
St. Petersburg Times

A saint by any name Series: WEEKEND DIVERSIONS

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St. Petersburg, Fla.: Dec 17, 2004. pg. 8

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Santa Claus stands for more than a jolly, overweight man delivering the hottest toys and high-tech gadgets. A holiday exhibit at the Dunedin Historical Museum traces the religious and commercial evolution of Santa as St. Nicholas in the second century to the Santa of today.

Tucked into a vintage toy area at the railroad station museum, the Santa exhibit reminds visitors of the roots of holiday gift giving.



People should stop and think about where traditions originate, said Sandy Kinzer, administrative assistant at the Dunedin Historical Museum.

She credits Vincent Luisi, the museum's executive director, with collecting materials and including the exhibit each holiday season.

"We get so wrapped up in presents that we forget that what we do in the present was

started in the past," Kinzer said.

Visitors to the museum's exhibit will find that Santa's generosity takes a different turn. In what some historians and theologians call the true story of Santa, a baby named Nicholas was born more than 1,700 years ago in Patara, a village in what is now Turkey. The story, told in the exhibit via an A&E cable television special, narrates Nicholas' saga of being left a wealthy orphan when his parents died in an epidemic. He dedicated his life to God and used his entire inheritance to help the needy and sick.

Nicholas was named bishop of Myra and was known for his love of children. He reached sainthood and an old story tells of the townspeople of Myra celebrating his life on the eve of Saint Nicholas Day.

The exhibit offers an international holiday and civics lesson for children. In a display case are vintage dolls and written descriptions depicting the Santa figure in different cultures. Dutch children see him as Sinter Kaas, adorned in his red bishop's robe and riding a white horse, and Santa is Father Christmas to the English. In France, there's Pere Noel and also the negative Pere Fouchette, bearer of switches for bad boys and girls. Russian children revere Grandfather Frost, and some Chinese children honor Dun Che Lao Ren, the "Christmas Old Man."

Japanese children look to Hoteiosho, who travels on foot instead of by sleigh. Hoteiosho is said to have eyes in the back of his head to observe children, the Santa exhibit reports.

Visitors learn that most Spanish-speaking countries observe Christmas strictly as a religious holiday and St. Nicholas is one of many saints. Children receive their gifts on Jan. 6, the celebration of the Epiphany.

Santa's commercial trek across U.S. history is also on display. There are 1960s to 1990s Santa dinner napkins, matchbook covers, plastic watches and soda cans.

Antique scraps show how English fabric and paper were used to make Christmas cards.

On the walls hang front pages of Dunedin newspapers from Christmas Day 1929. There are holiday memories handed down by Dunedin families. One memory tells of Alfred Grant, an English sailor who jumped ship in St. Petersburg in 1892 and lived in Dunedin. Grant tells of the excitement of Christmas in Florida and how gifts were given to children at Dunedin's old library hall.

Children can craft simple ornaments to take home or hang on the tree in the toy area. A modern-day Christmas scene awaits visitors in the museum's space-age exhibit, a tribute to Florida's NASA connections and to 1980 Clearwater High School graduate Nicole Passonno Stott, a NASA operations engineer who hopes to be assigned to a space mission.

The 1950s living room, with Lucky Strike cigarettes and rabbit ears on the old television, has been decorated for Christmas, including tinsel and old-fashioned bubble lights on the tree. The museum provides families with a holiday break and history lesson, said

Susan Littlejohn, president of the museum's board of directors.

"I don't think they have a flavor for the past when tinsel and things were so simple, because that's all we had when we were stringing popcorn on the tree and hanging colored light bulbs," she said.

"The traditions are truly all that come before Christmas . . . the music, choirs, celebrations, the decorating, the foods which bring everybody together for the holidays."