

AN 1880s CALIFORNIA CHRISTMAS

On 4 January 1855, five years after California joined the United States, the *Los Angeles Star* described the “Christmas and New Year’s festivals ... passing away with the usual accompaniments, *viz.*: Bull fights, bell ringing, firing of crackers, fiestas, and fandangos.” Three years later, the *Star* editorialized nostalgically about the family dinners, holly and ivy, and Christmas trees of “Christmas elsewhere.” It was another step in remaking Christmas from a centuries-old, weeks- or months-long public revel of feasting, dancing, and sports—based on the pagan winter festivals of Roman Saturnalia and Germanic Yule—to a decorous ritual of the middle-class home, spread by a rising mass media. With holly and ivy from the English, Christmas trees from the Germans, and Santa Claus from the Dutch, a wintry tableau invaded sunny California.



Santa Claus by Thomas Nast, 1872.

Literature Cheap paper and growing literacy spread new ideas quickly. Washington Irving introduced the Dutch version of Saint Nicholas to a wider audience in 1809 with his satirical *History of New-York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*. In 1823 Irving’s friend Clement Clarke Moore published *A Visit from Saint Nicholas* in a Troy, New York newspaper, solidifying the image of a

jolly, pipe-smoking elf rather than the historical bishop. Thomas Nast’s drawings in New York-based *Harper’s Weekly* from 1863 gave us Santa’s modern icon.

The first Christmas novella is 1816’s *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* by the German E. T. A. Hoffmann (a Lutheran), introducing the Christmas tree to literature. Its 1844 French translation by Dumas (Catholic) inspired the 1892 ballet by Tchaikovsky (Orthodox), which became a Christmas staple only in 1944 when revived by San Francisco Ballet director William Christensen (Mormon).

Washington Irving moved to England in 1815 and described the Old English country Christmas—including ghost stories round the fire—to Americans in five essays published *New Year’s Day*, 1820. Charles Dickens’ 1843 *A Christmas Carol* was an actual ghost story that transformed a Christmas Past of feasts and games to a day of moral redemption—and started a vogue for annual Christmas stories.

The Christmas Tree Used among German Americans, the Christmas tree suddenly became universal in the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1848 Queen Victoria and her German husband were shown with their family round a tabletop one in a woodcut in the *Illustrated London News*. In 1850 the picture was altered to represent an ordinary upper-middle-class family and published in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, America’s premier publication. By 1851 the first Christmas tree lot had sprung up in Manhattan. Where the English had to import the trees, America had pines in abundance.

California also had conifers, though not of the kind back East. The 16 December 1885 *Alta California* mentions the “dock of the San Francisco and North Pacific Coast Railroad ... fragrant, with the odor of great stacks of Christmas trees and innumerable bunches of holly, which have been brought down from the redwoods near Howard’s Station” near Bodega Bay. Photographs of 1880s Christmas trees in the Oakland houses of amateur photographer William Letts Oliver seem to show Douglas fir and redwood (though there is an artificial one—with real candles—on the dining table in 1900). Dorothy Unangst Bilodeau, growing up in San Luis Obispo at the turn of the century, writes in *La Vista* (1971) of her father building a tree from cedar branches until her uncle brought a Monterey pine from Cambria. The ideal was not our modern bushy tree but one

with sparsely spaced branches to accommodate candles, lit briefly and carefully watched. (The first electric tree lights were used in 1882—by Thomas Edison’s business partner.) Decorations included toys for the children and rare glass balls, as well as painted nuts and pine cones, popcorn and cranberry strands, paper chains,



Christmas tree from Godey’s Lady’s Book, 1850

cornucopias of sweets, and other homemade trimmings. Bilodeau describes months making stars and moons from gold cigar-box linings and angels from faces in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* attached to tissue wings. Tinsel comes in around the turn of the century. A white sheet beneath the tree represented snow.

House Decorations The English decorated churches and houses with evergreens: not firs but holly, ivy, ilex, mistletoe, and rosemary. Irving mentions holly hung in house windows; Dickens, in shop windows. Irving describes family portraits and other interior

features garlanded with holly and ivy, as well as a quarrel between parson and sexton over whether Druidic mistletoe belongs in church.

A wreath hangs above a parlor door in an 1864 portrait of New York’s Blodgett family, made of holly rather than pine. But pine drapes the chimneypiece in Nast’s 1872 *Santa Claus*. Illustrations (if not photographs) of Christmas festoons of greenery exist; a pine-trimmed bannister is described in an Easton, Maryland newspaper in 1904, and the *Alta California* in 1908 reports San Francisco’s Bohemian Club decorating its ceiling with pine for a Yuletide gala.

Santa Claus/Saint Nicholas Washington Irving’s 1809 *Saint Nicholas* visits on the eve of his December 6 feast day; Moore in 1823 transfers him to Christmas Eve. Irving’s version has “a low, broad-brimmed hat, a huge pair of Flemish trunk hose, and a pipe”; rides over the tops of trees in a wagon; and drops presents down the



Christmas Tree, William Letts Oliver House, Oakland, CA, 1880s

chimney. Moore’s is dressed in fur, comes down the chimney, and sports a white beard and round belly. Both fill stockings.

In Susan Warner's 1850 novel *The Wide, Wide World* (the century's bestseller after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), two girls old enough to know that Santa Claus is "mamma, and grandpapa, and grandmamma, and aunt Sophia, and aunt Matilda" unpack their stockings and find a bunch of white grapes, horn of sugar plums, kid gloves, ball, pin cushion, Cologne water, and scissors, with raisins and almonds in the toe. Through much of the nineteenth century, adults were given gifts on New Year's Day.

Christmas Cards The first commercial Christmas card was ordered by Thomas Cole, who had helped introduce penny postage to England. In 1843, the same year *A Christmas Carol* was to be published, Cole ordered a thousand cards and sold what he didn't need personally in his London shop for sixpence each. A week's salary of Scrooge's clerk Bob Cratchit—15 shillings—would have allowed his family to buy and send 25 cards (factoring in postage).



The first Christmas card, with scenes of feasting and charity, 1843

In the daily *Alta California* in 1884, Sanborn, Vail & Co. advertised "The Only Artistic Christmas Cards of California Scenery." The next year, rival Snow & Co. advertised the liquidation of their whole stock of cards in a Christmas Eve reduction, an early postseason sale.

Carols In 1844 London's *Catholic Weekly Instructor* devoted an issue to Christmas history, tracing carols to Henry VII's Twelfth Night feasts but noting they "now exclusively enliven the industrious servant-maid and the humble laborer." The carol, however—adding sound to the sentimental Christmas experience—was already invading the middle class.



The first known image of Santa Claus descending a chimney with a sack of toys, published in the New York Mirror, January 1841. The image in Pepperman's 1871 Christmas advertisement in the San Luis Obispo Tribune appears to be based on this.

The origins of the secular "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" and religious "The First Noel" are lost in time. "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" is known in England by 1760 and is the only carol sung (for a hoped-for handout) in *A Christmas Carol*. "Deck the Halls"—an 1862 English translation by a Scotch musician of a Welsh New Year's song—was part of the century's academic folk revival.

Several carols were hymns that migrated out of the church as Christmas was transformed into a more spiritual holiday. Some did not come into their own till the right words and music were combined. "Joy to the World" was by the English Nonconformist hymnist Isaac Watts, but the music we know was added in America

in 1839. “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” has 1739 words by the Methodist Charles Wesley and 1840 music by the Jewish convert Felix Mendelssohn, joined by the Anglican organist William Cummings in 1855. “Oh Come, All Ye Faithful” appeared in Latin as “Adeste Fidelis” in 1751 and was translated into English by a Catholic priest in 1841.

“Silent Night,” a collaboration of an Austrian priest and church organist in 1816–18, was translated into English by a New York Episcopalian minister in 1859. “It Came upon a Midnight Clear,” the first wholly American carol, had 1849 words by a Massachusetts Unitarian pastor and 1850 music by a New York hymn composer. Even the 1857 “Jingle Bells” had a church origin: the Massachusetts music director of a Unitarian church in Savannah, Georgia, nostalgic for snow. It was originally performed at Thanksgiving.

Food Food has been a Christmas tradition much longer than anything else. Irving mentions mince pies on both sides of the Atlantic, but these would have contained shredded meat as well as suet and dried fruit. In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens goes through a catalogue of delicacies: turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, joints of meat, sucking-pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chestnuts, apples, oranges, pears, grapes, filberts, almonds, figs, raisins, French plums, twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch. Even the 1859 *Los Angeles Star* refers to “the inevitable and inseparable plum pudding,” further popularized by Dickens.

Commercialization The first Christmas ad in San Luis Obispo appeared in the *Tribune* in 1871. Advertising the Jewish merchant Max Pepperman’s store, it included a 54-line poem in which Santa Claus deputizes him to “dispense, / On due return of dollars and of cents,” toys to the girls and boys of San Luis, where “cheerful snow forgets to fall, / And ice responds not to the skaters call.” Pepperman also introduced the first image of Santa Claus to San Luis Obispo in 1874, reused by other advertisers in the *Tribune* in subsequent years. By the early 1880s, Christmas advertising had reached a peak unimaginable today. Ah Luis ran the same holiday ad for well over a year. In the 1883 season, the Jewish merchants Abraham Blochman, S. Gross, and E. Lasar were running Christmas ads, as well as the well-connected Anglo J. A. Goodrich. Lasar continued his for “A

Fine Display of Holiday Goods” through May, and Blochman’s banners were still announcing “Christmas is Coming!” in July.



The advertisement Ah Luis ran virtually every week in the San Luis Obispo Tribune from December 1881 to 1883

Nostalgia As long as people have written about Christmas, they have regarded it with nostalgia of times past or places distant. John Stow’s 1598 account of Christmas celebrations in *Survey of London* was about abandoned sports, feasts, and decorations. Dickens had his *Ghost of Christmas Past*, and Irving conjured a traditional English Christmas that was a fabrication from his research of old accounts.

In San Luis Obispo, the 23 December 1871 *Tribune* complained, “The observance of this holiday has greatly deteriorated in the United States within the last half century, and in many parts of the older states, Christmas has no significance beyond its gastronomic pleasures. ... In another century, if we continue to gather the questionable wisdom of unbelief in all things excepting the material ones of this world, Christmas will become a festival of the past, and the innocent pleasures of Santa Claus, the gift-laden tree, the chimney-hung stockings, and all the touching pastimes and customs that are still in vogue to a certain extent will be only known to the antiquary.” Most of those customs had been widely adopted only within that half century; 150 years later, there’s no sign of decline.

James Papp, The Jack House, San Luis Obispo, Christmas 2016

CHRISTMAS SUPPLEMENT: PEPPERMAN'S SANTA



To My Young Folks in San Luis

Great Santa Claus his missive thus doth send
To Pepperman, his tried and trusty friend:
Go thou into that part of my domain,
In California's land of gold and grain,
San Luis named, his chosen bishopruck,
(And go about it on the double-quick),
There have you my permission to dispense,
On due return of dollars and of cents,
To my young people, fair girls and bright boys,
Unending store of deft and beauteous Toys;
Dolls that can lisp out "mamma" and "papa,"
And could, if needed, finger the guitar;
Children of wood, who walk like flesh and blood,
Arks such as Noah used in the Great Flood;
Carts, Buggies, Phaetons, an endless train
Such as, once lost, will not be seen again.
Watches that twice a day, at least, are right,
Swords, Guns and Pistols, good for boyish fight.

Tools, Building Bricks, Boxes that hold a town,
And Jacks, in boxes, that go up and down.
Kaleidoscopes, whose bright an beauteous hues
Enchant the sense and drive away "the blues."
Whips, Tops, Drums, Balls and Bugles for the boys,
Fit to make music, or to make a noise;
Horses that go on rockers and on wheels,
And Lady Dolls with chignon and high heels;
Cups, Plates and Saucers from far-famed Cathay;
And Yankee notions from the Break of Day;
Chromos and Lithographs and Mouldings rare,
And Looking-Glasses for the infant fair;
Steamboats and Carriages and Railroad Cars,
And many kinds of Statuette and Vase;
Knives, not intended to cut youthful love,
And animals, from Elephant to Dove;
Helmets and Cradles, Birdcages and Baskets,
Card Cases, Necklaces and Jewel Caskets;
And let the Precious Metals there be seen,
Mixed with the Diamond's bright and glittering sheen,
In endless form of Bracelet and of Ring,
Of Button, Stud, of Earring and of Pin.
Let not the Ruby nor the Emerald pale,
The Jasper, Jet, nor Pearl nor Onyx fail,
To lend their charms my CHRISTMAS TREE to grace,
In that far off but still delightful place;
For there, though cheerful snow forgets to fall,
And ice responds not to the skaters call,
Yet mirth and ease live out the live-long day,
Eternal sunshine cheers the traveler's way,
And generous men and matrons join to plan
With my best friend and subject, Pepperman,
How best to pleasure every lad and lass,
And glad the heart of good SAINT NICHOLAS.
He will be there on Christmas Eve to see,
The young folks gather round his Happy Christmas Tree.

Poem published 1871, illustration 1874, in Pepperman's
Christmas advertisements in the *San Luis Obispo Tribune*