27 Winter Holiday Tradition Origins - mental_floss on YouTube (Ep. 39)

List Show
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Hi I'm John Green, welcome to my salon. This is Mental Floss.

1. And did you know Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer was originally created to be a free story-book given to department store shoppers? That's right - If you did your holiday shopping at Montgomery Ward department store in 1939, you'd get a Rudolph book along with your purchase. So, before he became a hit song in 1949, Rudolph was just a promotional tool! I wonder if that's why all the other reindeer called him sell-out.

And that's the first of many winter holiday, basically Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa, tradition origins that I am going to share with you today.

(Intro)

2. So the Christmas tree, of course, didn't start out as a religious tradition. An ancient annual celebration of the winter solstice often involved people bringing evergreen trees into their home because they represented all the plant-life that would return in the spring. The connection between evergreens and Christmas didn't really get started until the 16th century in Germany. And it took a long time for Americans to accept the tradition, but most Christmas celebrations involved trees by the 1890s.

3. Most believe that decorating the tree with ornaments comes from ancient Christmas plays, in which a tree would represent the tree of life. Apples were hung on the tree, which eventually were replaced by other edibles, and finally, the ornaments that we know today. Of course, any student of the Bible will know that apples have been wrongly maligned and that the fruit in the tree of life is never named.

4. Then there's the famous tree of Rockefeller Center in New York City. It has been a tradition since 1931, when a group of construction workers put a tree on their construction site. Today, of course, the lighting of the Rockefeller Christmas Tree is known to New Yorkers as one of those annoying days when there are lots of tourists.

5. Who was the first person to put lights on a Christmas tree? Possibly Martin Luther - although at the time it was actually candles.

6. Speaking of candles, Jewish people believe that God gave Moses instructions for the original menorah. Hanukkah is the celebration of the menorah at the Jewish temple of Jerusalem which they believe burned for 8 nights, rather than the 1 night the oil should have provided. I know that as miracles go, that's a relatively small one, but it was easier to be astonished back then - they hadn't seen Transformers 3, which is truly, astonishingly bad.

7. The Menorah actually inspired the founder of Kwanzaa, Dr. Maulana Karenga. Similar to Hanukkah celebrations, Kwanzaa involves lighting 7 candles on a kinara over the course of a week. 'Kinara' means candle-holder in Swahili, and in this case the candles are meant to symbolize the 7 principles of African heritage.

8. The name 'Kwanzaa' also comes from Swahili, in which 'matunda ya kwanza' means first fruit. And I will remind you - mispronouncing things is my thing. Karenga was inspired by the first fruit festivals that took place in Africa, leading him to create his celebration of African-American culture in 1966.

9. What's the connection between holly and the holly-days? Meredith! I told you no puns! Anyway, holly was considered a powerful object long before it had anything to do with the winter holidays. In fact some ancient Europeans thought it even had the ability to protect places from lightning. But Christians probably took this tradition from the Romans, who hung holly during the festival of Saturnalia.

10. Speaking of Saturnalia, that festival gave us a lot of the Christmas traditions that we know today. For example, the custom of gift-giving. And then in the 4th Century, Pope Julius the 1st chose December 25th to celebrate the birth of Christ so that the celebration would compete with Saturnalia while also stealing many of its traditions

11. Once the date was set as December 25th, the 4th century also saw the emergence of carols, which started out a Church-endorsed Latin hymns. Whereas today, of course, Christmas caroling marks the only socially acceptable occasion for strangers to come into your home and threaten to deck your halls.

12. Carols didn't really become beloved - I mean, if you consider them beloved - until St. Francis of Assisi created the first nativity scene in 1223. The story goes that he set up a manger along with a real life ox and donkey and then preached next to it. The tradition took off and he encouraged celebration in singing to occur in peoples' native languages, rather than just Latin - you know, which did lose the popularity of carols. Wait did someone say donkey? Here's one wearing a tutu that was created by Meredith's mother!

13. There was a blessed moment early in the history of the United States, when carols died down because puritans did not believe in them. But then, they made a comeback in the 1800s and it looks like they're here to stay. And when I say here to stay mean that there are radio channels devoted entirely to them that begin after Halloween and end in mid-January. So since you're already probably sick of carols - I know I am - I'm just gonna talk about two.

14. Jingle Bells was written in the 1850s by James Lord Pierpont, and was originally a Thanksgiving song. But it quickly became a Christmas song. It is actually the first song that was ever broadcasted from space. In 1965, the crew of the Gemini VI played *Jingle Bells* on smuggled instruments. It's worth a listen so click the rocket ship on the wall behind me to listen to the song.

15. Irving Berlin, the songwriter who gave us *God Bless America* also wrote *White Christmas*. And when he wrote the song in 1942, he considered the song a quote 'throwaway'. But according to the Guinness Book of World Records, Bing Crosby's version of *White Christmas* is the best-selling song of all time. Wait Meredith - has that stat been updated since the release of *Baby*?

16. Candy Canes have been around since the 1670s. Apparently, a German choir director passed sugar sticks out to children in the congregation to minimize noise during Mass. To connect them to religion, the sticks were curved over at the top to represent shepherd's crooks.

17. One very common misconception about Christmas is that the modern incarnation of Santa Claus comes from a 1930s Coca-Cola Company add campaign. Many people think that Santa is typically depicted wearing red and white because those are the Coke colors. But it's not true! In fact, Santa wearing red became the standard more and more throughout the early 1900s, which then continued as the century went on.

18. All right have to ask Tumblr users to take a deep breath before I start this one. Mistletoe is an important object due to the Norse myth of Balder, who was a brother of Thor. There was a prophecy that he would be killed, so his mother made all the objects in the world vow to leave him alone. But she didn't ask mistletoe! And then Loki shot Balder with a spear made of mistletoe, so now we kiss under it to honor Balder. I'm sorry, is Balder played by Tom Hiddleston? I don't think so. Let's do something to honor Loki.

19. All right Mark, by the time we finish this it's gonna be New

Year's. We gotta speed up. Okay Wreaths date back to the ancient Greeks, Romans and Etruscans, but the Lutherans started to associate them with the holiday during the 16th century in Germany - just like the Christmas tree.

20. Latkes and other fried foods on Hanukkah represent the oil that was said to leave the original menorah candles burning for eight days and also because fried foods are delicious. Potato Latkes, by the way, became a thing associated with Hanukkah in the mid-1800s.

21. The Yule Log in a Loop on TV started in 1966, when New York broadcaster WPIX had nothing scheduled for an hour and a half on TV in the winter.

22. Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, came after the early Anglican churches giving their congregations Advent donations to the poor on that day or from the holiday on the same day in which the upper class gave presents to their servants. In 1871, it became a national holiday in England.

23. The abbreviation X-Mas isn't new at all. And it should not offend those who think it removes the 'Christ' from Christmas. The X is a reference to the Greek letter 'x' which is pronounced 'chi' and is the first letter in the word for Christ.

24. Christmas cookies have been around since medieval Europe. But North American kids have been leaving cookies and milk for Santa since around the 1930s. Many believe in fact, that this had something to do with the Great Depression, and teaching naughty kids to be more generous.

25. The first holiday movies date back to 1897, with short films like *Santa Claus Filling Stockings* and *Visit of St. Nicholas*. Of course, the genre was eventually perfected by Tim Allen in *The Santa Clause* and more importantly, *The Santa Clause part 2*. Mark just informed me that there is, in fact, a third Santa Clause movie, so I know what I'm doing after this video is over!

26. Practising Judaism was outlawed by the Greeks during the 2nd century so Jewish people invented the dreidel to mask the fact that they were secretly studying the Torah, which is why it's still played today.

27. And lastly we return to the salon so that I can share that it's believed that Hanukkah Gelt originated in Poland during the 17th century, where parents gave their children money to give to their teachers. Chocolate Gelt replaced money in the 1920s, when the Loft's candy company, started producing candy coins.

Thanks for watching Mental Floss here on YouTube which is made with the help of all of these nice people.

Every week, we endeavour to answer one of your mind-blowing questions. This week's question comes from Richard in Norman, who asks: Do batteries lose weight as they are discharged? Well Norman - or perhaps I should address the Richard inside of you. Regardless, the answer is no. The charge of the battery itself has no weight, so nothing is lost or gained as a battery is discharged.

Thanks again for watching! And don't forget to be awesome.