

A Brief History of Christmas

Part Four: Christmas and Technology

Christmas in the Dime Novel

- By the mid-19th century, presses could print and distribute novels so cheaply that they began to constitute a genuinely popular culture. Novels in this period often featured at least a section set in the newly ascendant Christmas season.
- Because popular culture was highly sentimental in this period, Christmas was more often a celebration of inherent human goodness than a particularly Christian festival.

The Earliest Christmas Movies

- As early as 1897 (that is to say, 10 years before programmed radio broadcasting began), people were watching silent movies about Santa Claus.
- In 1901 the first “A Christmas Carol” adaptation hit the silent screen.
- The Great Depression, which did not slow down movie production and did not slow down ticket sales much, saw releases like *The Shanty where Santy Claus Lives* and “Mickey's Orphans,” in which Walt Disney's famous mouse provides presents for poor kittens. The Depression also provided the occasion for the beginning of the Radio City Christmas Spectacular, the famous annual Rockettes show.

Christmas Musicals and TV Specials

- When Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire starred in their 1942 movie adaptation of Irving Berlin's *Holiday Inn*, the Christmas movie hit a new level of popularity. You might have heard the film's signature song, “White Christmas.” (No, the song did not debut in 1954's *White Christmas*. You can win some Trivia Pursuit games knowing that.)
- 1944 saw the rise of the Christmas animated movie with “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.” (Gene Autry recorded the song in 1949, and the longer version that still airs on TV hit the airwaves in 1964.) Charlie Brown's Christmas special came out in 1965.
- In 1951, *Dragnet*, according to imdb.com, released the first television Christmas special with “A Big .22 Rifle for Christmas.” *Ozzie and Harriet* and *The Honeymooners* soon followed suit.
- 1966 was the television musical debut of the Grinch. Boris Karloff did the narration and the Grinch's voice but not the famous song “You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch.”

The Really Famous Ones

- *It's a Wonderful Life* hit cinemas in 1946. At this point Mary will tell the class that Nathan has never watched this one. It's true.
- Alastair Sim's version of *Scrooge* came out in 1951. It remained the definitive version until George C. Scott's 1984 version. (Some, of course, still prefer the 1983 Disney version and the 1992 *Muppet Christmas Carol*.)
- *Miracle on 34th Street* came out in 1955.

Implications, Before I Run out of Room

- Much of what we think of as American Christmas came about in a two-way relationship with novels, movies, and radio—there was not a clean, one-way road from traditions to movies about the traditions or vice versa.
- Just about all the standard Christmas images flow from the 19th century revival of Christmas more than from textual records of ancient or medieval traditions.
- As we noted last time, Christmas is a complex thing—there's not really much of a “pure Christmas to which we can return so much as the potential, in the midst of all this mess, of forging good ways of doing Christmas.