

Midwinter's nightly frost is hard -
Brightly the stars are beaming;
Fast asleep is the lonely yard,
All, at midnight, are dreaming.
Clear is the moon, and the snowdrifts shine,
Glistening white, on fir and pine,
Covers on rooflets making,
None but Tomten is waking.

"Tomten," by Viktor Rydberg

Welcome to Vintage Americana, exploring and restoring rural American culture. I'm your hostess, Holly, and this is episode 42, "Half Way Out of the Dark." Today we're going to explore Christmas and midwinter folklore. Some of which is enchanting, and some of it is more than a little dark. Much of what we'll touch on today is, again, heavy on the Northern European influence. Because, again, you're getting a taste of my cultural traditions.

While I don't buy into the whole theory that Christmas is nothing but a retread of pagan celebrations, it's certainly true that most cultures mark the turning of the year - the point at which days begin to finally STOP getting shorter and begin to lengthen again. Even Dr. Who (who is mostly post-religion), goes off on a monologue about the fear, and the hope, and the point at which we know we're "half-way out of the dark." And it's certainly true that Christmas makes use of that powerful feeling - placing the birth of the Christ child at that point when the world is at it's darkest... and about to come into the light.

We may as well start with the most famous, and obvious bit of folklore - Santa Claus himself. Like many of our other traditions, Santa is an import. Saint Nicholas of Myra was a figure associated with December festivities in the Netherlands, and he came over with the residents of New Amsterdam. Sinter Klaus of the Dutch immigrants moved into Santa Claus for their English neighbors. The juxtaposition of the two cultures formed this new synthesis, which overrode Father Christmas of English tradition.

Not that a lot of elements of American Christmas don't come from England, because they do. For which we can credit Washington Irving. He wrote four essays praising the older English customs regarding celebrating Christmas and in many ways popularized the traditions we cleave to, even now. Before Irving, a lot of places in the early American

states had outlawed Christmas celebrations as largely being drunken revels. Irving's descriptions of feasting, dancing, and general good cheer struck a cord.

One of Irving's tales revolved around a Dutch scouting party that was shipwrecked on Manhattan, and "good St. Nicholas came riding over the tops of the trees, in that self-same wagon wherein he brings his yearly presents to children."

Now, Irving doesn't mention reindeer. (And the Dutch Sinter Klaus rides a white horse). But an anonymous poem published in 1821 in New York mentions a single reindeer:

Old Santeclaus with much delight
His reindeer drives this frosty night.
O'er chimneytops, and tracks of snow,
To bring his yearly gifts to you.

And then, of course, a couple decades later, Clement Moore gives us the sleigh and eight tiny reindeer.

Why reindeer? No one seems to be entirely sure. Other than that Santa had started to be associated with the far North. And reindeer were a mysterious sort of animal from that area.

But it might be that Scandinavian immigrants brought that little detail with them.

The Finns, in particular, have Joulupukki. Now he's considered something of a "Finnish Santa." But he started as the Yule Buck - a frightening figure in a mask and horns, who wore a fur coat. Joulupukki shares some characteristics with Odin, the Norse God, and is also associated with the Wild Hunt.

The Wild Hunt is a topic all of its own, and worth some reading. In this instance, you can think of it as ghostly hunting party that rode through the skies - heard but not seen. Associated with winter storms, and particularly with Midwinter so we can see how it fits in here.

As for Joulupukki, he's now something of a Father Christmas figure, who drives a sleigh pulled by reindeer. And is often somewhat oversimplified as the "Finnish Santa" in articles on Christmas in many lands that try to cram all the folklore into a single

framework.

The mantle of the Yule Buck, meanwhile, has passed to the more ephemeral Yule Goat, who visits houses to keep an eye on Christmas preparations. Sometimes a neighbor will sneak into your home and leave a Yule Goat. And you can only be rid of him by sneaking in and leaving him to watch over yet another neighbor. Modern versions are made of straw or wood, usually with a festive red ribbon.

The other folklore creature that may have been imported with Scandinavian immigrants are Santa's elves. Before they made toys for Santa, and before Herbie wanted to be a dentist, the tomten of Sweden (or nisse of Norway), took care of the farmstead. Not cute and lovable creatures, the tomten could be vindictive if not placated with a bowl of porridge left out each night. An unhappy tomte might cause chaos on the farm or even deliver a poisoned bite to the residents. The poem I started today's episode with is actually about one farm's tomte and his lonely caretaking duties on Midwinter's night. The poem has become a Christmas tradition, and was even adapted into a beloved childrens' book by Astrid Lindgren, the author of Pippi Longstocking. Tomten are now a part of Christmas, and that bowl of porridge gets left out on Christmas eve.

At least the goat and the tomten have morphed into benign and even happy elements. Not so Gryla and the Yule Lads of Iceland. Gryla the giantess listens to whispers about naughty children all year round. At yuletide, she goes out and collects the naughty ones to cook into a stew for the next year.

Her sons, the Yule Lads, are 13 trolls who each have a particular awful behavioral trait. They were frightening creatures, but their activities were confined to the night, as the sunlight would turn them to stone. A good incentive to try to have chores done and be inside by dark!

And then there is the Yule Cat. No ordinary tabby, the enormous black feline lives with Gryla. He goes out to prowl around and eat any child who didn't get new clothes for Christmas. This isn't as random as it sounds - pre-industrial revolution, everyone who helped with the wool harvest, and finished the spinning and weaving, would have a new set of clothes. So, new clothes of Christmas meant the wearer had been industrious.

While the Yule Lads have been sanitized into red-clad, fluffy-bearded pranksters who leave goodies, neither Gryla nor the Cat have lost their dark image. In fact, all of them

were so terrifying that Iceland passed a law in the 19th century to prohibit using tales of Gryla and the Yule Lads to try to terrorize children into good behavior.

I think I'm glad that's one set of traditions that didn't get imported.

Although the Germans and Pennsylvania Dutch DID bring their scary Christmas story with them. Mr. Belsnickel is something of an anti-Santa figure. Dirty and dressed in rags, he goes about for several weeks before Christmas delivering beatings to naughty children. Or, according to some, even drowning them. Yikes! The Belsnickel still makes his rounds, especially in rural Pennsylvania. Although the modern version carries birch switches in one hand, he also carries a bag of treats in the other to reward good children. Wearing a mask or painted face, and usually antlers, some consider him a merging of Saint Nicholas and Krampus. But I have to wonder if he's not really the continuation of the Finnish Joulupukki.

And what about Krampus? The German legend has lately been revived in America thanks to movies and memes. Well, we here in America tend to grab onto anything fun and make it our own. But, Krampus as he appears in Germany and Austria is hairy, with the cloven hooves and horns of a goat (Hmmm, yule goat again?) and has taken on the roll of punishing the naughty children for Saint Nicholas.

In Bavaria and Austria, it's Frau Petcha who provides the incentive for good behavior. And not just for kids. Once a patron of spinning, she first rewarded those who performed all of their necessary spinning by leaving a silver coin. Those who didn't? Could expect to wake to find her at the foot of the bed. And she would... slit their bellies and fill them with straw, rocks, and the unspun fibers they had not attended to. Over time, her jurisdiction spread to include general domestic responsibility. Making sure that

Charming, yes? Petcha was also known as a member of the Wild Hunt, along with her host of helpers. In fact, in some versions she is the leader of the hunt, accompanied by the Beautiful Ones and the Ugly Ones. Their purpose, along with their Mistress, seems to have been to encourage behavior that would help the community, and discourage selfishness that might damage it. But they, too, changed and became more benign over time. By the 16th Century, they visited between Christmas Day and Epiphany - the traditional 12 days of Christmas. The Beautiful Ones brought luck and good fortune, while the Ugly ones made noise and brandish whips to drive off evil spirits.

The Italians, on the other hand, don't seem to have a dark history behind their Christmas Witch. La Befana visits on Epiphany - leaving treats in the stockings of good children and coal and soot for the naughty ones. Yep, this is an international theme. There are a number of stories regarding her origin. Whether as a mother who lost her child, and in her maddened grief seeks out the Christ child to give him gifts - and is therefore made into "the mother of all of Italy" as her reward, or as a frazzled housewife who refused to help the Magi, then changed her mind and has been searching for the Christ child ever since, she's a much more benign figure than her more bloody-minded sisters to the North.

Perhaps the greater emphasis on punishment for bad behavior in the North has to do with an increased need to make sure that everyone in the community pulled their weight, in order to survive through the winter. Or maybe it's just that the lack of sunlight makes us crabby.

Having introduced a number of the folklore characters associated with Christmas, lets talk a little about animals. While the Yule Cat is an animal, it's more of a... supernatural force. Some of the other Christmas animals are more expected, but still share in the wonder.

We all know about Santa's reindeer. Whether they're magic in and of themselves, or fed magic corn, they've taken on their own mystique. Able to fly around the world in a single night, land on rooftops, and carry a sleigh loaded with toys for every boy and girl, they're quite a team. The traitional eight, plus Rudolph, appeared in Clement Moore's poem, "A Visit From St. Nicolas." Although, in the first printing, Dunder and Blitzen - Dutch for Thunder and Lightning - are present. Later they become Donder and Blitzen, and then Donner and Blitzen - German for Thunder and Lightning.

It's interesting that Moore uses the Dutch names for two of the reindeer, although the modern Dutch Sinterklaas arrives on a white horse (variably named). To ferret out why requires a bit of a timeline and an understanding of the history of both the Old Country and the New.

At the time that New Amsterdam and the surrounding areas of New York were settled by the Dutch, the Dutch provinces had recently rebelled against and rid themselves of the rule of Spain. In establishing their Protestant identity more firmly, most places outlawed the celebration of Saint Nicholas Day. In places like Amsterdam, small family

gatherings still took place, but emphasis had shifted to Christmas and the gift giving attributed to the Christ Child.

What all that means is that the revived Sinterklaas of the Netherlands, who regained popularity in the 19th century, is quite a different figure from the one carried over in the 17th century by the early Dutch settlers. And it was THEIR traditions that gave rise to Santa Claus and all his trappings. Mingled with stories from their neighbors, undoubtedly.

While reindeer get the lion's share of the glory, other animals get a little Christmas folklore of their own.

Donkeys get a few cute stories, of more modern vintage. Whether it's the old Rankin Bass special about Nestor, The Long Eared Donkey, picture books about The Littlest Donkey, or Disney's rather obscure theatrical short "The Small One," there is a persistent library of tales about the donkeys who were present at the Nativity. The scene we're all familiar with of a baby in the manger, surrounded by animals has also been imbued with wonder.

One bit of folklore says that animals can talk at Midnight on Christmas Eve. But it's bad luck to anyone who actually hears them. Some versions even insist that the hearer of these conversations will die soon afterward. The Danes take no chances, and often give their pet dogs pieces of cookies and cakes on Christmas eve so they'll speak well of their masters when the magic hour falls.

Even the humble robin has acquired some Christmas trappings. The sprightly robin redbreast is a cheerful sight in the bleak midwinter. And it's said that he got that bright red coloring when he flew between the Christ child and a flare up from the fire that had been built in the stable for warmth, preventing the child from being burnt.

Whether this legend began being told before or after robins appeared on Victorian Christmas greeting cards, I can't tell you.

I'm going to guess that a lot of these bits of myth and lore are as new to you as they were to me. In some ways, we've spent the last 50 years or more sanitizing and brightening the folklore that surrounds Christmas.

Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying we should bring back all the bloody,

terrifying pagan aspects of midwinter myth.

But focusing only on the bright spots gives us something of a Christmas with a Bokeh effect. Blurred, and overlit. And, in many ways, deprive it of its wonder and power.

Santa has become a figure of purest goodwill. When is the last time children were actually threatened with a stocking filled with coal and a switch? We hang so many lights, we chase away the darkness entirely - and forget it's there. Part of the problem of overcommercialization is related to the tendency to embrace only the brightness.

More magic can be found by turning off all the lights and lighting a candle. We know this, if we still go to the candlelight service on Christmas Eve. Or turn off all the other lights in the house and just let the Christmas tree glow quietly by itself.

We also know it if we live in rural areas. I've had to, on more than one occasion, demonstrate to an acquaintance the difference between "dark," and "country dark." One college classmate, born in New York City, had never been anywhere without street lights. She came with us out for a gingerbread house party at the home of the mother of one of our other neighbors, who lived out in a rural area. Half way there, she was horrified at the true darkness. "Somebody needs to put up some lights!" she exclaimed from the back seat. "Why?" I asked. "So the rabbits can find their way back to their holes?"

Enjoying the darkness for what it is, and standing on the top of the hill behind the barn on a clear, cold December night is a peaceful experience. The stars are bright and the milky way is a stream of light across the sky. Snow creaks on laden boughs in the woods nearby.

And one believes that watching tomten might be waiting for the household to go to bed before they start their nightly duties.

We've reduced Santa Claus to a glorified delivery boy. Sometimes with modern trappings and computers. Sometimes with cheerful elf assistance, every bit as unthreatening as he is. No one really stays on his naughty list. And the whole of his being is reduced to running a toy factory.

Not everyone in the modern world has lost the thread of the story. Some of my favorite Christmas movies and books recapture a little of the old spirit of the thing.

If you're familiar with Terry Pratchett, and his discworld stories, you may have encountered the holiday he invented for that world. Hogswatch is a thinly veiled Christmas, presided over by the Hogfather. I can recommend both the book, "Hogfather," and the excellent BBC adaptation of it - which is available on Amazon Prime. Pratchett was clearly steeped in the folklore of Christmas and midwinter. It comes through in the telling of the tale, and even the plot of the story centers around belief. The book certainly is, as usual, better at plumbing the depths of that subject.

Another favorite - and I'm surprised that the movie didn't do well - is "Rise of the Guardians." In this reimagining, Santa does his usual toy run. But that's secondary to his task, shared by other figures of folklore, of defending children and innocence from the darkness that lurks constantly at the edges of our consciousness. As such, he's a huge burly fellow, armed with double scimitars and with a robust Russian accent. This is a Santa who understands both sides of human nature.

A more offbeat choice is "Klaus," an intended theatrical movie that ended up becoming a "Netflix Original." It deserves a wider audience. Centering on a spoiled fop of a postman, who learns the importance of kindness, connection, and community, it also gives us a whole new window on Santa himself. And at the same time, provides some subtle explanations for all the things we associate with our modern version of Santa. Everything from the flying sleigh and reindeer, chimney hopping, and writing of letters gets a cheeky little nod. Although my favorite aspect is the drawing in of the Saami people and their contribution to both myth and mission.

Consider turning off the latest Hallmark Christmas movie or installment of Home Alone or The Santa Clause in favor of something a bit more mythic.

After all, the desire to gather around the fire in the dark and tell ghost stories is in our very bones. And while much of that habit has been relegated to Halloween, it hasn't always been so.

The Victorians, as they did with many things, raised the concept of the Christmas Ghost Story to art and artifice. We're all familiar with Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," but that was by no means the only such tale he wrote. In fact, there were so many iterations, even Dickens started to get tired of it.

And Dickens' work was a clever blend of Holiday Magic and the Delightful Shiver. Other

writers went for pure shivers. M.R. James wrote a number of ghost stories, often to tell to friends at Christmas. Sometimes considered the master of the genre, his stories still make us draw closer to the fireplace. Collections of them can be had easily, and many of the stories are in the public domain and available online. The BBC has also revived the tradition, by producing some of them as part of their "A Ghost Story for Christmas" series. It looks like this year "The Mezzotint" is this year's entry. Although it's airing on Christmas Eve in Britain, which means those of us on this side of the pond probably won't get it until later.

Henry James also gave us a seasonal thriller. In "Turn the Screw," the narrator recounts a Christmas Eve gathering in an old house, with the guests regaling each other with ghost stories. One of them tells a spine-tingling tale about two children whose governess tries to shield them from a ghostly presence. I won't spoil the story for you.

Even Sir Arthur Conan Doyle gave us a Christmas tale, The Bue Carbuncle, wherein Sherlock Holmes solves the mystery of how the eponymous object came to be inside their Christmas Goose. Dramatic adaptations of the story are popular with community theater companies this time of year, so if it interests you, look to see if there is a presentation of it nearby.

This year, I invite you to unplug a little bit. Step away from the "elf yourself" app. Turn off the computer-synchronized LED light display. Experience the darkness of Midwinter. Light a candle. Start a fire in the fireplace. Tell ghost stories. Read something by M.R. James. Leave a bowl of porridge out of the tomten. Take a walk with a lantern. Or - look for a local lantern walk. The Michigan State Park system has two available, and yours might as well. A mile on a trail lit by old-fashioned lanterns might put you in the mood for cocoa and some folklore.

Christmas is a season of joy. But also a season of melancholy. We delight in the company of family and friends - and toast those who are no longer with us.

You can't fully appreciate the bright of the lights or the warmth of the fire if you've never met the cold and dark. This year, I invite you to deliberately do both.

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come your way.

I'm off to make sure I have enough homemade cocoa mix. And see if I can find my copy of M.R. James's stories. Are you coming?