

# Christmas Traditions from Around the World

## A Few Memorable Traditions

By Mary Lyle, Director of Education

The one thing that made *Christmas Traditions from Around the World* at the Western Heritage Museum and Lea County Cowboy Hall of Fame so special was its focus on community and sharing. At this event, we invited people of different cultures to share their traditions with the public including decorations, food, and music. The food tables changed over the years, and we have enjoyed having the opportunity to learn about so many different cultures from practically every continent in the world represented.

All cultures celebrate the holiday season in their own way, but one thing they have in common is the sharing of traditional foods at these celebrations. We respond to food using all of our five senses: the color and appearance, the smell, the texture, the taste, and the sound (crunch or sizzle, for example) of our favorite foods are associated with childhood memories. We cherish recipes that have been handed down from one generation to another because they keep us connected to those who may no longer be with us.

Since we started *Christmas Traditions from Around the World*, we all have learned so much about different cultures, but more importantly, we have met some of the most wonderful people from our community. It has been a real pleasure for us at the Museum to provide opportunities for our community to gather and learn. I thank everyone who has volunteered in the past, and here's hoping that we will be able to be together again next year!

## A FEW FUN FACTS

### England

Victorian England has influenced many of English Christmas Traditions.

- The Christmas Tree was popularized by Queen Victoria and her husband Prince Albert, it was a tradition imported from Germany, Prince Albert's homeland.
- Christmas cards were invented around 1841 by Sir Henry Coleridge, who hoped to avoid writing personal greetings to his many friends at the holiday.

### Germany

Many German Traditions, which can be traced back to the Middle Ages, have been adopted in other countries.

- The Advent Calendar was first used by German Lutherans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- "Silent Night," probably the most popular Christmas Carol ever written, was composed by Father Joseph Mohr with music by Franz Gruber in 1816.

## **Mexico**

In Mexico, the Christmas season begins on December 12<sup>th</sup>, the Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint.

- Poinsettias are native to Mexico and given as Christmas flowers all over the world today. There are several legends about the plant. One says that a little girl brought it as an offering for the baby Jesus in her church nativity scene. Another claims that the flower looks like the star of Bethlehem.

## **Italy**

One of the most important traditions in Italy is midnight mass at St. Peter's Square in Vatican City. The faithful gather in the square to hear mass offered by the Pope over loudspeakers.

- The "Creche" or "Nativity Scene" was made popular by St. Francis of Assisi in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.
- The "Feast of the 7 Fishes" is held on Christmas Eve and is a Southern Italian tradition. The menu includes eel, salted cod, muscles, calamari, sardines, shrimp, and scallops.

## **Philippines**

As a legacy of the cultural mixing of Spanish and native Filipino cultures in the past, some Christmas traditions in the Philippines are similar to those practiced in many Latino countries.

- The Philippines has the longest Christmas season in the world beginning the countdown on September 1 with the singing of Christmas Carols.
- The "paról" represents the Star of Bethlehem. It is traditionally made out of bamboo and rice paper in the shape of a 5-pointed star and lit with a candle or lantern.

## **United States**

Because the United States is such a large and diverse country, many traditions we call our own originated elsewhere. There are, however, some that the United States can claim.

- "The Night Before Christmas" (originally "A Visit from St. Nicholas") was published in 1823. Written by poet Clement Clarke Moore, the poem is responsible for our modern image of Santa Claus as a plump and jolly magical man who entered homes through the chimney.
- Rudolf the Red Nose Reindeer was created in 1939 for Montgomery Ward by Robert May. The character appeared in a coloring book that the company gave away as a holiday promotion.

## **New Mexico**

We are proud of our unique New Mexican Christmas traditions. Many of these traditions were brought here by the Spanish and given a New Mexican flare influenced by the local Native American cultures.

- What we commonly call "Luminarias" or more properly "farolitos" (little fires) date back to the sixteenth century. In the villages of New Mexico lights were placed along the path leading to the church on Christmas Eve. Traditionally luminarias are made using a paper sack filled with a base of sand and a votive candle. They are lit at sunset on Christmas Eve.
- In 1989 the New Mexico Legislature adopted the Biscochito as the official state cookie.