

CHRISTMAS  
AROUND  
THE WORLD  
INFO PACKET



NAME \_\_\_\_\_

Many of the customs and traditions of Christmas as it is commonly celebrated in the United States actually originated elsewhere in the world. The U.S. is often called “The Melting Pot” due to becoming home for members of other cultures. They brought with them their cultural identities and contributed elements of those identities to our national whole. This unit will study the holiday traditions that have been brought to us by other countries.



## Austria

Austria celebrates Christmas for a whole month. Christmas begins on December 6<sup>th</sup> with the arrival of Saint Nicholas (Santa Klausen) and his companion Krampus, who is a devil. The children tell these two characters all their good deeds and bad deeds of the past year. Krampus carries a rod and raises it to strike the children. At that moment Saint Nicholas chases the children away. The children then promise to be “good” and Saint Nicholas gives them nuts, fruit, and candy.

Christmas trees are usually pine or fir. The parents decorate the trees with gold and silver garlands, cookies, **ornaments**, and lots of candles. The wrapped presents are spread out underneath the tree. The tree is then hidden behind a locked door. Legend has it that Christkind, a child-like person wearing white robes, a gold crown and big golden wings, helps decorate the tree.

Most homes display Advent Wreaths, and the Nativity Scene is the focal point in almost every home. Many of the pieces have been hand carved from wood and have been passed down through generations.

On Christmas Eve, the family enjoys a dinner of fried carp. The father then reads the Christkind story to the family. A ringing of a bell signals the family that it is time to see the tree for the first time. The door is unlocked and the family gathers around the tree to sing classical carols. The gifts are then opened and enjoyed.

At midnight on Christmas Eve the neighbor living the farthest away from the village lights a torch and walks to his closest neighbor’s house. Singing carols and carrying a manger, each neighbor joins the crowd of people with his or her own torch. The people then continue their walk into the village and are joined by other village people. They all walk to the steps of the church for a Christmas service.

December 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> are celebrated with family and friends. There is a lot of visiting and eating during these two days. Roast goose, ham, fruit cake, and Christmas sweets are served in many Austrian homes.

## Brazil

Brazilian people decorate their homes with the **traditional** Manger Scene, green eucalyptus leaves, and all sorts of red flowers. The Christmas trees are decorated with candles.

On Christmas Eve, December 24<sup>th</sup>, the family sets the meal out on the table, and then goes to Midnight **Mass**. The meal might be a roast pig, steamed fish pie, fried shrimp, turkey, desserts and champagne.

Brazilians leave the meal on the table so that the Holy Family can eat while they are at **Mass**.

Families in Brazil observe the white-gift Christmas. Each person brings a little food such as rice, potatoes, etc. wrapped in white paper which they lay on the manger scene in front of the church. This food is then distributed to poor families for their Christmas dinners. The family then returns home to a delicious meal after **Mass**.

After dinner the family sees the tree for the first time. The candles are lit and then Christmas carols are sung around the tree. The children then set out their shoes so that Papa Noel (Sao Nicolau) can come. He enters the homes on Christmas Eve through an open window. He leaves gifts in the shoes and also hides them all over the house.

On Christmas morning the children make breakfast for their parents and serve them their meal in bed. Then the children discover all that Papa Noel (Sao Nicolau) has left them.

Christmas is celebrated December 24<sup>th</sup> to January 6<sup>th</sup>. In Brazil it is summer season so many Christmas activities include boating, picnics, fireworks, open-air fiestas, poetry contests, balls, and **banquets**.

## Denmark

On Christmas Eve, December 24<sup>th</sup>, suet, bread, and the best sheaves of grain are attached to the end of poles and placed around the yards of farms and houses to feed the birds. The people believe that good crops will come to the farm if a lot of birds come to eat the food provided. Even all the farm animals receive large **portions** of food on this day. Musicians climb to the church belfry in the winter cold. They play four hymns, one each for the North, South, East, and West. This “blows in the **Yule**.”

A big bonfire is built outdoors. It is large enough to be seen inside the house. Candles in the home are also lit. This represents light, warmth, and friendship. A candle is also lit in the window. This means any stranger or traveler is welcome in their home for food or shelter.

The whole family attends church in the afternoon and then returns home for Christmas Eve dinner. The dinner begins with a rice pudding sprinkled with cinnamon. In one of the **portions** there is an almond. This **portion** is usually served to a child. The child getting the almond in his serving wins a surprise. Dinner is roast goose, stuffed with apples and prunes, served with red cabbage, potatoes, apple cake, Danish pastries, and other baked goods.

Behind locked doors a tree has been decorated with Danish flags, hearts, bells, and candles. When dinner is finished, the candles on the tree are lit. The family gathers around the tree to sing Christmas hymns. The gifts under the tree are then passed out.

Julnisse (Nisser) brings the Christmas gifts. He is a mischievous, gnome-like elf creature who lives in the lofts of old farm houses and watches over the animals all year. He is dressed in a gray, home-spun suit, red bonnet, long red stockings and white clogs. He has a long, white beard. He has a wife and many children, all of whom wear little red caps. Rice pudding is left outside the kitchen door for him to eat when bringing gifts to the home. As the children are opening gifts left by the Nisser, a knock at the door announces Santa Claus. He enters the house bringing even more gifts, and he stays for a friendly but short visit. The rest of the day is spent eating, sleeping, visiting, and entertaining.

Christmas plates began as a tradition in Denmark. Christmas cookies and fruits were given on beautiful plates to servants at Christmas time. The servants then hung the plates on the walls in their homes. This tradition soon became popular world-wide. The Christmas stamp was invented in Denmark by a Danish postmaster. The money made from selling the stamps was (and still is) used for charity. The **custom** is popular nation-wide.

### **Finland**

The Christmas tree is set up and decorated on Christmas Eve, December 24<sup>th</sup>. The tree is decorated with little apples, candy wrapped in colored tin foil, paper flags, decorated ginger-snap cookies, paper stars, cotton, tinsel, and lots of candles. From the ceiling just above the tree, the Finnish people make a "Heaven." This is created by hanging a net-like piece of fabric from which they have hung colored foil stars, silver bells, or any ornament that will reflect the candlelight.

The family goes to the sauna (bath house) and afterwards dresses in clean clothes. They then return home for the Christmas dinner. The dinner may be boiled codfish, porridge, boiled potatoes, cream sauce, cold ham, roast suckling pig, pickled herring, roasted ham, salted meat, mashed potatoes, red cabbage, carrots, cucumbers, rice or turnip pudding.

On Christmas Eve, after dinner, Father Christmas or Santa Claus visits in person with lots of his elves. He arrives at the Finnish home by a sleigh guided by reindeer through the snow all the way from Lapland. Santa's elves are usually dressed in brown "elf" shirts and brown pants that go only as far as the elf's knees. The elves wear little red stockings and little red "elf-like" hats. Father Christmas or Santa Claus delivers the Christmas gifts personally to the children.

On Christmas Day, December 25<sup>th</sup>, the family goes to church early in the morning. The rest of the day is for visiting relatives and family friends.

Saint Stephen's Day on December 26<sup>th</sup> is celebrated by the Finnish people with horse races, dances, visiting, and eating more delicious Christmas food dishes.

### **France**

A few days before Christmas the family decorates the Christmas tree with stars, candles, lights, and tinsel. The first French Christmas trees were decorated with colored, artificial roses, apples, sugar and painted "hosts." Almost every home displays the manger scene.

The parents attend Midnight **Mass**. The children usually remain at home to get a good night's sleep.

After **mass** there is a big dinner. Dinners vary from area to area, but they may include goose, buckwheat cakes with sour cream, turkey, chestnuts, oysters, fruits, sweets, wines, and champagne. There may be dancing and drinking of champagne after dinner. Christmas plays and puppet shows are also enjoyed at Christmas time.

Children put their shoes by the fireside. Pere Noel (Father Christmas) will fill the shoes with gifts. In olden times, French peasant children would put their sabots (wooden shoes) by the fireside. Today pastry shops make chocolate sabots filled with candy. While the children sleep, Pere Noel adds little toys, candy, and fruit to the Christmas tree and fills the little shoes by the fireside. On Christmas morning, December 25<sup>th</sup>, the family gathers to **exchange** gifts found on the hearth and beside the tree.

### **Germany**

December 6<sup>th</sup> (Saint Nicholas Eve) marks the beginning of the Christmas holidays for the German people, continuing until January 6<sup>th</sup> (Twelfth Night). In times past, on December 6<sup>th</sup>, German children looked forward to the visit of Saint Nicholas and his companion Krampus (the devil). The children would tell these two characters all their good deeds and bad deeds of the past year. Saint Nicholas was the bearer of little gifts for the children who promised to be “good.” Krampus was the giver of a bundle of birch rods to the “**naughty**” children.

The Christmas tree tradition came from Germany. The tree was an evergreen decorated with apples and candles. In later years little thin cookies were added. The tradition of decorating the Christmas tree is now recognized world-wide. Germany was the first to create many Christmas decorations for the world. Blown-glass bulbs, paper **cornucopias**, fancy cutouts, angels, and tinsel were just a few to come to us from Germany. Many of the first Christmas toys were also created in Germany.

Many German children write to the Christ child, listing the gifts they would like to receive. They put glue on the letter and sprinkle it with sugar. The letter is then left on the window sill. The “glittery” letter is supposed to “catch the eye” of the Christ child.

On Christmas Eve, December 24<sup>th</sup>, the mother decorates the Christmas tree behind closed doors with tinsel, colored balls, and cookies shaped like gingerbread men, soldiers on horseback with colored frosting costumes, animals, stars, crescents, and hearts. The family sees the tree for the first time on Christmas Eve.

After dinner Christkind, a child-like person wearing white robes, a gold crown and big golden wings, brings German children their gifts. The Christkind is accompanied by a gnome-like companion called Knecht Rupprecht or Pelznickle or Ru-Klas. He is dressed in a fur pelt. It is said that before Christmas he went into people’s attics to spy and snoop to see if the children were good. If they were, he took the gifts down the chimney. The children see their gifts the next morning on Christmas Day.

Not only did the Christmas tree and its decorations come from Germany, but many other Christmas traditions around the world came from Germany. Such traditions as the foods, ceremonies, symbols, music, verse, Advent Wreaths, the Christmas crib are all of German **origin**. Our first picture of Santa Claus in the United States was done by a German born artist who drew him as a fat, little fellow, dressed in fur, with a toy-laden sleigh and a spyglass to spot the houses where he delivered the toys.

### **Italy**

Christmas lasts for three weeks in Italy, from December 18<sup>th</sup> (Novena) to January 6<sup>th</sup> (Twelfth-Night or Feast of Epiphany).

In Northern Italy the family displays the **traditional** fir Christmas tree. In Central and Southern Italy there are no Christmas trees. Instead, the homes display a “ceppo.” It is a triangular pyramid built of wood with several triangular shelves. The shelves hold the manger scene, candy, fruits, nuts, and small gifts. People decorate the “ceppo” with colored crepe paper, pine cones, golden cords, candles, plastic fruit.

People decorate their homes with chrysanthemums, violets (flowers can be natural or artificial), holly berries and olive trees.

During the eight days before Christmas, children go door to door reciting Christmas selections and singing songs. They wear shepherd sandals and hats and play songs on shepherd’s pipes. People reward them with coins, so they can buy Christmas food.

Every home that can afford a manger scene has one in their home. The manger scene had its **origin** in Italy and is now a universal Christmas **custom**.

People do not eat any food 24 hours before Christmas Eve. Then on Christmas Eve there is a huge **banquet**. Meals vary from area to area, but may include roasted, baked, or fried female eel, tortellini (pastry filled with meat), a capon, and home-baked cakes, fruit, nuts, breads, and wines.

Before the **banquet**, children write their parents a "Christmas Letter" on fancy stationery. In the letter the child promises to be a "good" child in the upcoming year and further promises to behave his parents at all times. The letter is then placed under the father's dinner plate. After supper, each child's letter is publicly read to the whole family, insuring that the family becomes the child's witnesses to his promises.

After the **banquet**, little gifts are placed in a bowl called the "Urn of Fate." Everyone chooses a gift. In some boxes there is no gift. This adds to the fun. Each person eventually ends up with a gift.

At 9:00 everyone goes to the churches to see the church officials dressed in their beautiful robes and to attend **Mass**.

January 6<sup>th</sup> is Epiphany. This is the gift giving day. La Befana brings the gifts in Italy. Legend tells La Bafana's story. La Bafana was an old woman who was busy doing her household chores when the Three Wise Men asked for her help in getting to Bethlehem. She refused because she was too busy with her chores. Later she was sorry for her refusal and set out to find the Wise Men. She could not find them, but while wandering around from place to place, she began rewarding good children and threatening **naughty** children.

Today she visits houses quietly, dressed in common old clothes, often black. She rewards good children with candy and gifts placed in their stockings, but **naughty** children get a switch and a piece of coal.

In some areas La Bafana comes down the chimney to fill children's shoes with candy and gifts (sometimes to fill the child's shoes with coal or ashes). Some areas show La Befana riding on a broom over housetops, and some areas show La Befana walking from home to home.

## **Poland**

Children in Poland receive gifts two times during the Christmas holidays. The first gifts are received on December 6<sup>th</sup> from Saint Nicholas. Then on Christmas Eve children receive gifts a second time.

Everyone waits for the first star (representing the Star of Bethlehem) seen in the sky on Christmas Eve, December 24<sup>th</sup>. When the first star appears, the evening meal begins. The supper must have an odd number of dishes (anywhere from five to thirteen) and an even number of guests or an even number of suppers. Empty places are left at the table for the Christ Child and any family members not able to enjoy the Christmas Eve meal. Supper is served on the white table cloth; underneath the tablecloth and underneath the table some straw is laid to represent the atmosphere of the stable. The supper will most likely include soups, fish, noodles, buckwheat groats, peas, dumplings, wafers, dessert, pears and dried fruits, nuts, and cakes.

After supper, the lights on the Christmas tree are lit. Then the Star Man comes to the children's homes. He quizzes them on their **catechism**. Children with correct answers are given gifts. Those with incorrect answers are usually "coached along" so they can also receive gifts. The Star Man is accompanied by the Three Star Boys. The Star Boys carry an **illuminated** star and sing Christmas carols at each home.

Children believe that the gifts brought to them by the Star Boys originally came from the stars and were carried to them by the Wise Men. The Wise Men are supposedly disguised as the Three Star Boys. They are accompanied by groups of young people dressed in animal costumes or characters of the Nativity scene. There are also many little puppet shows that feature different scenes of the life of Christ given at this time.

In olden days the Polish people scattered wheat sheaves near the fruit trees in hope that there would be good crops the next year. The birds enjoy the extra wheat sheave food.

December 31<sup>st</sup> is Saint Sylvester's Eve. People attempt to foretell the future on this day.

## **Sweden**

In Sweden Christmas is celebrated for a whole month beginning on St. Lucia's Day, December 13<sup>th</sup>. Before dawn the oldest daughter in each family dresses in a long white robe tied with a red sash around her waist. On her head she wears a metal crown that is covered with green leaves. The crown holds several lit candles.

Any remaining girls in the family also dress in white. They have a ring of silver tinsel in the shape of a halo on top of their heads. Each girl carries a lit candle wrapped in a damp handkerchief in her hand.

The boys also dress in long white robes. They wear tall, cone-shaped hats made of silver paper and decorated with star-shaped cutouts. They call themselves Star Boys.

The children come into the bedrooms of their parents and grandparents where they sing a song called “Santa Lucia.” They then serve the adults, who are still in bed, coffee, fat buns shaped like an X, and ginger cookies shaped like stars and hearts. The adults blow out the children’s candles, and the children join the adults in eating the treats. The mother usually brings hot chocolate into the bedrooms for the children to drink.

The Christmas tree is decorated very simply with many animals, angels, roosters, little baskets, and stars all made from the straw that is tied, bent, twisted, and braided. Little goats and pigs are the most **traditional ornaments**. A big straw goat usually stands next to the Christmas tree. Straw is the symbol for grain, representing food and **prosperity**. Many small white candles are also placed on the tree.

Christmas gifts are wrapped in paper and sealed with a blob of wax. The presents have tags that have special jingles, rhymes, or verses on them, giving hints as to package contents before opening it. Gifts are then put into a wicker basket on the floor to be opened later.

Christmas Eve, December 14<sup>th</sup>, at 6 p.m., the family gathers together in the kitchen for a ceremony called “dipping in the kettle.” A big kettle has drippings of pork, sausage, and cornbeef in it. Each family member takes his fork and spears a piece of brown bread and then dips the bread into the kettle and eats it. This is to remember a time when food was **scarce**. The celebrating begins now with a smorgasbord of breads, boiled potatoes, peas, a white sauce, fish, and ham.

Rice porridge is an important part of the Christmas dinner. Inside is hidden one almond or gold ring. The porridge is served and carefully eaten. If the person who ends up with the almond or ring is unmarried, then he or she will be married in the coming year. If a child or married person gets the almond or ring, there is much teasing and laughter.

The father lights the candles on the tree while all the electric lights are turned off. Additional Christmas presents are brought by Jultomten, who arrives by sleigh drawn by one or two goats. Jultomten is a very skinny, small, gnome-like man who also has a bad temper. He wears a cloth sack on his back filled with gifts. He knocks on the door and asks if there are any good children in the house. He then passes out his gifts to the children. Children leave a bowl of porridge in the loft of their barns for Jultomten to eat while making his rounds from house to house.

The children open the gifts from Jultomten, and then the family passes out the gifts in the basket under the tree. Each person reads the rhyme, jingle, or verse and tries to guess the contents of his package before opening it. The candles are then blown out on the tree and Christmas Eve is over.

On Christmas Day, December 25<sup>th</sup>, Swedish people put lit candles in their windows to light the Christ Child on his way. People walk or take sleigh rides to a 5 a.m. church service, then return home for a quiet and restful Christmas Day.

December 26<sup>th</sup> is known as the Second Day of Christmas. Children often have parties in the mid-afternoon, and adults have parties from the mid-afternoon until the next morning. There is a lot of visiting, eating, celebrating, and dancing.

January 6<sup>th</sup> is “Twelfth Night.” Children dress up in costumes. Each child carries a pole with a paper star attached to the end of it. The paper star has a lit candle inside that makes it shine. Children go from house to house singing, and they are given treats from each house.

### **United States and Great Britain**

The United States and Great Britain **encompass** all the **customs** of the world. Since the United States and Canada were settled by people from all over the world, these **immigrants** brought with them all their **customs** and traditions for Christmas celebrations. The United States and Great Britain celebrate Christmas with much the same **customs**.

In December, groups of people enjoy Christmas caroling. Many times the carolers are rewarded with something to eat and a hot drink or with coins.

A **traditional** dinner may be roasted turkey, stuffing, cranberries, sweet potatoes, yams, white potatoes, green and jello salads, breads, and pumpkin, mince, or apple pies. In England roasted goose is popular, and the British have a favorite drink called **wassail**, which is ale or wine spiced with apples, sugar, and cloves or cinnamon. Dinner meals may also represent the native country of a family's **origin**.

The family enjoys decorating the Christmas tree. The tree may be pine or fir and is decorated with colored balls, electric lights, tinsel, and **ornaments** that are imported and representative of many countries throughout the world. The tree may also be decorated to represent the native country of a family's **origin**. Many homes are decorated with holly, Advent Wreaths, calendars, and manger scenes. The mistletoe plant is often hung in the homes. It is a symbol of friendship. Anyone standing under the mistletoe can expect to be kissed.

In the United States children write letters to Santa Claus at the North Pole and mail them. The letters request gifts they wish Santa to bring them. Children are also encouraged to visit Santa Claus in person to discuss good and bad deeds of the past, as well as what they want for Christmas. Children hang their stockings on the fireplace, hoping Santa Claus will fill them with candy and little gifts.

In Great Britain children write letters to Santa Claus or Father Christmas requesting their gifts. They toss the list into the back of the fireplace and hope that the ashes are carried up the chimney like "magic" to Santa Claus. Children hang their stockings by the fireplace or at the end of their beds to be filled with little gifts and treats from Santa Claus.

Santa Claus arrives Christmas Eve, December 24<sup>th</sup>, after everyone in the household is asleep. He arrives by sleigh, pulled by eight reindeer with bells on their harnesses, on top of the house roof tops. He then descends down the chimneys and fills the Christmas stockings with candy and little presents and leaves gifts under the Christmas tree. Father Christmas looks much like the American Santa Claus, except that he wears a long red robe.



## Characterization

Authors use many techniques to give readers a good understanding of their characters without illustrations. They give us information about two aspects of the character, which helps us to form a mental picture. The first is the character's outward appearance. These are details one would observe with the five senses about the character – how s/he looks, sounds, might smell, etc. The second is the character's inner self – behaviors, attitude, personality, etc. We have learned that each country we've studied has unique Christmas characters. The chart below gives details about the outer and inner traits of each of these characters as they have evolved through years of cultural story-telling. (NOTE: If no details are given about the character's appearance, it is understood that he typically looks like our American version of Santa Claus.)

<u>Country</u>	<u>Character</u>	<u>Appearance</u>	<u>Personality</u>
Austria, Germany	Krampus	devil, carries a rod	threatens children
Austria, Germany	Christkind	child-like, white robes, gold crown, golden wings	helps decorate the Christmas tree
Brazil	Papa Noel	no details given	enters through window, leaves gifts in shoes, hides gift in house
Denmark	Julnisse	gnome-like elf, gray suit, red bonnet, long red stockings, white clogs, long white beard, accompanied by wife and lots of kids with little red caps	mischievous, lives in lofts, watches over animals
Finland	Father Christmas	arrives in a sleigh with reindeer	personally visits each home, personally delivers gifts to children
Finland	Elves	brown shirts, brown knee pants, red stockings, red elf hats	help Father Christmas deliver gifts
France	Pere Noel	no details given	puts gifts in children's sabots (wooden shoes), adds decorations to the Christmas tree
Germany	Knecht Ruppre Cht	gnome-like, wears a fur pelt	snoops from attic, takes gifts down the chimney
Germany	Santa Claus	fat, little, dressed in fur, in toy-filled sleigh, holding a spyglass	delivers gifts
Italy	La Bafana	old woman, dressed in old black clothes, rides a broom	visits houses quietly, leaves <b>naughty</b> children coal, enters the house down the chimney, fills good children's shoes with gifts
Poland	Star Man	no details given	quizzes children on <b>catechism</b> , rewards correct answers with gifts, coaches incorrect answers
Poland	Star Boys	three of them, carry lit stars	sing Christmas carols
Sweden	Jultomten	rides in sleigh pulled by goats, very skinny, small, gnome-like, sack on back full of toys	bad temper, knocks on door to deliver gifts
Great Britain	Father Christmas	like American Santa Claus, but wears a long red robe	like American Santa Claus

## Newspaper Writing

Newspaper articles are short and to the point. Their main purpose is to get across specific information to their readers, and because space is limited, they often ignore regular writing rules – they may use incomplete sentences, and paragraphs are sometimes only two or three sentences long. However, they do have rules of their own.

1. Every newspaper article has an eye-catching headline designed to make the reader want to read the article.
2. Each also tries to answer five main questions: Who? What? When? Where? and Why?

Additionally, newspapers often include pictures intended to relay information. A caption beneath the picture will most likely sum up the main idea of the information the picture is meant to relay.

## Spelling/Vocabulary

Banquet: feast

Catechism: religious knowledge

Celebrate: observe an occasion with special activities

Cornucopia: a horn containing a lot of food

Custom: a practice common to many

Encompass: to include

Exchange: to give something in return for getting something

Honor: to show respect

Illuminated: lit up

Immigrant: someone who moves from one country to live in another

Mass: church service

Naughty: misbehaving

Origin: beginning

Ornaments: decorations

Portion: a part; a serving

Prosperity: success

Scarce: very little of something

Traditional: usual; handed down over time from generation to generation

Wassail: ale or wine spiced with apples, sugar, and cloves or cinnamon

Yule: another word for Christmas