

Christmas TRADITIONS

By Hayley Penrose

Long family road trips, international holidays, a day of religion, or just a day off, Christmas means a lot of different things for people. For some it might be the only time you see your cousins, or a time of year when you can just take a break from the hectic schedule of work. It can be one, or a number of things all mashed together resulting in the most wonderful time of the year.

Christmas has a complex and often debated history. In ancient times, well before the birth of Jesus, people in the northern hemisphere held celebrations in the middle of winter. The winter solstice meant that the worst of winter was over and people could look forward to extended hours of sunlight. In much of Europe, it was a time when livestock had been slaughtered so they wouldn't have to be fed through the winter. Wine and beer was fermented, ready for drinking so fresh meat and alcohol was readily available for feasting. The Romans also had a holiday at this time, Saturnalia, which honoured Saturn, the god of agriculture. For a month, Roman society was turned upside down with peasants taking control of the city. It wasn't until the fourth century that the church decided to have a celebration to commemorate the birth of Jesus, with Pope Julius I settling on December 25th. There are many theories that the



decision was made in an attempt to adopt the traditions of the pagan Saturnalia celebrations. It became a time of year when, like during Saturnalia, the poorer people could take over as the upper classes entertained the less fortunate.

The cultural celebration of Christmas can be attributed to the Americans who, while slow to embrace the day (it was not a federal holiday until 1870) championed the family aspect that we know today, as well as creating and adopting a number of traditions that are now intrinsically linked to the holiday.

While its origins may be a little vague, Christmas as we know it has

come together from a number of different customs and beliefs. Today there can be no doubt of the day's popularity with festivities held all around the world. Each country has its own traditions for Christmas. In Russia, it is not uncommon for some people to fast on Christmas Eve or right through to early January for Advent. Others celebrate Advent with a calendar or countdown to mark the days until Christmas. Countries in the Northern Hemisphere are in the middle of winter, so some places enjoy a winter wonderland for their festivities. Here in Australia we have adapted many traditions and made them summer appropriate since it is not unusual for



temperatures to be in the 30s or more. Beaches and barbies feature heavily in a traditional 'Aussie Christmas'.

Regardless of location, family and loved ones are at the centre of many Christmas celebrations, coming together over the holiday period. It can be one of the only times during the year when you see some people or go to a certain place. In a way, this is what makes Christmas special because it often has such specific meaning. Dinner at Grandma's with the whole extended family or visiting people who live far away are often staples in people's holiday plans.

It is a common tradition to give gifts at Christmas time. Each country does this a bit differently. In Australia, Santa brings gifts on Christmas Eve for children who have been good during the year and leaves them in a stocking or under a decorated tree. This also happens in the United States and United Kingdom. Other countries have traditions which see presents being opened from early December. In Holland children receive presents on December 5th, St Nicholas' Eve, while in Spain, the latest day gifts are exchanged is on Epiphany, January 6th. Gifts can be anything from sweets and baked goods, items purchased from a store, or handmade projects and

everything in between!

Presents are often placed under decorated trees before they are opened. The evergreen fir tree has been used to celebrate winter festivals for thousands of years and was adopted into Christmas celebrations. Artificial trees have become quite popular today, but real trees are still used quite widely. They are decorated with everything from tinsel and ornaments to candy canes and lights in every colour of the rainbow. Early in

their history they were decorated with candles to mimic the stars. Today electric fairy lights are much more commonly used.

There are many different ways that Christmas is celebrated around the world but what they all have in common is the way they bring people together to take part in activities that don't happen at any other time of the year. Whether you're fasting for advent or waiting for Santa to arrive, Christmas has something for everyone.

