**Traditions and Holidays**

Americans widely observe other holidays which stem from traditions older than those of the United States. One is Easter, the Christian feast of the Resurrection of Jesus. Easter always falls on a Sunday. For most Americans, it is a day of worship and a gathering of the family. Many follow old traditions such as the dyeing of hard-boiled eggs and the giving of gifts of candy eggs, rabbits and chicks for the children. Many households organize Easter egg hunts, in which children look for dyed eggs hidden around the house or yard or in a park. The President of the United States even has an annual Easter egg hunt on the lawn of the White House the day after Easter, known as "Easter Monday."

The other holidays stemming from old traditions are Christmas Day, December 25, and New Year's Day, January 1. The American traditions of those days are generally the same as those in other nations which observe them—but those who live in such nations may notice at least some differences.

Christmas is a most important religious holy day for Christians, who attend special church services to celebrate the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Because it is a religious holy day, it is not an official holiday. However, since most Americans are Christian, the day is one on which most businesses are closed and the greatest possible number of workers, including government employees, have the day off. Many places of business even close early on the day before Christmas. When Christmas falls on a Sunday, the next day is also a holiday.

Naturally Christians observe Christmas according to the traditions of their particular church. Besides the strictly religious traditions, however, other common Christmas practices are observed by people who are not religious or who are not Christian. In this way, some Christmas traditions have become American traditions. Among them:

Gift-giving is so common at Christmas time that for most stores it means a sharp increase in sales. Stores, in fact, are full of shoppers from Thanksgiving time in late November until the day before Christmas. This situation has caused many religious people to complain that the religious meaning of Christmas is being subverted, that Christmas has become "commercial." Despite the criticism, Christmas shopping is a major activity of many Americans in the month of December. Gifts are given to children, members of the family and close friends. They are given to people who have done favors for others or who work for them. Some people bake cookies or make candies or other special food treats for friends and neighbors. Many businesses give their workers a Christmas "bonus"—gifts of extra money—to show appreciation for their work. Christmas is also a time when most Americans show great generosity to others less fortunate than they. They send money to hospitals or orphanages or contribute to funds that help the poor.

Most Americans send greeting cards to their friends and family at Christmas time. Some people who are friends or relatives and live great distances from each other may not be much in contact with each other during the year—but will usually exchange greeting cards and often a Christmas letter telling their family news.

Santa Claus is a mythical man who is said to live at the North Pole, where he makes toys throughout the year. The Santa Claus character is derived from age-old stories about an early Christian saint named Nicholas, known for his giving of gifts. Santa Claus, pictured as a cheerful fat man with long white beard and dressed in a red suit, supposedly visits the home of good children on the night before Christmas and leaves them gifts. Very young American children look forward eagerly to Christmas morning, when they find gifts he has left behind.

The decorating of homes for Christmas is very common. Most Americans who observe

Christmas have a Christmas tree in their homes. This may be a real evergreen tree or an artificial one. In either case, the tree is decorated and trimmed with small lights and ornaments. Other decorations such as lights and wreaths of evergreen and signs wishing people a "Merry Christmas" can be found inside and outside of many homes.

A Christmas dinner, often with turkey on the menu, for family and friends is also an American tradition; so are parties for friends, family and co-workers. Besides the Christmas dinner, many people hold other gala get-togethers just before and just after Christmas.

Although New Year's Day is also a Christian holy day, it has a long secular tradition which makes it a holiday for all Americans. Most of the celebrating of the holiday takes place the night before, when Americans gather in homes or in restaurants or other public places to enjoy food and beverages and to wish each other a happy and prosperous year ahead. Balloons and paper streamers and horns and other noisemakers are all around at midnight when the old year passes away and the new year arrives. One of the more colorful and unusual observances of New Year's Day takes place in Philadelphia, where large groups of people wearing unusual costumes parade through the city with bands.

**Valentine'e Day and Halloween**

One other day that most Americans observe, even though it is not an official holiday, is February 14, Valentine's Day, named for an early Christian martyr whose feast day was once observed on that day. On this day, Americans give special symbolic gifts to people they love. They also send special greeting cards called Valentines to such people. Most commonly, the gifts are candy or flowers.

Halloween, the last day of October, has a special significance for children, who dress in funny or ghostly costumes and knock at neighborhood doors. After shouting "Trick or Treat!" they are given gifts of candy or money. Originally a religious holiday—the evening before All Saints or All-Hallows Day, Halloween is now celebrated by Americans more according to ancient Celtic pagan traditions. Some children collect money on this day to help children of other nations through the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).