



CULTURAL CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS:

The Christmas Stocking

By Lisa Crandall

There is a ritual in our house on Christmas Eve – the stuffing of the socks, more formally known as the Christmas Stockings. It always begins with the orange (or in years when money is tight, a tangerine) tucked into the toe. After that the order does not matter, although there are certain other elements that are also mandatory.

The orange is the symbol of gold - money. As my mother used to say – that’s your wealth for the year. It is important that you eat that orange before the end of the day if you are going to have enough money for the rest of the year.

Other symbolic elements include an apple – for health, a banana – for laughter, and a bit of chocolate – for luxury. I also insist on a new toothbrush in each stocking, but after that it can be socks, or underwear, post-it-notes, pens, jewellery, individual packets of gourmet hot chocolate, nail polish and/or lottery tickets. The possibilities are limited only by your budget, your imagination and the size of the stocking.

When I was growing up the stockings we used were very specific – my father’s heavy gray woolen socks. In other households, I know that the stockings are knitted or crocheted, sewn out of red flannel, likely

decorated with reindeer or Christmas ornaments. Each one personalized with the name of its owner.

As a child waking up to find my Christmas sock on the end of my bed, or sometimes just outside my bedroom door, was a magical way of starting Christmas morning. One of my friends recalls that her parents used the stocking as a way to sleep in just a little longer. She was allowed to open her stocking and enjoy its contents as long as she did so quietly and refrained from waking up her parents. I remember gathering on my parent’s bed with my brother and sisters so we all opened them together. No sleeping in for my parents!

The tradition of the Christmas Stocking reaches far back into the history of Christmas. It is mentioned in the much-loved poem ‘A Visit from Saint Nicholas,’ also known as ‘Twas the Night Before Christmas,’ which was written in 1823. It is impossible to know how much further back the tradition goes.

According to some legends, the first Christmas stockings were filled with gold coins and belonged to three sisters. The children of an impoverished widower. He was in despair, unable to provide marriage dowries for his beloved daughters. The original St. Nicholas, a wealthy nobleman

who generously shared his wealth with those in need, heard about this poor family. One night, it just happened to be Christmas Eve, he snuck into the family cottage and found the freshly washed stockings of the girls hanging by the fire to dry. He filled three stockings with gold coins and the legend of the gold in the toe of the stocking on Christmas Eve was born.

This tradition is found all around the world. Generally, the idea is that good children would receive toys and candies, but bad children would get lumps of coal. In some parts of the world, tradition has it, children leave their stockings out, but they are filled with carrots and oats and lumps of sugar as treats for the reindeer, and St. Nick repays their generosity by refilling the stockings with small toys and other gifts.

In Italy, the tradition is for the stockings to be left out the night of The Epiphany (January 6) for the good witch, Le Befana, to fill. The form of the “stocking” also varies from place to place. In Holland, the children would traditionally leave out their wooden shoes to be filled. In France, the tradition often refers to children leaving their shoes under the tree.

Regardless of the size, shape or color of it, Christmas stockings are one of my favorite holiday traditions. **LH**

The Legend of Le Befana

According to Italian legend, during their search for the Christ Child, the three Wise Men stopped at a cottage in the countryside to ask for directions. They knocked on the door and an old woman carrying a broom answered. She was unable to give them any information so they continued on their journey after asking her if she would like to join them. She declined, saying she had too much housework to do. After they left, she reconsidered and started down the road after them, but was unable to catch up. As she went, Le Befana stopped each child she encountered and gave them a small treat in hopes that one was the Christ Child. Now, each year, on the eve of the Epiphany she sets out again, stopping at each house to leave treats for good children and a lump of coal for those who were bad.