thing we can ask is "God bless us all, everyone."