

## Revisit lesser-known Christmas traditions



Wassail is an ancient spirited beverage that was brought house-to-house with the goal of spreading Christmas cheer.

Christmas celebrants participate in many different traditions year after year, but some may not fully understand the meaning behind such activities. A Christian holiday, Christmas did not originate with all activities centralized to the church. In fact, many of the traditions people hold dear have pagan roots, which were adapted as Christmas celebrations evolved.

People who hang mistletoe in doorways may be surprised to learn that this tradition dates back to the ancient Druids. The Druids believed mistletoe possessed mystical powers that brought good luck to the household and warded off evil spirits.

Evergreen trees are now associated with Christmas trees, but evergreen boughs were once used to decorate homes during the winter solstice to help people envision the spring to come. Christians often look at evergreen trees as a sign of everlasting life and their relationship with God.

However, while many Christmas traditions continue to be an integral part of annual celebrations, there are some

customs that have fallen out of favor. Although these traditions may no longer be widely practiced, anyone can revive them and make them part of their holiday celebrations.

Wassailing is a custom that has ancient origins and is not as popular today as it once was. "Wassail" comes from the Anglo-Saxon phrase "waes hael," which means, "good health." Wassail is a drink made of mulled ale, spices and other ingredients. To go wassailing meant to travel door-to-door singing and offering a drink from a wassail bowl in exchange for gifts. Wassailing has been mentioned in certain Christmas carols, including "We Wish You a Merry Christmas."

Largely an English tradition, wassailing was brought to America by British settlers. January 17th, the old Twelfth Night, is the traditional date for wassailing. Although wassailing has largely fallen by the wayside, increased interest in ales and craft brewing may help revitalize this Christmas tradition, which can inspire community spirit.

Gift-giving with fruit cake is another tradition that has been

much maligned and does not enjoy the same popularity that it once did. Fruit cake is a cake made with chopped candied fruit, nuts and spices and is occasionally soaked in spirits. Fruit cakes have been enjoyed all over the world, but Americans may never have embraced the Christmas fruit cake tradition as much as those from other countries. However, with the right recipe and an open mind, it may be possible to resurrect the fruit cake tradition once again.

Mummers plays are another British tradition that arrived in North America with settlers but has largely fallen by the wayside. Mummers plays involved miming folk dramas, and the plays were commonplace around the holiday season. Celebrants may want to research such dramas and include them in this year's festivities to liven up celebrations even more.

Traditions passed on through the years help make Christmas a favorite time of celebration. People may want to explore the less popular traditions today and once again make them interesting parts of this year's festivities.

## The history of Christmas stockings



Just when the excitement of opening presents abates after the last of the packages under the Christmas tree have been torn open, children and adults alike may discover that there are more treats to be had nestled inside of stockings hung on the mantle.

The hanging of Christmas stockings is a tradition with an extensive history. Several legends attribute the hanging of stockings to different people or events. Here is a look at some of the stories that have made Christmas stockings so popular.

### St. Nicholas Day

Rather than hanging stockings on Christmas, many countries celebrate Saint Nicholas Day on December 6, and this is when stockings are proudly left out for treats. The small, inexpensive trinkets are later unwrapped and enjoyed on Christmas Day.

### Dutch heritage

One tradition says that, in 16th century Holland, children kept their clogs filled with straw in front of the hearth for Santa's reindeer to find. They also left treats for Santa Claus. In return, Santa would leave gifts in the clogs. Over time, stockings were swapped out for clogs.

### Merchant's family story

A popular tale tells the story of a merchant, his wife and three daughters. After the wife falls ill and dies, the man becomes devastated and squanders all of his wealth on frivolous things to mask his sadness. When it comes time for the daughters to marry, the man does not have money for a dowry. St. Nicholas hears of the plight and knows the man would be too proud to accept charity. Therefore, St. Nicholas anonymously tosses three bags of gold coins down the chimney. The man's daugh-

ters had done the laundry prior and left their stockings hanging by the fireplace to dry. The gold landed in the stockings, thus starting the Christmas stocking tradition.

### Italian good witch

One stocking story does not attribute the tradition to Santa, but to a kind-hearted Italian witch named "La Befana." La Befana arrives on a broomstick the night of January 5 and fills the stockings of good children with sweet treats and toys. Bad children are awarded lumps of coal. La Befana is also credited with being the old woman who the wise men ask for directions to Christ's manger in the Christ child's story. After turning down an offer to accompany them, La Befana later carried gifts in search of Christ.

Christmas stockings have become part of holiday traditions, and this beloved tradition has its own unique history.

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