

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Saint Nicholas Day—December 6

### THE LEGEND of SAINT NICHOLAS

In many countries, the Feast of Saint Nicholas—not Christmas—is the day for holiday gift giving. The Feast of St. Nicholas, or Saint Nicholas Day, is on December 6<sup>th</sup>. The evening before, children set out their shoes or stockings. St. Nicholas comes in the night, on a white horse, and fills the shoes and socks with small toys, treats, and special St. Nicholas cookies. These gifts are meant to be shared, not hoarded.



St. Nicholas was a real person—a Bishop who lived during the 4<sup>th</sup> century in Asia Minor (now Turkey). This is why he is often depicted (pictured) wearing a bishop's mitre (hat) and carrying a staff.

Nicholas was very rich because he had received a large inheritance from his parents. He was also very kind and used his money to help the poor by giving secret gifts to those in need. There are many legends about Nicholas' generosity, although we don't know if any of them are true.

The most famous story about St. Nicholas tells how the custom of filling shoes and stockings with gifts first got started. It goes like this:

There was a poor man who had three daughters. He was so poor that he did not have enough money for his oldest daughter's dowry. (A dowry is a sum of money paid to the bridegroom by the bride's parents on the wedding day. This still happens in some countries, even today.) Without a dowry, a girl was unlikely to find a good husband.

One night, Nicholas secretly dropped a bag of gold down the chimney of the family's house. The bag fell into a stocking that had been hung by the fire to dry. Now the father could pay the dowry and his oldest daughter was able to marry.

The same thing happened later with the second daughter.

When the third daughter was old enough to marry, the father determined to find out who was paying the girls' dowries. He secretly hid by the fireplace every evening until he caught Nicholas dropping in a bag of gold. Nicholas begged the man to keep what he had done a secret, but the news eventually got out. After that, whenever anyone received a secret gift, it was believed to have come from Nicholas.

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Because of his kindness, Nicholas was made a saint. And every year on his feast day, children set out their stockings, shoes and socks. They hope that St. Nicholas will pay them a visit and leave gifts for them to share in his honor. Often, one of the treats they find is an orange. This represents the gold (from the legend) that Nicholas dropped down the poor man's chimney.

It is believed that Dutch settlers in New Amsterdam (now New York) brought the tradition of Saint Nicholas to America. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, St. Nicholas was transformed (changed) into Santa Claus—the merry elf who rides through the sky in a reindeer-powered sleigh and delivers gifts to good boys and girls.

1. Santa Claus rides in a sleigh drawn by reindeer. How does St. Nicholas travel?
2. How did the custom of filling stockings and shoes with gifts get started?
3. Why do children often find oranges in their stockings?
4. What are children supposed to do with the gifts they receive on St. Nicholas Day?
5. Where did our idea of Santa Claus probably come from?