

"I'm dreaming of a White Christmas" — these words from the song made famous by Bing Crosby have become a symbol of American identification with this most festive of holiday seasons. But the Christmas that Americans celebrate today complete with Christmas carols, cards, presents, trees, and Santa Claus everywhere, is only a little more than a hundred years old. Before 1850, many U.S. citizens did not dream of Christmas at all—not until it promised to help unite the peoples of the North and South United States after the American Civil War.

In colonial times, Americans of different religious faiths and national origins attempted<sup>1</sup> to ignore Christmas because of their puritanical beliefs. The only Americans who really celebrated the holiday were Virginia planters, who took the occasion to feast, dance, gamble<sup>2</sup>, hunt, and make personal visits, since they believed these were old Christmas customs practiced in English manors<sup>3</sup>.

The fast change of lifestyle in the U.S. brought about by the Civil War, urbanization, and industrialization soon made people start to long for<sup>4</sup> "the good old days". The development of an American Christmas at this time helped the nation to make sense out of the confusions they



## CHRISTMAS IN 19th-CENTURY AMERICA

were then experiencing<sup>5</sup>, creating a sense of community and brotherhood among the people. It provided Americans with a feeling of family unity, peace, and goodwill.

### TREE MADNESS

By the 1850's, Americans had fallen in love with the German custom of keeping a tree in their house at Christmas time. Some Americans had seen Christmas trees for the first time when they toured Germany or in the homes of German-Americans, and it took little time for the custom to take root<sup>6</sup> in the New World. By 1900, one American in five was estimated to have a Christmas tree at home.

At first, home-made decorations such as nuts, popcorn, fruit, and candies adorned<sup>7</sup>

the trees. Later, however, tree decoration became big business as American businessmen began to import large quantities of ornaments from Germany. One advertisement declared that "so many charming little ornaments can now be bought ready to decorate Christmas trees that it seems a waste of time to make them at home".

### CARD MADNESS

R.H. Pease distributed the first American-made Christmas card in the early 1850's, which consisted of a family scene surrounded by pictures of Santa, reindeer<sup>8</sup>, dancers, Christmas presents, and holiday foods. Louis Prang expanded the sending of cards to a grander scale. By 1870, he owned two-thirds of the steam

presses in America and had perfected the color printing process. In 1875, he added Christmas greetings to his cards, which proved to be such a success that he could not meet demand<sup>9</sup>.

In a hurried and mobile nation such as the U.S., more and more Americans started writing cards instead of sending Christmas letters or making holiday visits. One postal official complained in 1882, "I thought last year would be the end of the Christmas card mania, but I don't think so now. Four years ago a Christmas card was a rare thing".

### GIFT MADNESS

Gifts had played a relatively modest role in Christmases of the past, but in the

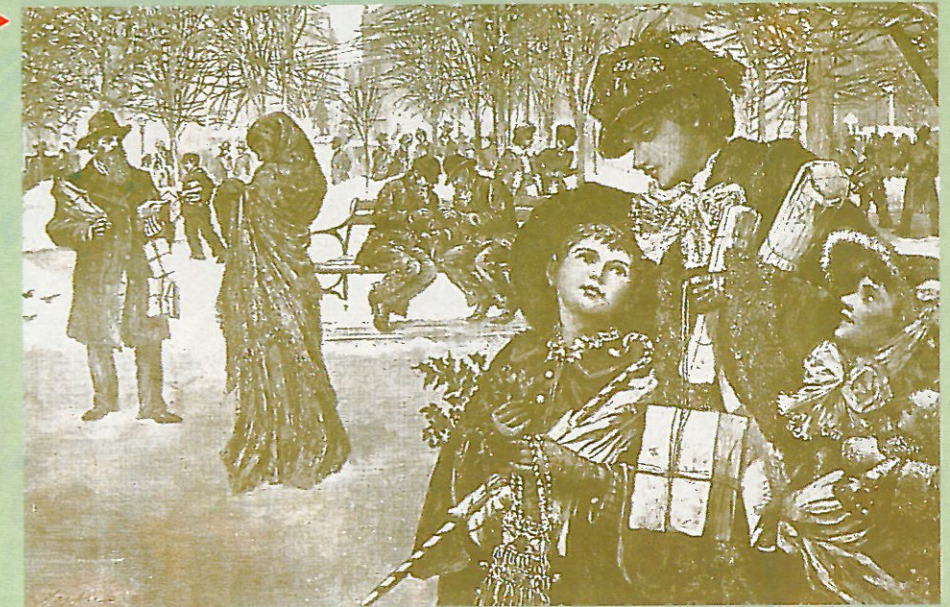
Christmas shopping in New York, 1884.

1870's and 1880's Christmas gift-giving blossomed<sup>10</sup> similarly as with Christmas trees and cards. In addition, gifts of charity offered symbolic solutions<sup>11</sup> to the social problems of extreme economic inequality between the rich and the poor. Today, Christmas gift-giving has become the single-most important element of the U. S. consumer economy.

Originally, gifts were given unwrapped<sup>12</sup>, but later people began to realize that a present hidden in fancy paper and ribbons dramatized the whole act of gift-giving into something bigger than it really was. In fact, gift-giving started to take on more and more significance as one American magazine commented: "Love is the moral of Christmas... What are gifts but the proof and signs of love?"<sup>13</sup>

### SANTA MADNESS

Santa Claus first appeared<sup>14</sup> in semi-modern form in the 1820's in Clement Moore's *An Account of a Visit from Saint Nicholas*. He supplied Santa with eight reindeer<sup>14</sup> to pull his sleigh<sup>14</sup>, and Thomas



Nast later gave him a workshop and record books to keep track of children's behavior<sup>15</sup>. Nast also dressed him in red, gave him a home and wife at the North Pole, and provided him with elves<sup>16</sup> to help him make presents.

All in all, Santa, his family, and all his helpers presented a very romantic vision of American capitalism complete with ideal labor conditions (no complaining worker elves), effective production (toys perfectly suited to the wishes of all children) and efficient distribution (through the chimneys of all houses).

So powerful a symbol did Santa become, that a number of writers and preachers<sup>17</sup> worried that he was a substitute and rival to Jesus Christ! An evangelical magazine supported this fear with a report in 1906 that one little girl, when told that Santa Claus did not exist, refused to continue attending church school. She said, "Likely as not, this Jesus Christ business will turn out just like Santa Claus".

In 1897, young Virginia O'Hanlon asked the editor of the *New York Sun* newspaper, "Is there a Santa Claus?" In reply, the editor said, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. Virginia, your little friends are wrong. Without Santa, there would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. Nobody can conceive or imagine<sup>18</sup> all the wonders that are unseen and unseeable in the world".



1 mali snahu; 2 hrať hazardné hry; 3 [mæna] vidieckych sídlach; 4 túžiť po; 5 nájsť zmysel vo vtedajšom zmatku, ktorý prežívali; 6 aby sa zakorenili; 7 zdobili; 8 sob; 9 nemohol uspokojiť dopyt; 10 prekvitalo; 11 darčeky dobročinnosti núkali symbolické riešenie; 12 nezabalené; 13 čím iným sú darčeky ak nie dôkazom a znakov lásky; 14 (slei) sane; 15 aby sa zaznamenávalo správanie detí; 16 zaopatril mu škriatkov; 17 kazateľov; 18 pochopiť či predstaviť si;