American Holidays and Traditions

**It's Another New Year... (**January 1**)**

...but for what reason?

"Happy New Year!" That greeting will be said and heard for at least the first couple of weeks as a new year gets under way. But the day celebrated as New Year's Day in modern America was not always January 1.

ANCIENT NEW YEARS

The celebration of the new year is the oldest of all holidays. It was first observed in ancient Babylon about 4000 years ago. In the years around 2000 BC, the Babylonian New Year began with the first New Moon (actually the first visible cresent) after the Vernal Equinox (first day of spring).

The beginning of spring is a logical time to start a new year. After all, it is the season of rebirth, of planting new crops, and of blossoming. January 1, on the other hand, has no astronomical nor agricultural significance. It is purely arbitrary.

The Babylonian new year celebration lasted for eleven days. Each day had its own particular mode of celebration, but it is safe to say that modern New Year's Eve festivities pale in comparison.

The Romans continued to observe the new year in late March, but their calendar was continually tampered with by various emperors so that the calendar soon became out of synchronization with the sun.

In order to set the calendar right, the Roman senate, in 153 BC, declared January 1 to be the beginning of the new year. But tampering continued until Julius Caesar, in 46 BC, established what has come to be known as the Julian Calendar. It again established January 1 as the new year. But in order to synchronize the calendar with the sun, Caesar had to let the previous year drag on for 445 days.

THE CHURCH'S VIEW OF NEW YEAR CELEBRATIONS

Although in the first centuries AD the Romans continued celebrating the new year, the early Catholic Church condemned the festivities as paganism. But as Christianity became more widespread, the early church began having its own religious observances concurrently with many of the pagan celebrations, and New Year's Day was no different. New Years is still observed as the Feast of Christ's Circumcision by some denominations.

During the Middle Ages, the Church remained opposed to celebrating New Years. January 1 has been celebrated as a holiday by Western nations for only about the past 400 years.

NEW YEAR TRADITIONS

Other traditions of the season include the making of New Year's resolutions. That tradition also dates back to the early Babylonians. Popular modern resolutions might include the promise to lose weight or quit smoking. The early Babylonian's most popular resolution was to return borrowed farm equipment.

The Tournament of Roses Parade dates back to 1886. In that year, members of the Valley Hunt Club decorated their carriages with flowers. It celebrated the ripening of the orange crop in California.

Although the Rose Bowl football game was first played as a part of the Tournament of Roses in 1902, it was replaced by Roman chariot races the following year. In 1916, the football game returned as the sports centerpiece of the festival.

The tradition of using a baby to signify the new year was begun in Greece around 600 BC. It was their tradition at that time to celebrate their god of wine, Dionysus, by parading a baby in a basket, representing the annual rebirth of that god as the spirit of fertility. Early Egyptians also used a baby as a symbol of rebirth.

Although the early Christians denounced the practice as pagan, the popularity of the baby as a symbol of rebirth forced the Church to reevaluate its position. The Church finally allowed its members to celebrate the new year with a baby, which was to symbolize the birth of the baby Jesus.

The use of an image of a baby with a New Years banner as a symbolic representation of the new year was brought to early America by the Germans. They had used the effigy since the fourteenth century.

FOR LUCK IN THE NEW YEAR

Traditionally, it was thought that one could affect the luck they would have throughout the coming year by what they did or ate on the first day of the year. For that reason, it has become common for folks to celebrate the first few minutes of a brand new year in the company of family and friends. Parties often last into the middle of the night after the ringing in of a new year. It was once believed that the first visitor on New Year's Day would bring either good luck or bad luck the rest of the year. It was particularly lucky if that visitor happened to be a tall dark-haired man.

Traditional New Year foods are also thought to bring luck. Many cultures believe that anything in the shape of a ring is good luck, because it symbolizes "coming full circle," completing a year's cycle. For that reason, the Dutch believe that eating donuts on New Year's Day will bring good fortune.

Many parts of the U.S. celebrate the new year by consuming black-eyed peas. These legumes are typically accompanied by either hog jowls or ham. Black-eyed peas and other legumes have been considered good luck in many cultures. The hog, and thus its meat, is considered lucky because it symbolizes prosperity. Cabbage is another "good luck" vegetable that is consumed on New Year's Day by many. Cabbage leaves are also considered a sign of prosperity, being representative of paper currency. In some regions, rice is a lucky food that is eaten on New Year's Day.

AULD LANG SYNE

The song, "Auld Lang Syne," playing in the background, is sung at the stroke of midnight in almost every English-speaking country in the world to bring in the new year. At least partially written by Robert Burns in the 1700's, it was first published in 1796 after Burns' death. Early variations of the song were sung prior to 1700 and inspired Burns to produce the modern rendition. An old Scotch tune, "Auld Lang Syne" literally means "old long ago," or simply, "the good old days." The lyrics can be found here.

**Valentine's Day! (**February 14**)**

Not Like it Used To Be

February 14 is Valentine's Day. Although it is celebrated as a lovers' holiday today, with the giving of candy, flowers, or other gifts between couples in love, it originated in 5th Century Rome as a tribute to St. Valentine, a Catholic bishop.

For eight hundred years prior to the establishment of Valentine's Day, the Romans had practiced a pagan celebration in mid-February commemorating young men's rite of passage to the god Lupercus. The celebration featured a lottery in which young men would draw the names of teenage girls from a box. The girl assigned to each young man in that manner would be his sexual companion during the remaining year.

In an effort to do away with the pagan festival, Pope Gelasius ordered a slight change in the lottery. Instead of the names of young women, the box would contain the names of saints. Both men and women were allowed to draw from the box, and the game was to emulate the ways of the saint they drew during the rest of the year. Needless to say, many of the young Roman men were not too pleased with the rule changes.

Instead of the pagan god Lupercus, the Church looked for a suitable patron saint of love to take his place. They found an appropriate choice in Valentine, who, in AD 270 had been beheaded by Emperor Claudius.

Claudius had determined that married men made poor soldiers. So he banned marriage from his empire. But Valentine would secretly marry young men that came to him. When Claudius found out about Valentine, he first tried to convert him to paganism. But Valentine reversed the strategy, trying instead to convert Claudius. When he failed, he was stoned and beheaded.

During the days that Valentine was imprisoned, he fell in love with the blind daughter of his jailer. His love for her, and his great faith, managed to miraculously heal her from her blindness before his death. Before he was taken to his death, he signed a farewell message to her, "From your Valentine." The phrase has been used on his day ever since.

Although the lottery for women had been banned by the church, the mid-February holiday in commemoration of St. Valentine was still used by Roman men to seek the affection of women. It became a tradition for the men to give the ones they admired handwritten messages of affection, containing Valentine's name.

The first Valentine card grew out of this practice. The first true Valentine card was sent in 1415 by Charles, duke of Orleans, to his wife. He was imprisoned in the Tower of London at the time.

Cupid, another symbol of the holiday, became associated with it because he was the son of Venus, the Roman god of love and beauty. Cupid often appears on Valentine cards.

**Easter! (**between the dates of March 22 and April 25**)**

The Traditions of Easter

As with almost all "Christian" holidays, Easter has been secularized and commercialized. The dichotomous nature of Easter and its symbols, however, is not necessarily a modern fabrication.

Since its conception as a holy celebration in the second century, Easter has had its non-religious side. In fact, Easter was originally a pagan festival.

The ancient Saxons celebrated the return of spring with an uproarious festival commemorating their goddess of offspring and of springtime, Eastre. When the second-century Christian missionaries encountered the tribes of the north with their pagan celebrations, they attempted to convert them to Christianity. They did so, however, in a clandestine manner.

It would have been suicide for the very early Christian converts to celebrate their holy days with observances that did not coincide with celebrations that already existed. To save lives, the missionaries cleverly decided to spread their religious message slowly throughout the populations by allowing them to continue to celebrate pagan feasts, but to do so in a Christian manner.

As it happened, the pagan festival of Eastre occurred at the same time of year as the Christian observance of the Resurrection of Christ. It made sense, therefore, to alter the festival itself, to make it a Christian celebration as converts were slowly won over. The early name, Eastre, was eventually changed to its modern spelling, Easter.

The Date of Easter

Prior to A.D. 325, Easter was variously celebrated on different days of the week, including Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. In that year, the Council of Nicaea was convened by emperor Constantine. It issued the Easter Rule which states that Easter shall be celebrated on the first Sunday that occurs after the first full moon on or after the vernal equinox. However, a caveat must be introduced here. The "full moon" in the rule is the ecclesiastical full moon, which is defined as the fourteenth day of a tabular lunation, where day 1 corresponds to the ecclesiastical New Moon. It does not always occur on the same date as the astronomical full moon. The ecclesiastical "vernal equinox" is always on March 21. Therefore, Easter must be celebrated on a Sunday between the dates of March 22 and April 25.

The Lenten Season

Lent is the forty-six day period just prior to Easter Sunday. It begins on Ash Wednesday. Mardi Gras (French for "Fat Tuesday") is a celebration, sometimes called "Carnival," practiced around the world, on the Tuesday prior to Ash Wednesday. It was designed as a way to "get it all out" before the sacrifices of Lent began. New Orleans is the focal point of Mardi Gras celebrations in the U.S. Read about the religious meanings of the Lenten Season.

The Cross

The Cross is the symbol of the Crucifixion, as opposed to the Resurrection. However, at the Council of Nicaea, in A.D. 325, Constantine decreed that the Cross was the official symbol of Christianity. The Cross is not only a symbol of Easter, but it is more widely used, especially by the Catholic Church, as a year-round symbol of their faith.

The Easter Bunny

The Easter Bunny is not a modern invention. The symbol originated with the pagan festival of Eastre. The goddess, Eastre, was worshipped by the Anglo-Saxons through her earthly symbol, the rabbit.

The Germans brought the symbol of the Easter rabbit to America. It was widely ignored by other Christians until shortly after the Civil War. In fact, Easter itself was not widely celebrated in America until after that time.

The Easter Egg

As with the Easter Bunny and the holiday itself, the Easter Egg predates the Christian holiday of Easter. The exchange of eggs in the springtime is a custom that was centuries old when Easter was first celebrated by Christians.

From the earliest times, the egg was a symbol of rebirth in most cultures. Eggs were often wrapped in gold leaf or, if you were a peasant, colored brightly by boiling them with the leaves or petals of certain flowers.

Today, children hunt colored eggs and place them in Easter baskets along with the modern version of real Easter eggs -- those made of plastic or chocolate candy.

**St. Patrick's Day! (**March 17**)**

Customs and Traditions

The person who was to become St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, was born in Wales about AD 385. His given name was Maewyn, and he almost didn't get the job of bishop of Ireland because he lacked the required scholarship.

Far from being a saint, until he was 16, he considered himself a pagan. At that age, he was sold into slavery by a group of Irish marauders that raided his village. During his captivity, he became closer to God.

He escaped from slavery after six years and went to Gaul where he studied in the monastery under St. Germain, bishop of Auxerre for a period of twelve years. During his training he became aware that his calling was to convert the pagans to Christianity.

His wishes were to return to Ireland, to convert the native pagans to Christianity. But his superiors instead appointed St. Palladius. But two years later, Palladius transferred to Scotland. Patrick, having adopted that Christian name earlier, was then appointed as second bishop to Ireland.

Patrick was quite successful at winning converts. And this fact upset the Celtic Druids. Patrick was arrested several times, but escaped each time. He traveled throughout Ireland, establishing monasteries across the country. He also set up schools and churches which would aid him in his conversion of the Irish country to Christianity.

His mission in Ireland lasted for thirty years. After that time, Patrick retired to County Down. He died on March 17 in AD 461. That day has been commemorated as St. Patrick's Day ever since.

Much Irish folklore surrounds St. Patrick's Day. Not much of it is actually substantiated.

Some of this lore includes the belief that Patrick raised people from the dead. He also is said to have given a sermon from a hilltop that drove all the snakes from Ireland. Of course, no snakes were ever native to Ireland, and some people think this is a metaphor for the conversion of the pagans. Though originally a Catholic holy day, St. Patrick's Day has evolved into more of a secular holiday.

One traditional icon of the day is the shamrock. And this stems from a more bona fide Irish tale that tells how Patrick used the three-leafed shamrock to explain the Trinity. He used it in his sermons to represent how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit could all exist as separate elements of the same entity. His followers adopted the custom of wearing a shamrock on his feast day.

The St. Patrick's Day custom came to America in 1737. That was the first year St. Patrick's Day was publicly celebrated in this country, in Boston.

**Groundhog Day! (**March 20**)**

How Did the Groundhog Get a Day of His Own?

The lowly groundhog, often called a woodchuck, is the only mammal to have a day named in his honor. The groundhog's day is February 2. Granted, it’s not a federal holiday; nobody gets off work. But still, to have a day named after you is quite a feat.

How did the groundhog come by this honor?

It stems from the ancient belief that hibernating creatures were able to predict the arrival of springtime by their emergence.

The German immigrants known as Pennsylvania Dutch brought the tradition to America in the 18th century. They had once regarded the badger as the winter-spring barometer. But the job was reassigned to the groundhog after importing their Candlemas traditions to the U.S. Candlemas commemorates the ritual purification of Mary, 40 days after the birth of Jesus.

Candlemas is one of the four "cross-quarters" of the year, occurring half way between the first day of winter and the first day of spring. Traditionally, it was believed that if Candlemas was sunny, the remaining six weeks of winter would be stormy and cold. But if it rained or snowed on Candlemas, the rest of the winter would be mild. If an animal "sees its shadow," it must be sunny, so more wintry weather is predicted:

If Candlemas be fair and bright,

Winter has another flight.

If Candlemas brings clouds and rain,

Winter will not come again.

The groundhog and badger were not the only animals that have been used to predict spring. Other Europeans used the bear or hedgehog--but in any case the honor belonged to a creature that hibernated. Its emergence symbolized the imminent arrival of spring.

Traditionally, the groundhog is supposed to awaken on February 2, Groundhog Day, and come up out of his burrow. If he sees his shadow, he will return to the burrow for six more weeks of winter. If he doesn’t see his shadow, he remains outside and starts his year, because he knows that spring has arrived early.

In the U.S., the “official” groundhog is kept in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. Every February 2, amid a raucous celebration early in the morning, “Punxsutawney Phil” as the groundhog is called, is pulled from his den by his keepers, who are dressed in tuxedos. Phil then whispers his weather prediction into the ear of his keeper, who then announces it to the anxiously-awaiting crowd.

Of course, this is for show. It’s a fun celebration and a great tradition. But Phil's keepers secretly decide upon the "forecast" in advance of the groundhog's arousal.

Besides, spring always arrives on or near March 21, so whether the groundhog decides to return to his den or remain above ground, the sad fact is spring will always have to wait at least six more weeks.

**April fool’s day! (**April 1**)**

Unlike most of the other nonfoolish holidays, the history of April Fool's Day, sometimes called All Fool's Day, is not totally clear. There really wasn't a "first April Fool's Day" that can be pinpointed on the calendar. Some believe it sort of evolved simultaneously in several cultures at the same time, from celebrations involving the first day of spring.

The closest point in time that can be identified as the beginning of this tradition was in 1582, in France. Prior to that year, the new year was celebrated for eight days, beginning on March 25. The celebration culminated on April 1. With the reform of the calendar under Charles IX, the Gregorian Calendar was introduced, and New Year's Day was moved to January 1.

However, communications being what they were in the days when news traveled by foot, many people did not receive the news for several years. Others, the more obstinate crowd, refused to accept the new calendar and continued to celebrate the new year on April 1. These backward folk were labeled as "fools" by the general populace. They were subject to some ridicule, and were often sent on "fools errands" or were made the butt of other practical jokes.

This harassment evolved, over time, into a tradition of prank-playing on the first day of April. The tradition eventually spread to England and Scotland in the eighteenth century. It was later introduced to the American colonies of both the English and French. April Fool's Day thus developed into an international fun fest, so to speak, with different nationalities specializing in their own brand of humor at the expense of their friends and families.

In Scotland, for example, April Fool's Day is actually celebrated for two days. The second day is devoted to pranks involving the posterior region of the body. It is called Taily Day. The origin of the "kick me" sign can be traced to this observance.

Mexico's counterpart of April Fool's Day is actually observed on December 28. Originally, the day was a sad remembrance of the slaughter of the innocent children by King Herod. It eventually evolved into a lighter commemoration involving pranks and trickery.

Pranks performed on April Fool's Day range from the simple, (such as saying, "Your shoe's untied!), to the elaborate. Setting a roommate's alarm clock back an hour is a common gag. Whatever the prank, the trickster usually ends it by yelling to his victim, "April Fool!"

Practical jokes are a common practice on April Fool's Day. Sometimes, elaborate practical jokes are played on friends or relatives that last the entire day. The news media even gets involved. For instance, a British short film once shown on April Fool's Day was a fairly detailed documentary about "spaghetti farmers" and how they harvest their crop from the spaghetti trees.

April Fool's Day is a "for-fun-only" observance. Nobody is expected to buy gifts or to take their "significant other" out to eat in a fancy restaurant. Nobody gets off work or school. It's simply a fun little holiday, but a holiday on which one must remain forever vigilant, for he may be the next April Fool!

**Mother's Day! (**May 10**)**

History of Mothers' Day

Some Motherly Advice

What the Bible says about Mothers

***M***... is for the million things she gave me,

***O***... means only that she's growing old,

***T***... is for the tears she shed to save me,

***H***... is for her heart of purest gold;

***E***... is for her eyes, with love-light shining,

***R***... means right, and right she'll always be.

Put them all together, they spell "MOTHER,"

A word that means the world to me.

--Howard Johnson (c. 1915)

History and Customs...

In the U.S. Mothers' Day is a holiday celebrated on second Sunday in May. It is a day when children honor their mothers with cards, gifts, and flowers. First observance in Philadelphia, Pa. in 1907, it is based on suggestions by Julia Ward Howe in 1872 and Anna Jarvis in 1907.

Although it wasn't celebrated in the U.S. until 1908, there were days honoring mothers even in the days of ancient Greece. In those days, however, it was Rhea, the Mother of the gods that was given honor.

Later, in the 1600's, in England there was an annual observance called "Mothering Sunday." It was celebrated during Lent, on the fourth Sunday. On Mothering Sunday, the servants, who generally lived with their employers, were encouraged to return home and honor their mothers. It was traditional for them to bring a special cake along to celebrate the occasion.

In the U.S., in 1908 Ana Jarvis, from Grafton, West Virginia, began a campaign to establish a national Mother's Day. Jarvis persuaded her mother's church in Grafton, West Virginia to celebrate Mother's Day on the anniversary of her mother's death. A memorial service was held there on May 10, 1908 and in Philadelphia the following year where Jarvis moved.

Jarvis and others began a letter-writing campaign to ministers, businessmen, and politicians in their quest to establish a national Mother's Day. They were successful. President Woodrow Wilson, in 1914, made the official announcement proclaiming Mother's Day a national observance that was to be held each year on the 2nd Sunday of May.

Many other countries of the world celebrate their own Mother's Day at different times throughout the year. Denmark, Finland, Italy, Turkey, Australia, and Belgium celebrate Mother's Day on the second Sunday in May, as in the U.S.

# Memorial Day. (May 31)

Rest Haven Cemetery in Edinburgh, Indiana

is the final resting place of many war veterans.

Memorial Day, originally called Decoration Day, is a day to remember those who have died in our nation's service. After the Civil war many people in the North and South decorated graves of fallen soldiers with flowers.

In the Spring of 1866, Henry C. Welles, a druggist in the village of Waterloo, NY, suggested that the patriots who had died in the Civil War should be honored by decorating their graves. General John B. Murray, Seneca County Clerk, embraced the idea and a committee was formed to plan a day devoted to honoring the dead. Townspeople made wreaths, crosses and bouquets for each veteran's grave. The village was decorated with flags at half mast. On May 5 of that year, a processional was held to the town's cemeteries, led by veterans. The town observed this day of remembrance on May 5 of the following year as well.

Decoration Day was officially proclaimed on May 5, 1868 by General John Logan in his General Order No. 11, and was first observed officially on May 30, 1868. The South did not observe Decoration Day, preferring to honor their dead on separate days until after World War I. In 1882, the name was changed to Memorial Day, and soldiers who had died in other wars were also honored.

In 1971, Memorial Day was declared a national holiday to be held on the last Monday in May.

Today, Memorial Day marks the unofficial beginning of the summer season in the United States. It is still a time to remember those who have passed on, whether in war or otherwise. It also is a time for families to get together for picnics, ball games, and other early summer activities.

**Father's Day.(** June 20**)**

The History of Fathers' Day

Quotes About Dad

Play Fathers' Day Word Search Online

Send a Father's Day Card

Fathers' Day Links from Yahoo!

Father's Day Gift Ideas

 FATHERS' DAY HISTORY

Sonora Dodd, of Washington, was one of the first people who had the idea of a "father's day." She thought of the idea for Father's Day while listening to a Mother's Day sermon in 1909.

Sonora wanted a special day to honor her father, William Smart. Smart, who was a Civil War veteran, was widowed when his wife died while giving birth to their sixth child. Mr. Smart was left to raise the newborn and his other five children by himself on a rural farm in eastern Washington state.

After Sonora became an adult she realized the selflessness her father had shown in raising his children as a single parent. It was her father that made all the parental sacrifices and was, in the eyes of his daughter, a courageous, selfless, and loving man. Sonora's father was born in June, so she chose to hold the first Father's Day celebration in Spokane, Washington on the 19th of June, 1910.

Even before Dodd, however, the idea of observing a day in honor of fathers was promoted. Dr. Robert Webb conducted what is believed as the first Father's Day service at the Central Church of Fairmont, West Virginia in 1908. It was Dodd's efforts, however, that eventually led to a national observance.

President Calvin Coolidge, in 1924, supported the idea of a national Father's Day. Then in 1966 President Lyndon Johnson signed a presidential proclamation declaring the 3rd Sunday of June as Father's Day

**Fourth of July.**

The history of the United States of America began long before the Colonists declared their independence. The Magna Carta, written in 1215 in order to try to convince King John of England to give the people certain rights, is generally considered to be the touchstone of liberty, upon which later documents are based.

The links below will take you to America's Historic Documents. These are the pieces of history upon which our nation was founded, and within which our current liberty is rooted. All the documents are complete and unabridged, including George Washington's Farewell Address.

**Labor Day. (** September 6**)**

Labor Day is a national legal holiday that is over 100 years old. Over the years, it has evolved from a purely labor union celebration into a general "last fling of summer" festival.

It grew out of a celebration and parade in honor of the working class by the Knights of Labor in 1882 in New York. In 1884, the Knights held a large parade in New York City celebrating the working class. The parade was held on the first Monday in September. The Knights passed a resolution to hold all future parades on the same day, designated by them as Labor Day.

The Socialist Party held a similar celebration of the working class on May 1. This date eventually became known as May Day, and was celebrated by Socialists and Communists in commemoration of the working man. In the U.S., the first Monday in September was selected to reject any identification with Communism.

In the late 1880's, labor organizations began to lobby various state legislatures for recognition of Labor Day as an official state holiday. The first states to declare it a state holiday in, 1887, were Oregon, Colorado, New York, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. Then in 1894, Congress passed a law recognizing Labor Day as an official national holiday.

Today, Labor Day is observed not only in the U.S. but also in Canada, and in other industrialized nations. While it is a general holiday in the United States, its roots in the working class remain clearer in European countries.

It has come to be recognized in the U.S. not only as a celebration of the working class, but even more so as the unofficial end of the summer season. In the northern half of the U.S. at least, the summer vacation season begins with Memorial Day and ends with Labor Day.

Many colleges and some secondary and elementary schools begin classes immediately after Labor Day.

State parks, swimming pools, and campgrounds are all quite busy on Labor Day, as vacationers take one last advantage of the waning hot season. September is the month that marks the beginning of autumn. And, because of that, the average daytime maximum temperatures take a plunge during the month in most of the U.S.

# Columbus Day! (October 12)

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS discovered America in 1492. At least that is what all elementary school children were always taught: "In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." Of course, Columbus never did "discover" North America, and the regions he did explore were already inhabited. He only discovered them from the viewpoint of the Europeans. Yet his first voyage did prove one thing for sure, that the earth was not only round, but that it was bigger than he had thought, Eratosthenes notwithstanding.

One of the first known celebrations marking the discovery of the "New World" by Christopher Columbus was in 1792, when a ceremony organized by the Colombian Order was held in New York City honoring Christopher Columbus and the 300th anniversary of his landing in the Bahamas. Then, on October 12, 1866 the Italian population of New York organized the first celebration of the discovery of America. Three years later, in 1869 Italians in San Francisco celebrated October 12 calling it C-Day.

To mark the 400th anniversary of Columbus' voyage, in 1892, President Benjamin Harrison made a commemorative proclamation. But it was Colorado, in 1905, that became the first state to observe a Columbus Day. Since 1920 the day has been celebrated annually, and in 1937 President Franklin Roosevelt proclaimed every October 12 as Columbus Day. That's where it remained until 1971 when Congress declared it a federal public holiday on the second Monday in October.

Christopher Columbus (1451 - 1505)

Columbus, the son of a wool merchant and weaver, was born in Genoa, Italy and went to sea at the age of 14. Following a shipwreck off the coast of Portugal in 1470, he swam ashore and settled in that country.

Between 1477 and 1482 Columbus made merchant voyages as far away as Iceland and Guinea. But in 1484, his "Enterprise of the Indies" idea fell on deaf ears when he presented it to King John of Portugal. Shortly thereafter, he moved to Spain, where King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella became more interested in his adventuresome ideas.

To the New World

On August 2, 1492, Columbus set sail in search of the East Indies. The voyage was financed by Ferdinand and Isabella by making the city of Palos pay back a debt to the crown by providing two of the ships, and by getting Italian financial backing for part of the expenses. The crown had to put up very little money from the treasury.

Columbus and 90 crewmen boarded the three ships that were to make the first voyage to the New World, the Niña, Pinta, and the flagship, Santa Maria. On October 12, 1492, Columbus first saw the islands of the new world, landing in the Bahamas. Later in the month, he would sail to Cuba, and to Hispaniola (now Haiti). He thought he had reached the East Indies, the islands off Southeast Asia.

Contrary to popular belief, most educated individuals in the 15th century, and especially sailors, already knew that the earth was round. What was not realized by Columbus, however, was just how big a globe it was. Columbus seriously underestimated the size of the planet.

Seaworthy Cuisine

The menu for Spanish seamen consisted of water, vinegar, wine, olive oil, molasses, cheese, honey, raisins, rice, garlic, almonds, sea biscuits, dry legumes such as chickpeas, lentils, beans, salted and barreled sardines, anchovies, dry salt cod and pickled or salted meats (beef and pork), salted flour.

Food, mostly boiled, was served in a large communal wooden bowl. It consisted of poorly cooked meat with bones in it, the sailors attacking it with fervor, picking it with their fingers as they had no forks or spoons. The larger pieces of meat were cut with the knife each sailor carried. Fish was eaten most often. On calm days, the crew would fish and then cook their catch.

Return to Spain and Additional Voyages

On Christmas Day, 1492, the Santa Maria sank off Hispaniola. Columbus departed for Spain on January 16, 1493 on the Niña, arriving there on March 4.

Columbus made three additional voyages to the New World. The second voyage set sail in September, 1493, with 17 ships. During his expeditions, he helped to colonize Hispaniola, and discovered the South American mainland. He did not, however, see mainland North America during any of his voyages.

He returned to Spain for the last time on November 7, 1504. He died at Valladolid, Spain on May 20, 1506, at the age of 55.

Controversy

Much controversy exists over Columbus' expeditions and whether or not one can "discover" an already-inhabited land. The natives of the Bahamas and other islands on his journey were peaceful and friendly. Yet many of them were later enslaved by the Spanish. Also, it is known that the Vikings explored the North American coast 500 years before Columbus.

Nevertheless, Columbus' expedition was unique and important in that it resulted in the first intertwining of Europe with the Americas, resulting in the first permanent European colonies in the New World.

**Halloween! (**October 31**)**

Halloween is an annual celebration, but just what is it actually a celebration of? And how did this peculiar custom originate? Is it, as some claim, a kind of demon worship? Or is it just a harmless vestige of some ancient pagan ritual?

The word itself, "Halloween," actually has its origins in the Catholic Church. It comes from a contracted corruption of All Hallows Eve. November 1, "All Hollows Day" (or "All Saints Day"), is a Catholic day of observance in honor of saints. But, in the 5th century BC, in Celtic Ireland, summer officially ended on October 31. The holiday was called Samhain (sow-en), the Celtic New year.

One story says that, on that day, the disembodied spirits of all those who had died throughout the preceding year would come back in search of living bodies to possess for the next year. It was believed to be their only hope for the afterlife. The Celts believed all laws of space and time were suspended during this time, allowing the spirit world to intermingle with the living.

Naturally, the still-living did not want to be possessed. So on the night of October 31, villagers would extinguish the fires in their homes, to make them cold and undesirable. They would then dress up in all manner of ghoulish costumes and noisily paraded around the neighborhood, being as destructive as possible in order to frighten away spirits looking for bodies to possess.

Probably a better explanation of why the Celts extinguished their fires was not to discourage spirit possession, but so that all the Celtic tribes could relight their fires from a common source, the Druidic fire that was kept burning in the Middle of Ireland, at Usinach.

Some accounts tell of how the Celts would burn someone at the stake who was thought to have already been possessed, as sort of a lesson to the spirits. Other accounts of Celtic history debunk these stories as myth.

The Romans adopted the Celtic practices as their own. But in the first century AD, Samhain was assimilated into celebrations of some of the other Roman traditions that took place in October, such as their day to honor Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruit and trees. The symbol of Pomona is the apple, which might explain the origin of our modern tradition of bobbing for apples on Halloween.

The thrust of the practices also changed over time to become more ritualized. As belief in spirit possession waned, the practice of dressing up like hobgoblins, ghosts, and witches took on a more ceremonial role.

The custom of Halloween was brought to America in the 1840's by Irish immigrants fleeing their country's potato famine. At that time, the favorite pranks in New England included tipping over outhouses and unhinging fence gates.

The custom of trick-or-treating is thought to have originated not with the Irish Celts, but with a ninth-century European custom called souling. On November 2, All Souls Day, early Christians would walk from village to village begging for "soul cakes," made out of square pieces of bread with currants. The more soul cakes the beggars would receive, the more prayers they would promise to say on behalf of the dead relatives of the donors. At the time, it was believed that the dead remained in limbo for a time after death, and that prayer, even by strangers, could expedite a soul's passage to heaven.

The Jack-o-lantern custom probably comes from Irish folklore. As the tale is told, a man named Jack, who was notorious as a drunkard and trickster, tricked Satan into climbing a tree. Jack then carved an image of a cross in the tree's trunk, trapping the devil up the tree. Jack made a deal with the devil that, if he would never tempt him again, he would promise to let him down the tree.

According to the folk tale, after Jack died, he was denied entrance to Heaven because of his evil ways, but he was also denied access to Hell because he had tricked the devil. Instead, the devil gave him a single ember to light his way through the frigid darkness. The ember was placed inside a hollowed-out turnip to keep it glowing longer.

The Irish used turnips as their "Jack's lanterns" originally. But when the immigrants came to America, they found that pumpkins were far more plentiful than turnips. So the Jack-O-Lantern in America was a hollowed-out pumpkin, lit with an ember.

So, although some cults may have adopted Halloween as their favorite "holiday," the day itself did not grow out of evil practices. It grew out of the rituals of Celts celebrating a new year, and out of Medieval prayer rituals of Europeans. And today, even many churches have Halloween parties or pumpkin carving events for the kids. After all, the day itself is only as evil as one cares to make it.

**Veteran’s Day. (**Nov. 11**)**

This is my tribute to my father, and to all veterans. I thank God every day for him and veterans like him, without whom we wouldn't have the freedoms we've grown accustomed to. Freedoms that too many Americans take for granted. War is a horrible thing, and I in no way am attempting to glorify it. However, in some cases it is necessary.

My father is a World War II veteran. Joining the Navy when he was just 17, he was stationed aboard the U.S.S. Pensacola (CA-24), where he served bravely until the war's end in 1945. The Pensacola was a heavy cruiser, part of the screen of ships protecting the carrier U.S.S. Hornet, and later the Enterprise. The Pensacola saw much action, and earned 13 Battle Stars for her part in 13 major battles fought in the Pacific, including Midway, Iwo Jima, and Guadalcanal.

The Pensacola's armament consisted of 20mm and 40mm anti-aircraft guns, and 5 inch and 8 inch guns. My father was a gunner on a 5 inch mount. The 5 inch guns were multi-purpose, used for ship-to-ship, ship-to-shore, and anti-aircraft. My father has related to me that his scariest moments were during Kamikaze attacks, when the enemy planes had to be literally "blown from the sky", or centrifigul force would carry them into the ship. Fortunately, no Kamikaze planes hit the Pensacola, but she was strafed, bombed, shelled, and torpedoed.

She survived the war, only to be sunk off the coast of Washington State during nuclear bombardment testing in the late '40s. An unmagnanimouse end to a grand career. She was a proud ship, and her officers and crew fought with unwavering courage.

As an aside, I just want to say that I abhor the treatment our Vietnam Veterans have received by this country. Vietnam was a "dirty" war in my opinion, created I believe, by miss-guided politicians. The men and women who fought there were simply doing their duty, answering the call from our armed forces. In my eyes they are all heroes. I salute you!

**Thanksgiving! (**4th Thursday in November**)**

Find Out What You Know About Thanksgiving!

This page is dedicated to the holiday that encourages us to step back and give thanks for all the blessings we have. On this holiday site, you will discover some unusual things about the history of Thanksgiving, and you can take a fun little quiz to find out how much you know.

Take the quiz first, then read about the history of Thanksgiving to find out about the answers you missed! When you're finished, I would appreciate it if you would sign the guestbook to let me know what you learned!

**Pearl Harbor Day (**December 7**)**

In Memoriam:

At dawn on Sunday, December 7, 1941, naval aviation forces of the Empire of Japan attacked the United States Pacific Fleet center at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii and other military targets. The goal of this attack was to sufficiently cripple the US Fleet so that Japan could then attack and capture the Phillipines and Indo-China and so secure access to the raw materials needed to maintain its position as a global military and economic power. This would enable Japan to further extend the empire to include Australia, New Zealand, and India (the ultimate boundaries planned for the so-called "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere"). The prevailing belief within the Japanese military and political establishment was that eventually, with the then expected German defeat of Great Britain and Soviet Russia, the United States' non-involvement in the European war, and Japan's control of the Pacific, that the world power structure would stabilize into three major spheres of influence:

# Christmas (December 25)

At Christmas, people remember when Jesus Christ was born and the Christian religion started. Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem, about two thousands years ago. The people who followed Jesus' teaching were the first Christians.

Today, Christmas is a very important time in the Christian year, but it is also very important to those who do not go to church. It is a time for buying and giving presents, having parties, and being with family.

People start to get ready for Christmas in late October or early November. Shop - keepers decorate their shops with lights, trees and other decorations, and shoppers start to look for presents. Shops get very busy and stay open later. People with family and friends in other countries often send them cards and presents, and everyone begins to make plans for the coming holiday.

Many children have parties at school, and many adults have parties at work in December. Most people have 25 and 26 December off work, and many have a week off, from 25 December to 1 January. They usually spend this time at home with their family or visiting family who live far away.

The Christmas holiday begins on 24 December: Christmas Eve. People often stop work early and have a drink together, or finish their Christmas a shopping. They cover the presents in special papers, and put them under the tree.

Many people go to church at midnight on Christmas Eve. They hear the Christmas story and sing carols.

Christmas Day ( 25 December ) is a holiday. Children usually wake up very early. They look in their stockings to see what Santa put there for them. After breakfast they open their other presents around the tree.

Christmas dinner is in the afternoon and is the biggest meal of the day. Before they start to eat, people pull crackers. The crackers make a loud noise, and have a small game and paper party hat inside.

Dinner is usually turkey with lots of winter vegetables and then hot mince pies or a Christmas pudding.

At three o'clock many people in Britain turn their televisions on because the Queen say

"Happy Christmas " to everyone.

A lot of people go for a walk in the afternoon or play with their new games.

In the evening, people eat cold meat, and Christmas cake ( a kind of fruit cake ), fruit and nuts, but they are usually not very hungry because of t5heir big dinner.

Another British Christmas tradition is the pantomime. A pantomime is a kind of play with a children's story ( like Cinderella or Aladdin ) and lots of music and songs. Children like pantomimes because they can join in and make a lot of noise. They often go with their school or family.

The Christmas season ends on the twelfth day after 25 December, which is 6 January. Most people take down their Christmas trees and decorations by this date, and some people think it is bad luck not to do that.