

The American version of St. Nicholas, or Santa Claus originally came from the Dutch version called Sint Klaas. The Dutch settlers in New Amsterdam (New York) brought this fun and lively tradition (some even say cult) to America.

## Joy, Joy: A Christmas Fragment

When I was a young girl I spent several Christmases with my grandparents, away from the city.

On one occasion I remember my grandmother reminding my grandfather to harness the horse and sleigh and go to Aunt Sarah's and Uncle Timothy's with crocks of jam and a fat-pork cake for Christmas. Of course Aunt Sarah and Uncle Timothy weren't related to us, but because they'd lived many years in the place and everybody knew them, they were aunt and uncle to the whole community.

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And so one cold, clear, moonlit night my grandfather got up from the supper table and announced that he was going to make the trip and that I could go with him.

Soon we were ready to set out. My grandfather tucked a rug over my lap and around my feet as I sat on the side bench of the sleigh while he took the raised single seat at the back.

How can I describe the pleasure of driving along to the ringing of the sleigh's runners on the frozen snow, the rhythmic sound of the horse's hoofs, the jingle of the harness bells, to the sight of the fir trees and ponds silvered in moonlight, to the feel of the cold purity of the air that brushed against our cheeks? Somehow I felt part of an existence greater than I was normally aware of. I seemed to be somebody less mundane than my ordinary everyday self, while my grandfather, erect and large in his winter coat, his firm gloved hands



Coca-cola was the first beverage company to use Santa as part of their winter promotion. The character that we know as Santa was the one they used on their Coke cans!

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holding the reins that guided us on our way, seemed like a king.

Before long we had covered the three miles or so of our journey and found ourselves in Aunt Sarah's and Uncle Timothy's kitchen, warm in the glow of a kerosene lamp, with the smell of the burning wood in the stove, and the sound of the kettle burbling on top of it. Aunt Sarah clasped me in her arms, and Uncle Timothy placed his rough, rheumatic hand gently against my face.

We were given tea and newly-made bread - for me a thick crusty bit spread with molasses. There was talk of the weather, and of daily chores, and news about friends

and neighbors, and an expression of concern for each other's health. And then it was time to go. In a quiet voice Uncle Timothy said, "We must have a word of prayer before you leave" and before I could feel embarrassment at the idea, we were kneeling on the kitchen floor, with heads bowed, while Uncle Timothy thanked God for our visit and for the blessings of Christmas.

As we stepped out into the cold it seemed that for a moment there stayed with us the coziness of the kitchen, and such a shared warmth of feeling that before I had time to silently question the rightness of my request, I found myself asking my grandfather if I, and not he, could be the driver on our return home.

Smiling and without speaking my grandfather placed the reins in my hands. Then he settled himself on the side seat of the sleigh while I climbed onto the one at the back. Raised on high I could see beyond the horse to the road stretching grandly ahead. I slapped the reins on the horse's back and called "giddap, giddap" to urge him on.

The snow shimmered in the moonlight, the bells danced and sang, and the strong pure air bore us on into the calm untroubled night.

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