

MERRY CHRISTMAS.....YESTERYEAR

by Herbert D. Loomis



The First Christmas Card

Those were the days! You could buy a Christmas card for a penny and mail it for a penny. Santa might be dressed in brown or green, and reindeer were nowhere in sight. The date was around 1860. Thomas Nast, the great Harpers illustrator, hadn't yet pictured a fat, "roly poly" Santa dressed in red for he was inspired by Clement Moore's "The Night Before Christmas".

It had started in England less than twenty years earlier in 1843 when Sir Henry Cole, too busy to write his annual greeting, hired the eminent artist J.C. Horsley to design a card. It pictured a boisterous English Christmas Feast and Cole was criticized for his lack of decorum. The Robin was one of the most popular designs on these early cards as Robins were considered sacred and British folklore. The idea spread quickly and companies like Goodale & Son, Marcus Ward, Raphael Tuck, and LaRue turned it into big business. Design contests were held, with as much as \$25,000 going to the winner. Kate Greenway designed for Marcus Ward.

In America the earliest known cards carried advertising for Pease's Great Variety Store in Albany, N.Y.. It took a German immigrant lithographer, Louis Prang, to popularize them. Starting in Boston he quickly expanded to have outlets in all major cities and earned the title, "The Father of the American Christmas Card". Some of his later cards had silk inserts and elaborately fringed edges. By 1890 Prang had been driven out of business by cheap German imports.

In the early nineteenth hundreds, Clapsaddle, Brundage, and Winsch were some of the outstanding designers. All featured children and their signature on a card adds much to its value. The most valuable cards of this period are the *Hold - To - The - Light*, and the *Installment - Cards*. The Installment cards required a series of three or four cards to complete a picture, generally of Santa.

The early cards were not religious in nature and often featured Robins, Roses, Elves, and children. Santa alone has remained constant. Today the most desirable Santa cards show him with early cars, airplanes, telephones, etc.. Landscapes and holiday symbols such as bells, wreaths, and candles have always been popular. Since World War II there had been an emphasis on religious themes with *The Madonna* close to the top today.

(A lecture by H.D. Loomis to Manasota Genealogical Society on 7 Dec 2010; permission granted).