

“Bei uns ist immer was los!”

VORWEIHNACHTENSITTEN (PRE-CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS)

bringer of gifts: der Gabenbringer, die Gabenbringer

Nikolaus Was Gift-Bringer

The Protestant Reformation raised several problems for St. Nicholas. He had become well established as a gift-bringer and the opener of the Christmas season on his name day, Dec. 6. With the Reformation, though, it became improper to celebrate anything having to do with Catholic saints. But St. Nicholas was far too popular just to be done away with. Something had to give.

In a few countries, St. Nicholas just changed his name and kept right on going. Thus appeared Father Christmas in England, Weihnachtsmann in Germany and Pere Noel in France. Germany also established the figure of the Christkindlein, or Christ Child, who would come with the Pennsylvania Dutch to America, where his name would gradually be corrupted by popular pronunciation until he became Kris Kringle.

All these figures were jolly, venerable gift-givers, dressed in clothes appropriate to the season, except for the Christ Child — and even he changed with time so that Kris Kringle looked like all the rest.

At least one country, Holland, did not change the name of St. Nicholas but did change his religious aspects into purely secular ones. He became just like Father Christmas or Pere Noel but kept his old name. When the Dutch settled in New Amsterdam (later New York), they brought St. Nicholas with them.

But, as in so many cases, popular pronunciation had its effect: St. Nicholas became Santa Claes. The stage was almost set for the arrival of Santa Claus.

At the start of the 19th century, Washington Irving published a book called “Diedrich Knickerbocker’s A History of New York From the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty.” This was an extremely satirical book with at least as much fantasy as fact in it. One thing Irving did was make St. Nicholas a sort of patron saint for the Dutch and throw him into the



These illustrations by Doug Jamieson, based on 19th-century woodcuts and engravings, show types of Santa's many manifestations.