

Seasonal Safety Heroes: Santa Claus



There are some things that make me curious, such as: who came up with the idea of blowing sand from a long hot pipe to make glass? Who was the first to think that sea urchin might actually be food? And what other things did that person have the guts to taste that maybe had less fortunate gastronomic results?

Another thing I've always found mysterious is Santa Claus. How did a fat reindeer driver in a red suit become a fixture in a holiday celebrating the birth of the Messiah? This year I finally decided to do something to satisfy my curiosity.

The Origins of Santa Claus

What I learned is that Santa Claus is believed to be based on St. Nicholas who lived in Myra in what is today known as Turkey around 300 A.D. An orphan whose parents died of the plague, Nicholas was taken in by monks and became a priest at the startlingly young age of 17. He quickly gained a reputation for generously giving away church wealth as gifts to those in need, especially children. Legend says that he would throw small bags of gold down the chimney where they'd land in stockings hung by the fireplace to dry. Nicholas later became a bishop which explains the association with a bishop's hat—or miter — and long flowing gown with a red cape.

The Catholic Church canonized Nicholas after his death. This was also around the time that the Church began celebrating the modern holiday of Christmas. So, it was natural to make St. Nicholas part of the legend.

Fast forward nearly 2,000 year later when Protestant reformers wanted to keep the legend but not the association with a Catholic Saint. As a result, St. Nicholas began evolving into national variants. The English called him Father Christmas, the Germans Weihnachtsmann (Christmas Man), and the Russians Grandfather Frost. For some reason, Americans took to the Dutch version Sinterklaas, which they mispronounced as "Santa Claus."

The American political cartoonist, Thomas Nast, invented the modern look of Santa Claus. His drawing for the cover of the 1863 year-end issue of *Harper's Weekly* depicted a fat, jolly old guy with a white beard, red suit, stocking cap, and long-stemmed pipe. Starting in 1931, annual Christmas ads from Coca Cola refined the Nast version and produced the Santa Claus of today.

I know this feature is supposed to be about heroes of workplace safety. I would argue that Santa fits the bill based on reliable sources suggesting that:

- His elves are fully trained in the hazards of toy manufacturing.
- Santa equips those elves with a full regalia of protective equipment and ergonomically sound workstations.
- Santa's workshop has never, to my knowledge, suffered a lost-worktime injury or been cited for an OHS violation.