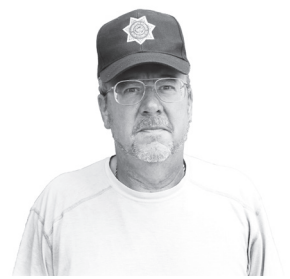


Christmas Stockings and other holiday traditions



My wife makes sure everyone in our house gets into the Christmas spirit, even the dogs. (Courtesy photo/Rackay)



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

My grandmother made Christmas a special time. Besides decorating the house and baking mountains of cookies, she had her traditions. One was that we hung stockings by the woodstove every Christmas Eve.

I went for the biggest sock I could find. I had always hoped to find it stuffed with fishing and hunting gear, perhaps a new boat and motor, but it never seemed to work out that way.

It is no secret I suffered from a terrible childhood affliction known as school. I hated school and everything about it. School robbed me of my freedom to run around in the outdoors and do what I want. Because I hated it so much, I was terrible at it.

My grandfather would read the notes from exasperated teachers, rattling out my poor behavior, missing homework, lack of attention, and he would threaten me. The threats around Christmas were usually based on what I was to expect from Santa for Christmas. "If you don't shape up in school, all you are going to get from Santa this year is a rotten banana and a handful of kindling sticks," was his usual threat.

Christmas morning would come, and sure enough, my stocking would have a rotten banana and a dozen small kindling sticks. My grandfather would laugh himself silly at the exasperated expression on my face. Then, he would give me a real present that contained some fishing tackle, a few toy cars, or some other thing. I would get back at him by ignoring the real present and just play with the sticks and rotten banana. He would whine to my grandmother, "When we get the money together, we got to take that boy to town and get his screws tightened up."

You would think that hanging stockings near

the fireplace, or woodstove in the kitchen had more to do with drying out wet socks, but the legend goes much deeper than that. It all started hundreds of years ago when a Dutch Nobleman became hopeless after the death of his wife. The Nobleman squandered away all the family wealth foolishly, leaving him and his 3 daughters broke.

Flat busted, he and his daughters moved to a peasant's cottage and lived a life of misery. The three daughters could not get married without dowries, money and property given to the new husband's family.

Enter good old St. Nicholas, as he came forward to help them. St. Nicholas desired to remain anonymous, so he quietly slipped onto the roof of the peasant's house and threw three pouches of gold coins down the chimney where they landed in the stockings the young women had hung by the fireplace to dry. The next morning, the three daughters found the gold coins inside their stockings which allowed them to marry and live happily ever after.

The legend also states that an orange in the

stocking represents the gold left St. Nicholas. Finding an apple meant that the owner of the stocking had been good all year while someone who received coal had been naughty. I wonder what old St. Nick would consider a rotten banana and a handful of sticks?

In the early 1800's, the first mention of Christmas stockings being hung by the chimney was from the popular poem "Visit from St. Nick," which contained the line: "The stockings were hung by the chimney with care in hopes that Saint Nicholas soon would be there."

The whole idea of Santa Claus came from St. Nicholas, back in the 4th Century. The saint wasn't a bearded man, running around in a red suit, and followed by a bunch of elves. He was a Christian Bishop who gave away a large inheritance to the poor people. He also rescued women from servitude. In Dutch, his name is Sinter Klaas and has since morphed into Santa Claus.

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer didn't happen onto the scene until 1939 when the Montgomery Wards department store (My

grandfather called them "Monkey Wards) asked one of their copywriters to create a Christmas story for kids that the store could use as a promotion.

In the first year, 2.4 million copies of the story were distributed. In 1949, Gene Autry recorded the song "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," giving the story another boost. Then in 1964, the famous television show called "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," narrated by Burl Ives, hit the airways, and the legend boomed.

Another tradition my grandmother had was to hang a mistletoe, just inside the house, right above where the door opened. That way, anyone entering the house was trapped by a kiss on the cheek from my grandmother. In my single digit years, I hated people slobbering kisses on me, so I started sneaking into the house through the basement window, to avoid the awaiting ambush.

The mistletoe tradition dates back to the ancient Celtic cultures where the Druids believed it to be a symbol of fertility and virility and considered it an aphrodisiac. However, mistle thrush birds eat the plant's berries, digest the

seed and then help the plant germinate with their droppings. The Germanic word for mistletoe means "dung on a twig." Maybe that's why I avoided the mistletoe ambush.

I always thought the reason for the rotten banana and kindling sticks in my stocking were because my grandfather was just trying to save a few bucks on a decent Christmas present for me. Either way, it worked out to be an equitable relationship for both of us. He got to save a few bucks, and I got to do lousy in school.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for The Nautical Mile, and several other saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a Director and Public Information Officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. Personal email is elkhunter77@icloud.com For information about the Posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

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