

Go A-Wassailing



Whether you have a good singing voice or not, get into the swing of the holiday season with Go Caroling Day on December 20. You may be surprised to hear that carols did not originate as holiday songs at all. Carols were folk dances, and *carol* meant “to dance in a ring.” Most often these dances and their accompanying songs were sung in the pubs (along with the presumptive overindulgence of ale). So when did carols make the jump from the alehouse to the church house? The answer might lie in Victorian England.

Wassailing, or the act of wishing good fortune on your neighbors, was a fairly common practice during the medieval era. It was believed that if you passed well wishes to your neighbors, they would reward you in turn. Caroling, or performing folk songs of well-wishes to neighbors, became traditional during local festivals and on holidays like May Day. But it was during the Victorian Era that caroling became forever merged with Christmastime. Legend has it that the first Christmas carol service was held in Truro, England, in 1880, when Edward White Benson attempted to lure carolers out of the pub on Christmas Eve by publicizing a carol service at church. Benson would go on to become the Archbishop of Canterbury.

It was also during Victorian England that Christmas became more popular and commercialized. Publishers began compiling and printing vast anthologies of carols. Some went so far as to take ancient songs and rewrite them as hymns to the birth of Christ. Many of the most famous Christmas carols date from this period, including “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen,” “The First Noel,” “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing!,” and “Joy to the World.” Nowadays, Christmas caroling is almost uniquely found during church services. Rarely do carolers venture door-to-door *a-wassailing* as they once did in olden times. But on December 20, Go Caroling Day, the practice may be revived. So don’t be surprised if you hear a knock on your door and a choir of voices.

December Birthdays

In astrology, the Archers of Sagittarius are those born between December 1–21. These open-minded travelers are in constant motion, searching the globe for meaning. Curious, optimistic, and enthusiastic, they are not afraid of change and treasure freedom. Those born from December 22–31 are Capricorn’s Goats. Goats are focused on lofty goals; these hardworking and determined souls will prevail with grit and resilience.

Aaron Rodgers (quarterback) – December 2, 1983
Walt Disney (animator) – December 5, 1901
Dave Brubeck (musician) – December 6, 1920
Emmett Kelly (clown) – December 9, 1898
Rita Moreno (actress) – December 11, 1931
Shirley Jackson (writer) – December 14, 1916
Betty Grable (actress) – December 18, 1916
Chris Evert (tennis pro) – December 21, 1954
Howard Hughes (magnate) – December 24, 1905
Clara Barton (nurse) – December 25, 1821
Tiger Woods (golfer) – December 30, 1975
Donna Summer (singer) – December 31, 1948

Christmas Crossing



It was nearly midnight on Christmas of 1776 when Revolutionary War General George Washington daringly crossed the freezing Delaware River to turn the tide in favor of the colonists. Washington had suffered numerous defeats, resulting in the loss of many strategic locations, including New York City in the north. Washington’s plan included three crossings of the Delaware. He led a division of 2,400 men to surprise a group of German Hessian soldiers gathered at Trenton. When Washington’s force descended the next morning, the Hessians were caught unawares after a night of Christmas revels and were easily overwhelmed. When Washington’s other two divisions of 3,000 men failed to make the rendezvous, he was forced to withdraw. While the victory was not particularly strategic, Washington’s renown and the morale of the Continental Army grew.

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Celebrating December

Safe Toys and Gifts Month

Write a Friend Month

Spiritual Literacy Month

Hanukkah

December 2–10

Pretend to Be a Time

Traveler Day

December 8

International Mountain Day

December 11

Crossword Puzzle Day

December 21

Christmas Day

December 25

Make Up Your Mind Day

December 31

Waiting for the Sun

In the northern hemisphere, the winter solstice, on December 21, brings the longest night of the year. Due to the tilt of Earth on its axis, the north pole faces away from the sun. While the interminable darkness stretches on, in many cultures this is a time to celebrate the light, and has been for centuries. In fact, the celebration of winter solstice predates the Christmas holiday.

Perhaps the most famous destination for viewing the sun during the winter solstice is at Stonehenge in England. This famous arrangement of massive stones was erected in prehistoric times and is perfectly aligned with sunset on the winter solstice. Scientists have concluded that this was a site of ancient ritual. Less famous is the massive burial mound and passageway at Newgrange in Ireland, dated to be older than the Pyramids. At sunrise on the winter solstice, the sun shines perfectly down the passageway to illuminate the innermost chamber. This is yet another instance where prehistoric peoples heralded the return of the light after the longest period of darkness.

Halfway across the world in Iran, Persians also celebrate the return of the light. On *Shab-e Yalda*, people gather to light fires to protect each other from the evil of the night. They feast and read poetry as they await the sunrise. The return of the sun is equated with the banishment of evil, the arrival of goodness, and the triumph of Mithra, the Sun God, over dark forces.

Japan, too, celebrates the return of the sun. *Toji-sai* marks the start of a new year, and it is when farmers traditionally welcome the sun as the source of their bountiful crops. As in Iran, bonfires are lit during the night to encourage the sun’s return. It is then common to take baths scented with the *yuzu* citrus fruit, which is believed to foster good health and fortune. On the solstice, don’t despair during the long night; instead, think of all those around the world who, perhaps like you, await the return of the sun.

Home for the Holidays

The sweet and spicy smell of gingerbread is a clear indicator that the holiday season is in full swing. By the time Gingerbread House Day arrives on December 12, you may have already indulged in eating this seasonal treat.



Gingerbread, made with ginger root, is believed to have originated in East Asia, where ginger was originally cultivated. It is believed that ginger and gingerbread were introduced to Europe after the Crusades of the 11th century. Gingerbread was adopted most heartily in Germany, where monks perfected their heart-shaped *lebkuchen* cookies. These cookies were first made as unleavened honey cakes, made in the same fashion as communion wafers. With the introduction of ginger, German bakers transformed *lebkuchen* into their beloved gingerbread. In 1487, Emperor Friedrich III presented the 4,000 children of the city of Nuremberg with gingerbread cookies shaped to his likeness.

The shape of gingerbread was not limited to hearts, faces, and people; miniature houses made of the cookie were also common. This is why a gingerbread house figured so prominently in the tale *Hansel and Gretel*, first published by German folklorists and brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in the 19th century. What better way for a witch to lure two children into her home than to build a home out of Germany's favorite cookie? Through this tale, the Brothers Grimm spread the popularity of making gingerbread houses beyond Germany.

It may be surprising that one of the most enduring holiday traditions was popularized by the tale of a witch attempting to eat two children by luring them into her gingerbread house. But the religious significance of gingerbread has deeper roots than *Hansel and Gretel*. Perhaps it stems from the development of gingerbread by German monks. Or the use of gingerbread in religious ceremonies. Whatever the reason, warm, spicy gingerbread has become synonymous with the Christmas season.

A Grimm Tale Turned White

The history of Disney's success with feature-length animated films began on December 21, 1937, when it released *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Many versions of this Grimm brother's fairy tale existed before Walt Disney put his hand to it. The first film version of *Snow White* hit theaters in 1902, but it was the Disney film that was considered groundbreaking. Indeed, the film won a specially designed Academy Award: one regular-sized Oscar statue with seven miniature Oscar statuettes. No less impactful was Disney's transformation of the story from a wicked tale of murder into a magical cartoon. The original unknown dwarfs were given funny personalities (not including the rejected names of Blabby, Jaunty, and Hoppy-Jumpy). Also forgotten was the evil Queen's fate of dancing to death in hot iron shoes. But this has always been the magic of Disney, providing the most exceptional and enduring family entertainment. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* has not lost any of its original luster.

Take the Plunge



Why anyone would want to celebrate Wear a Plunger on Your Head Day on December 18 is a mystery. Only the boldest will dare to "take the plunge" on this strange holiday. The plunger's history may have begun in 1777 when one Samuel Prosser received a patent for a wholly new kind of water closet known as the plunger closet, whereby the lavatory would flush with the lift of a plunger. It is likely that as materials such as wood and rubber became more available during the mid-19th century, the plunger was invented. It was during this time that the suction cup was also invented, which supports this theory. Plungers have long been used beyond the confines of the lavatory, though. During the 1920s, jazz musicians used rubber cups to "mute" the end of their trumpets. In the 1980s, plungers were even used on three separate documented occasions to perform CPR and save lives. However, no theories or records exist as to who first wore a plunger on their head.

First in Flight

On December 17, 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright made history on the sand dunes of Kill Devil Hills near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, when they achieved flight in a self-propelled, heavier-than-air aircraft.



Orville and Wilbur Wright did not attend college like their older brothers, but they displayed both an aptitude and passion for mechanical design. They became builders of printing presses and opened a bicycle repair shop. But after learning of the manned glider experiments by German engineer Otto Lilienthal in the 1890s, they turned their full focus to aviation.

The Wright brothers were not alone in their efforts to develop an airplane. Astronomer Samuel Langley had developed an increasing curiosity in aerodynamics. In 1887, he became secretary of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., where he continued his research and won the attention of President McKinley. McKinley's War Department granted him \$50,000 to develop an engine powerful enough to achieve flight. In December of 1903, just a few days before the Wright brothers' successful flight, Langley mounted a flight attempt that crashed in a river.

The Wright brothers not only mastered non-powered flight with their own engineered gliders but they invented their own lightweight engine and propeller. On December 17, they ventured out on a windy day to the dunes of the coast, where they achieved their long-sought dream. The brothers flew four times that day, with their last flight soaring 852 feet in 59 seconds. The Wright brothers had soared into the history books as the world's first flyers. Yet their achievement is not without controversy, for a Connecticut newspaper article dated August 18, 1901, describes a half-mile flight that took place on August 14 by inventor Gustave Whitehead. But while there are photographs of Whitehead with his flying machine, there are no credible accounts of him achieving flight. The Wright brothers' place in aviation history is safe.

The Invention of Clean

Many of us have good reason to thank Josephine Cochrane, for she invented the first automatic dishwasher on December 28, 1886. Cochrane was the daughter of an engineer and wife of a successful merchant and politician. In 1870, Cochrane and her husband moved into an Illinois mansion, where she hosted elaborate dinner parties served on heirloom china. Wishing to prevent damage to her precious china, Cochrane set about designing an automatic dishwasher in a shed behind her home. Wire compartments measured specifically to hold her unique collection of plates, cups, and saucers were fit into a wheel that revolved inside a copper boiler. A motor turned the wheel while hot soapy water rained down on the dishes. Cochrane took her invention to the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, where she won the highest prize. Just four years later, she bought a factory for her new company and provided dishwashers to many of Illinois' most prestigious hotels and restaurants—and sweet relief to the world's homemakers.

Making the Cut



Whether the snow is falling outside or not, you can provide some flurries of your own on December 27, Make Cut-Out Snowflakes Day. Paper snowflakes are simple, easy-to-make decorations that instantly create a festive atmosphere. And like real snowflakes, no two are exactly alike! Simply fold a square piece of paper in half diagonally to make a triangle, fold it in half again to make another triangle, and then fold it into thirds. Next, use scissors to cut straight or wavy lines into the finished triangle. As you unfold your paper, you'll find a perfectly unique and symmetrical flake. The cutting of paper snowflakes was born with Japanese origami in the Far East. It is likely that the French mastered the art of cutting paper doll chains from Japanese origami, and snowflakes evolved from those dolls.