Christmas Origins: Decrypting Personages and symbols

<http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/history/flowers.htm>

**The Poinsettia**

With its beautiful, red, star-shape poinsettia is a favorite flower in the United States. In Central America it is called the "Flame Leaf" or "Flower of the Holy Night". Now very popular in the US, the American settlers were not quite familiar with this one only a couple of centuries back. A native of Mexico, it was brought here over a hundred years ago by Dr. Joel Poinsett, the first US ambassador to Mexico. Most of the poinsettias used these days come from California.

**Legend:**   
The legend of the poinsettia comes from Mexico. It tells of a girl named Maria and her little brother Pablo. They were very poor but always looked forward to the Christmas festival. Each year a large manger scene was set up in the village church, and the days before Christmas were filled with parades and parties. The two children loved Christmas but were always saddened because they had no money to buy presents. They especially wished that they could give something to the church for the Baby Jesus. But they had nothing.

One Christmas Eve, Maria and Pablo set out for church to attend the service. On their way they picked some weeds growing along the roadside and decided to take them as their gift to the Baby Jesus in the manger scene. Of course they were teased by other children when they arrived with their gift, but they said nothing for they knew they had given what they could. Maria and Pablo began placing the green plants around the manger and miraculously, the green top leaves turned into bright red petals, and soon the manger was surrounded by beautiful star-like flowers and so we see them today.

**The Christmas Rose**  
The Christmas rose, also called the Snow or Winter Rose, is a well known English plant. It is traditionally regarded as a true Christmas flower. It blooms in the depths of winter in the mountains of Central Europe.

**Legend:**  
There is a nice legend associated with it. Legend links it with the birth of Christ and a little shepherdess named Madelon.

As Madelon tented her sheep one cold and wintry night, wise men and other shepherds passed by the snow covered field where she was with their gifts for the Christ Child. The wise men carried the rich gifts of gold, myrrh and frankincense and the shepherds, fruits, honey and doves. Poor Madelon began to weep at the thought of having nothing, not even a simple flower for the Newborn King. An angel, seeing her tears, brushed away the snow revealing a most beautiful white flower tipped with pink - the Christmas rose.

Also in central and northern Europe it is the custom to break off a branch of a cherry tree at the beginning of the Advent and keep it in water in a warm room; the flowers should burst into bloom at Christmas time.

Read more at <http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/history/flowers.htm#g3Ju7zSO8wIvxgp2.99>

**Santa Claus**

Most religious historians and experts in folklore believe that there is no valid evidence to indicate that St. Nicholas ever existed as a human. In fact, there are quite a few indicators that his life story was simply recycled from those of Pagan gods. Many other ancient Pagan gods and goddesses were similarly Christianized in the early centuries of the Church. His legends seems to have been mainly created out of myths attributed to the Greek God Poseidon, the Roman God Neptune, and the Teutonic God Hold Nickar. The Christian church created a fictional life history for St. Nicholas. He was given the name Hagios Nikolaos (a.k.a. St. Nicholas of Myra).

Many legends and miracles are attributed to Saint Nicholas.When he was an infant, his mother only nursed him on Wednesdays and Fridays; he fasted the remaining days. During his lifetime, he adored children and often threw gifts anonymously into the windows of their homes. A sailor who fell overboard was reputedly saved by Nicholas when the saint walked on water, retrieved the sailor and carried him back to the ship. After an innkeeper had robbed & dismembered some students, Nicholas reputedly re-assembled them and restored them to life. Nicholas took pity on a poverty-stricken family with 3 daughters who faced the threat of being forced into prostitution because they had no wedding dowries. For two daughters he crept-up to their house at night and threw bags of gold through a bedroom window. For the last daughter, he threw a bag of gold down the chimney -- which landed in a stocking she had set by the fireplace for drying. The traditional association of chimneys & stockings with Santa Claus comes from this story. Nicholas was also noted for his generosity with children -- he would reward them with treats if they had studied their catechism & behaved well. Nicholas was therefore patron saint of schoolchildren & sailors.

The transformation of Saint Nicholas to Santa Claus happened largely in America -- with inspiration from the Dutch. In the early days of Dutch New York, "Sinterklass" became known among the English-speaking as "Santa Claus" (or "Saint Nick"). In 1809 Washington Irving, a member of the New York Historical Society (which promoted a Dutch Saint Nicholas as its patron saint), created a tale of a chubby, pipe-smoking little Saint Nicholas who rode a magic horse through the air visiting all houses in New York. The elfish figure was small enough to slide down chimneys with gifts for the good children and switches for the bad ones.

Santa Claus is the sum total of several trends, customs and beliefs that only got unified about a century and a half ago. His story is told through an ex-animation of the 3 names given to him in America: St. Nicholas, Kriss Kringle and Santa Clause.

Much of the present form of the Santa story is undoubtedly due to the works of Clement Clark Moore and the cartoons of Thomas Nast. In 1822, Dr. Moore from New York wrote a Christmas poem, "A visit from St. Nicholas" to read out to his children on X'mas Eve. The following year one Ms Harriet Butler read the poem and requested a copy from him. Later she sent it without Dr. Moore's consent for publishing to Troy, New York Sentinel. Consequently it was published and became popular. In 1938 Dr. Moore revealed that St. Nicholas was his creation. And since then it has appeared countless times.

The 19th century American cartoonist Nast who had lived on the same West 23rd Street as Dr. Moore, did a series of Christmas drawings for Harper's Weekly. It was where the today's much familiar fat and rosy cheeked Santa with large beard and ringing bell made his debut after being modified from fat, little elf-like creature depicted in Dr. Moore's poem.

And perhaps what made Santa more realistic is the classic reply of the editor of New York Sun in response to the 8-year old Virginia O' Hanlon's query whether there really was a Santa Claus. The ed replied "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus', and made Santa living for ever to the kids.

Read more at <http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/history/santa_claus.htm#ZWuOr0IYDMPdMvJ1.99>

**Christmas Tree**

The concept of Christmas tree was first introduced by Germany long back in 16th century. It was the time when Christians brought adorned Christian tree to their homes. Wooden Christmas tree and evergreens bedecked the new looking homes. Candles are also used to give the homes a better and different look. Eventually, people of the other places of Europe also had started to follow the traditions and cultures related to the Christmas tree. Christmas tree looked even more fashionable and attractive when the husband of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, had bejeweled the first English tree at Windsor candle with candles, sweets, fruits and gingerbread in 1841. The tradition was followed by many English families later on. All kinds of extravagant items were used to decorate the tree and homes. According to Charles Dickens the Christmas trees were well covered and adorned with the fine looking dolls, miniature furniture, costume jewelry, little musical instruments, toy guns, swords, candy and fruits in 1850.

Most of the Americans had seen the peculiarities and oddness more than anything else in the Christmas tree in 19th century. It was on display in 1830s for the first time by the German settlers of Pennsylvania. The purpose was nice though. It was on display to raise money for the local church. Once the tree was set up outside of a church, people of Local Township didn’t take it positively. An outburst of anger was noticed; they thought it as a return of paganism. People of the parish asked the minister to take necessary steps and take it down.  
  
Even though the popularity of Christmas tree was notable in Germany but by the 1890s Christmas ornaments started to arrive in the US market as well. However, the convention for both Europe and US was quite different. Europeans liked to use small Christmas trees of 4 feet height where as Americans preferred gigantic Christmas trees, length of which varied enormously.

In the early 20th century Americans were inclined towards the homemade ornaments. Homemade decorations were mainly used to bedeck the Christmas trees but the German- Americans had continued their old and impressive tradition of adorning the Christmas trees with apples, nuts and marzipan cookies. Popcorns were the new items of decorations along with berries and nuts.  
  
The Christmas lights had helped the Christmas tree to beam when it is dark with the aid of the Electricity. Christmas trees were on display across the country. The beautifully decorated edifices mark the onset of the Christmas holidays.

In the early days, horns and bells were used to scare the evil spirits. Before that angels and fairies were used as signs of bringing good luck.

Angels, peacocks, numerous birds and many stars were usually used during Christmas to decorate Christmas tree in Poland. Beautifully painted wooden decorations, animals and children figures were the chief items which were used in Sweden. Tiny Danish flags, mobile of bells stars, snowflakes and small hearts were hanged to decorate the Christmas tree in Denmark. On the other hand, tiny fans and paper lamps were used during Christmas in Japan. The awe-inspiring trees were covered with straw bird cages, stars and geometric shapes in Lithuania. In the forthcoming year everyone wishes for good crops from the almighty through straw. Ornaments of painted egg shells were portrayed on Czechoslovakian trees.

To bring good luck in the daily life spider and web were used on the Christmas tree in Ukraine. According to a folktale an unfortunate and poor woman woke up in the early Christmas morning to find the branches wrapped with spider webs for decorating Christmas tree. She found out that the spider webs turned to silver by the bright sunlight of rising sun.  
  
  
**Legends of the Christmas tree:**

Many legends exist about the origin of the Christmas tree. The organizer of Christian church in France and Germany, Saint Boniface, the English monk was the protagonist in one of these stories. Once upon a time when he was traveling, he came across a group of pagans who had congregated around an oak tree. He saw that these pagans were about to offer a sacrifice of human child to the God Thor. He eagerly wanted to stop them from taking the little fellow’s life. He decided to hit and break the tree with one mighty blow of his fist. A small fir tree was grown in place of the oak tree. According to Boniface the tree stood the eternal life of Christ. He told the pagan worshippers that the little fir tree symbolizes life.  
  
There is another story of Martin Luther. Martin Luther was the founder of the protestant faith. While he was walking through a forest on a Christmas Eve, he was impressed by the beauty of millions of stars showing their lights through the evergreen tree branches. He was mesmerized with this fabulous vista and had decided to cut down a small tree. He took the tree for his family. To watch the same marvelous sight of the forest, he had decorated the wooden branches of the tree with a number of candles.

Another legend tells the story of an unfortunate woodsman who met a mislaid and starving child on one Christmas Eve. Even thought the woodsman was really poor but he arranged food and offered shelter to the child. The woodsman woke up in the very next morning to find a beaming tree outside his home and surprisingly he found one as well. The child was really the Christ child who camouflaged. The child rewarded the poor woodsman the glittering tree for his charity.

“Paradise Play” is the origin of Christmas tree, at least some feel it. Previously not many people could read. So, the plays were organized to teach the tales of the Bible all over Europe. The Paradise Play was performed on 24th December each year. It showed the creation of man. To perform it, apple trees were needed. But, in winter apple trees don’t bare fruits. So evergreens were hung with apples.

The story of spiders and Christmas trees were popular in Germany. In earlier days, people wanted their animals to be a part of the Christmas celebration because it was believed that the Christ child was born in a stable. So, they allowed their animals to come inside their homes to see the Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. Homemakers didn’t allow spider to come inside their homes because they didn’t want to spoil things inside. Spiders were unhappy for this and they complained to the Christ child. The Christ child was sad for the spiders and helped them get into the home at late night to watch the Christmas tree. Spiders enjoyed the whole night, they moved slowly and happily from one branch to another. The trees were covered with webs. The housewives were really contented on the next day seeing what spiders had done. All the cobwebs were turned into the sparkling tinsel with the help of the Christ child. The tradition of decorating the Christmas tree with the tinsel is still followed.  
  
  
**Decorating the Christmas Tree: A Timeless Tradition**  
  
Enter into any of the departmental stores during the month of December and you will notice that plenty of decorating items like plastic ornaments, beaming garland and blinking lights are there in the store. Christmas has always been a popular holiday all over the world since the inception of the Christmas celebration. But, previously the home and various edifices were not adorned spending hefty amount of money. However, the scenario is different today. The ornaments that are used during Christmas for decoration have become costly. It is a multimillion dollar industry now. It is important to know how this tradition of adorning homes became very popular. It is an integral part of the Christmas decorations now.

The tradition of ornamenting the Christmas tree and homes during Christmas arose from the Roman and Christian cultures. Early Christians believed that flowers of certain trees were bloomed irrationally on Christmas Eve as homage to Jesus’ birth. The impressive traditions of decorating the homes with angel tree toppers have emerged from the early Christian belief and Roman practices.

Even though the Europeans had started to adorn various structures and trees in Europe from 17th century but the first written account of a “Christmas tree” had appeared in 1605. According to the John Matthew’s “The Winter Solstice”, German citizens used to decorate the trees with “roses cut out of many colored paper, apples, wafers, gold-foil, [and] sweets”. More than 100 years later, the professor Karl Gottfried Kissling of the University of Witten burg wrote that the people at that point of time loved to decorate trees and homes with candles.

The particular practice was not liked by the religious leaders initially. However, it spread all over the world later on. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert of England showcased their lavishly decorated tree at their palace in 1840. By the early 1900s Offering gifts and the tales of Santa Clause became the integral parts of Christmas celebrations along with the Christmas tree decorations.

The patterns of decorations have changed over the years. Today evergreens are used in large numbers to adorn the Christmas trees. Hand crafted and edible items were predominately used previously. Nuts, candles, fruits and colored papers were the commonly used items for decorations. Ornaments brought from stores are used more often than not. Chain of electric lights is used to decorate the branches of the trees now. The essence of the festival is in the congregation of the family members at one particular place. Exchanging gifts and love still are the central ideas of the majestic Christmas carnival.  
  
  
Read more at <http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/history/xmas_tree.htm#1eg7v5YUYYrepjsU.99>

**Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer**

Reindeer has come to be associated with the Christmas riding the tradition of the Santa Claus. As Santa is believed to have from the far away North, what else than a reindeer drawn sledge can serve as a better carriage?

It is man's most ancient herd animal, the first animals being raised around 15,000 years ago. Up until about 12,000 years ago, reindeer grazed over a vast area of Europe. Rock paintings by primitive peoples featuring them are widespread, as are discoveries of tools made from reindeer horn. there was even a period of European prehistory in a part of France called Dordogne that is sometimes called "the civilization of reindeer." The only surviving part of such a civilization might be found in Lapland, which is the northern part of Norway, Sweden and Finland.

There are only a few thousand Lapps, but they own herds of many thousands of reindeer. From them the Lapps obtain meat, milk, hair for weaving, hides to make tents and clothing, and horn, from which they make households. They are also used to pull heavily laden sleds. It is all these multiple uses that have made reindeer so endearing to people in the North.

Caribou, the name by which the Americans are more familiar with reindeer, comes from an Indian word.

Read more at <http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/history/reindeer.htm#5AWzTdYdHKlqO3Eu.99>

**The Real Christmas Story**

**Nazareth, a village of Palestine**

Some 2000 years ago a young lady, named Mary, about 15 years of age, was praying in her home. All of a sudden she saw a stranger standing before her. She did not know how he had come in. The visitor was brighter than the light of day, and Mary frightened. She understood that he was not a man but an angel, when he greeted her: " Hail, you who are full of grace; the Lord is with you."

The angel told her not to be afraid. Then he conveyed her the message that she would bear a son to be called Jesus." He shall be great," said the angel. "and men will know him for the Son of the Most High," which is one of the names of God. The Lord God would give him the throne of his ancestor, David, king of the Jews; he would make him a king, but one different from earthly kings, for unlike human kingdoms and empires, " his kingdom," said the angel, " shall never have an end." Mary who was not yet married, asked the angel how it could be. He answered her: " The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

Mary had always been obedient to the law of God, bow she confirmed that his will was hers. Thus this humble maid was chosen to become the mother of one, whom the angel called the Son of the Most High, to be named Jesus, which means Savior.

She remembered that 700 years earlier Prophet Isaiah, had foretold: "A virgin will conceive". It was also announced that the Savior would be of the family of David to which she belonged, as did Joseph, the young man to whom she was betrothed. Mary, full of joy, thanked God daily for his gift. Her elder cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, also congratulated her on being God's choice.

Some time later, Mary was married to a young man of David's clan, called Joseph. A carpenter by profession, he was God-fearing, pious and of great virtue. Before the marriage, learning Mary's condition, he had felt puzzled. But during the night, in a dream an angel of God reassured him, inviting him to take Mary as his wife, for it was by the power of the Holy Spirit that she had conceived a child. "Mary", the angel said, "will bear a Son, whom you shall call Jesus, for he is to save his people from their sins." So Joseph took Mary into his house; he kept her secret and protected the all pure virgin, ready to become the guardian of her Child.

A few months after the marriage, Joseph and Mary left Nazareth and traveled to Bethlehem, the birth place of King David. The Roman Emperor, Augustus, wanting to know the size of the population of his empire, had ordered a census to be taken. In Palestine, a province of the Empire, the Governor issued orders that all Jews should register their names in their ancestral home town. Joseph set out for Bethlehem on foot, leading a donkey on which sat Mary. They traveled peacefully for 4-5 days. When they reached Bethlehem, the town and the local inn were crowded with visitors. Joseph and Mary found shelter and privacy in one of the grottoes situated outside the town. There shepherds sometimes took refuge with their sheep during the night. In this grotto Mary was delivered of a son. She wrapped him in swaddling-clothes and laid him to rest in a manger, where they kept the food for the animals. Jesus, the Savior, was born into the world.

He was born in absolute poverty and simplicity. But God wanted the world to hear of the good news without delay.

At a short distance from Bethlehem, a group of shepherds had gathered their flocks for the night's rest. All of a sudden, they were awakened and startled by a bright apparition, such as they had never seen before. They heard an angel announce to them: "Do not be afraid; behold the news I bring you is good news of a great rejoicing for the whole people. This day in the city of David, a Savior has been born for you, no other than the Lord Christ. This is the sign by which you are to know him; you will find a child still in swaddling-clothes, lying in a manger."

Without delay, they started in search of the Lord Christ. The city of David they knew was Bethlehem. There they went to those grottoes and looked inside. In one of them, they saw a man and a woman watching over a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. Entering it they told of the angel who had announced to them the happy news. Having paid their homage to the young king, and offered some little lambs in token of their devotion, they went back to their flocks, their hearts full of joy. They marveled that the Child-King was so feeble, so approachable to poor people like them, with dirty hands, patched clothes, but hearts melting like butter in the sun of his life.

Eight days after birth the Boy was circumcised according to the religious prescriptions of the Jews, and given the name Jesus as the angel had told. On the 40th day Jesus was taken to Jerusalem to be offered to God in the temple. As they entered the temple, a man of great holiness called Simeon, stepped forward to meet them. God had revealed to him that he would not die before seeing the Savior. Led by the Spirit he had come to the temple, where he met Mary and Joseph bringing the Child Jesus.

The Child was also recognized by an old woman called Anna, a widow 84 years old. Her husband died 7 years after the marriage and it was since then she had lived a life of prayer, in expectation of the Savior. The priest took the Child, and offered him to God without comment; he did not know who he was. An old man and an old woman alone had greeted the Lord coming to his temple. They had acknowledged the end of the old Law, which like Simeon could now retire from the stage of history. The old Law was antiquated; the time had come for its exit. The old order could retire with Simeon and Anna, whilst the new order was being prepared into the world by Mary.

It was then Joseph and Mary came back to Bethlehem. They settled down in a house where they were to receive some remarkable visitors.

A group of wise men, called Magi, had seen an unknown star moving in the heavens some time previously. They knew that the Messias was expected about this time, and connected the appearance of this star with the birth of one. They felt an inclination to follow the star, which seemed to invite them. They set off on their camels, provided with presents for the newborn king and journeyed to Jerusalem. In quest of a young king, these scholars, men of high standing, entered into King Herod's residence to enquire where they could find the newly born king of the Jews. The news of Messias' birth astonished all in the palace. For they knew nothing of this. Herod, a half-Bedouin succeeded in getting to the throne with the support of the Romans, and contrived to remain on it with the help of spies and assassins. This proud and selfish ruler was not a man to accept any challenge to his authority and decided that the young competitor must disappear. The scholars told Herod that Bethlehem was named by the holy scriptures to be the birth place of the Savior, Herod had directed these pilgrims from the East to continue their journey to Bethlehem, and find the young king out there. He also instructed them to call again on their return journey, to inform him of the whereabouts of the Child; he himself wished to go and pay him homage, he added.

On leaving Jerusalem, the wise men were overjoyed to see again the star. It led them to Bethlehem and stopped above the place where the Child lay. They entered the house they prostrated themselves at the feet of the Child with deep faith. Then opening the treasures they had brought, offered their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

After paying homage to the Child, the Magi started on their way home. They avoided Jerusalem, having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod.

Soon understood that they had eluded him. Greatly angered and anxious for his throne, he sent soldiers to Bethlehem with orders to kill all male children below the age of two years. The soldiers reached there and did as ordered.

Herod did not know that this massacre was useless. For, Joseph, warned by an angel in his sleep, had taken the Child and his mother Mary away. They were on the road to Egypt, the road to voluntary exile. The Light had come to the world and men whose actions were bad tried to extinguish this light: they preferred to live in darkness to keep their bad deeds secret. To Joseph and Mary, Egypt meant safety, but also the bitter bread exile in a land where the Jew had been a captive doing the work of slaves. Despite all these the Child was safe. Joseph and Mary, accustomed to hard work, with simple needs, kept in perfect peace their soul centered on God. He had saved the Child from the sword of Herod's executioners, he would protect them in all circumstances.

Meanwhile, King Herod, a man of incredible cruelty and duplicity, a killer of his own wives and grown-up sons had been arrested by his own son. There he had developed fatal illness. And died shrouded in curses and the hatred of the whole population. With his death there spread over Jerusalem and the whole state a general sense of relief. Once again the angel warned Joseph in his sleep that he could now take the Child and Mary back into his own country. Soon Joseph and Mary along with the Child went back to his own country into Galilee to the village of Nazareth. Henceforth, the Child of Joseph and Mary, the Messias, would be known by all as the son of Joseph, the carpenter from Nazareth.

Read more at <http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/history/birth.htm#DWQZty3iYxu7SRuu.99>

**Elves**

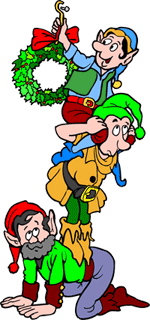
Elves are known to be tiny, dwarf-like creatures, either male or female, with pointed ears. They are youthful but immortal and have magical powers that can control what you see and experience. Their abodes are said to be underground, in forests, or in springs and wells, but no one really knows about it because they keep their location a secret! It is also believed that on the 6th of January the elves light up their torches and come down from their secret village in the mountain to play in a hidden field to celebrate the last day of Christmas.

But do you know who these elves are? Are they real creatures or just a myth? What is the story behind their origin? What is the secret behind them?

Elves have a fascinating history that is associated with Germanic paganism. Elves are originally seen to be the creation of Germanic paganism who thought them to be the creatures of light who lived in the heavens. Elves have been depicted as male or female, tiny or dwarf-like, youthful and immortal with magical powers. Later they were often referred to as living underground, in forests, springs and wells. Elves generally were magical beings who could control what people see as well as experience. Elves and fairies are also highly associated with the mushroom "Amanita Muscaria", also referred to as "magic mushrooms" not only in art but in Psychedelic experiences.

Centuries ago, in the pagan times, Scandinavian people believed that elves are house gnomes who guarded their homes against evil. If you were good, the elves were good to you, but if you were bad, the mischievous elves would play tricks on you. Although these gnomes mostly were benevolent, they could quickly turn nasty when not properly treated, so it is told. Some of the tricks they enjoyed playing were giving you nightmares by sitting on your head while you were dreaming, tangling your hair as you slept, making your milk turn sour, and stealing your sausages. Folks believed that if they left a bowl of porridge on the doorstep at night, the elves would be happy and not subject them to their ornery antics. Throughout the centuries, they were either loved or loathed. Some people even believed them to be trolls and cannibals. The perception of gnomes largely depended on whether a person was naughty, or nice.

By the mid-1800's the true purpose of the elves was revealed by the Scandinavians. Elves - already a tradition associated with story telling and magic, assumed a new significance in the mid-1800's and their true intention began to be held as nothing else but to help Father Christmas (Santa Claus). This was the handiwork of the popular Scandinavian writers of the day. At this time, elaborate Christmas festivals regained popularity and Scandinavian story writers such as Thile, Toplius, Rydberg sketched the elves' true role in modern life: fairies that are somewhat mischievous, but the true friends and helpers of Father Christmas. It is during this period when the elves began to be referred to as the "Christmas elves", or simply "elves", and not "house gnomes" anymore. Artists such as Hansen and Nystrm completed the picture of elves for us. It is now began to be held that the elves help Santa design and make the wonderful toys and gifts he brings to children. They were said to have other duties as well. Some elves take care of Santa's reindeer and keep his sleigh in good condition, ready to fly through the skies on Christmas Eve. Others help Santa keep his naughty and nice list in order, and some elves guard the secret location of Santa's village. Elves make sudden appearances in the days before Christmas, to keep an eye on each children and see which of them are behaving well and obeying their parents. They are believed to be Santa's secret agents and report their findings back to him. Children who are unkind and misbehave have their names added to the naughty list and may wake up Christmas morning to find their filled with lumps of coal or bundles of twigs!

The elves could be helpful now. Their mischievousness, however, was still evident in the variety of stories told about them. Tales suggested that how you were treated by the elves depended on whether the person was thought to be naughty or nice! Particularly in America, the diminutive, green with pointy ears type are depicted as Santa's helpers making toys in his workshop at the North Pole.

At one stage it was thought that the elves live in Father Christmas' (Santa's) village in North Pole. However, in 1925 it was discovered that there are no reindeer in the North Pole but there are lots in Lapland, Finland. Since reindeers draw the sleigh of Santa Claus, he must be living in an area, where there are large number of these animals available. Since then, it is believed that there is a secret village with a secret passage, somewhere in Lapland, where Santa, his wife and his team of elves live. Nobody has actually seen their village because the passage to it is a secret that is known only to Father Christmas and the elves. But people believe that it is somewhere on the Korvatunturi mountain in the Savukoski county of Lapland, Finland, which is on the Finnish-Russian border.

Some people that Santa employs six elves, while others think that he has nine elf assistants. Others think that there are as many as 13 elves living with Santa to help him. Elves are the children of Gryla and Leppaludi and are very clever. They help Santa to design toys and process requests of children that are sent to them through snail mail or emails. The popular Western names of the Christmas elves helping Santa Claus are:

1. Alabaster Snowball (Administrator of the Naughty & Nice list).  
  
2. Bushy Evergreen (Inventor of the magic toy-making machine).  
  
3. Pepper Minstix (Guardian of the secret of where Father Christmas's village is located).  
  
4. Shinny Upatree (The oldest friend of Santa and the cofounder of the secret village in Lapland).  
  
5. Sugarplum Mary (Head of the Sweat Treats, she is also known as Mary Christmas. She is an assistant to Mrs Claus and helps her in the kitchen).  
  
6. Wunorse Openslae (Designer of Father Christmas's sleigh and responsible for its maintenance. He also looks after the reindeers and it is believed that his reindeers reach speeds faster than Christmas tree lights).

The ancient folklores of Iceland mention elves by the names of Askasleikir, Bjugnakraekir, Faldafeykir, Gattathefur, Giljagaur, Gluggagaegir, Ketkrokur, Kertasnikir, Pottasleikir, Skyrjarmur, Stekkjarstaur, Stufur and Thvorusleikir. Other names of Santa's elves that can be found are Baggalutur, Bjalmans barnid, Bjalminn sjalfur, Bitahaengir, Frodusleikir, Laekjaraegir, Raudur, Redda, Sledda, Steingrimur, Syrjusleikir, Tifill and Tutur.

According to some legends and post-Christian folklore especially in Europe, elves are mischievous pranksters who make special appearances during the lead up to Christmas. For example "Albtraum" is a German word for nightmare which also means "elf dream". Earlier the word meant "elf pressure" as it was believed that nightmares are a result of an elf sitting on the dreamer's head! Elves also were believed to braid people's hair while sleeping, make milk sour and run off with sausages. People of Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Norway believed that a bowl of porridge left out would prevent elves from playing tricks on people especially during the festive season! Today, elves associated with Christmas are symbols to remind children to be good and not naughty!

Read more at <http://www.theholidayspot.com/christmas/history/elves.htm#fHfU8XUUOawUt2rt.99>

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|  |  |  | **submitted by Laura Witcher Goldstein** | | |  |
|  |  |  | One of the most often seen symbols of Christmas is the candy cane. Not only are candy canes used as a sweet Christmastime treat but they are also used for decoration. How did this seasonal candy get its familiar shape, and when did it become part of Christmas tradition?  When the practice of using Christmas trees to celebrate Christmas became popular in Europe the people there began making decorations for their trees. Many of the decorations were food items including cookies and candy. The predecesor of our modern candy cane appeared at about this time in the seventeenth century. These were straight, white sticks of sugar candy.  Part of the Christmas celebration at the Cologne Cathedral were pagents of living creches. In about 1670 the choirmaster there had sticks of candy bent into the shape of a shepherd’s crook and passed them out to children who attended the ceremonies. This became a popular tradition, and eventually the practice of passing out the sugar canes at living creche ceremonies spread throughout Europe.  The use of candy canes on Christmas trees made its way to America by the 1800’s, however during this time they were still pure white. They are represented this way on Christmas cards made before 1900, and it is not until the early 20th century that they appear with their familiar red stripes.  Many people have given religious meaning to the shape and form of the candy cane. It is said that its shape is like the letter “J” in Jesus’ name. It is also in the shape of the shepherds’ crook, symbolic of how Jesus, like the “Good Shepherd” watches over his children like little lambs. It is a hard candy, solid like a “rock”, the foundation of the Church. The flavor of peppermint is similar to another member of the mint family, hyssop. In the Old Testament hyssop was used for purification and sacrifice, and this is said to symbolize the purity of Jesus and the sacrifice he made.  Some say the white of the candy cane represents the purity of Jesus and his virgin birth. The bold red stripe represents God’s love. The three fine stripes are said by some to represent the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Others say they represent the blood spilled at the beating Jesus received at the hands of the Roman soldiers.  From its plain early beginnings to its familiar shape and color of today, the candy cane is a symbol of Christmas and a reminder of the meaning of the holiday. | | | |  |  |
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