



Christmas History, Tradition & Symbols

The History of Christmas Stockings

The hanging of stockings by the fireplace mantle (also spelled *mantel*), is a familiar Christmas custom. Those with homes lacking fireplaces may hang Christmas stockings from bedposts, doorknobs, windowsills, staircases and other areas. When Santa Claus arrives on Christmas Eve, he fills the stockings with small treats and gifts. While there is no definitive account that completely explains this tradition, several legends may help to illustrate how the custom of hanging Christmas stockings arose.

In the first legend, St. Nicholas of Myra, believed to be the inspiration for Santa Claus, is traveling through a small village when he learns of the plight of a merchant and his daughters. In one popular version of the story, the once wealthy merchant has fallen on difficult times and is worried for the future of his three beautiful daughters. Unable to afford dowries ~ money or property brought by a wife to her husband at marriage ~ for the girls, the three young women have no prospects for wedlock and may be subject to lives of shame.

Upon hearing of this predicament, St. Nicholas set forth to secretly help the proud merchant, knowing he would not accept an outright gift of charity. Riding his majestic white horse by the merchant's house one night, St. Nicholas tossed three bags of gold coins down the home's chimney. The bags were fortuitously captured in the girls' stockings, which had been hung by the fireplace mantle to dry. When the gold coins were discovered the next morning, the merchant and his daughters rejoiced. The young women went on to make advantageous marriages and all lived happily ever after. After tellings of the account spread, children began hanging their stockings by the fireplace, in hopes that they too would receive gifts from St. Nicholas.

Another explanation for the tradition of Christmas stockings may be found in Dutch lore. In Holland, 'Sinterklaas' arrives on a ship from Spain with his assistant 'Zwarte Piet' or Black Pete. Upon disembarking, they travel the country with Sinterklaas upon his noble white steed and Zwarte Piet riding a mule. Dutch children would leave treats of carrots and hay in their clogs, or wooden shoes, for the horse and mule and Sinterklaas would in turn fill the shoes with small gifts for the children after the horse and mule had enjoyed the treats.

When Dutch settlers immigrated to America, they brought many of their traditions with them. Over time, Sinterklaas came to be known as Santa Claus, and it is quite possible that wooden clogs were eventually replaced by stockings.

In any event, the habit of hanging of Christmas stockings, with the expectation they will be filled with small gifts from Santa, is a tradition now enjoyed by countless children the world over.

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