

SANTA CLAUS

White Rock's Pre-dates Coca-Cola's

by Cecil Munsey
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History of Today's Santa Claus

Santa Claus hasn't always looked like the jolly old fellow we know today – a portly grandfatherly Santa with flowing white whiskers, a ruddy complexion and dressed in a red suit trimmed with white fur.

Some bottle collectors believe that it was The Coca-Cola Company's consistent portrayal of Santa in its winter advertising campaigns, beginning in 1930, that created the Santa we know and accept today. That's a myth perpetuated by many including the author of this article. Indeed, in my 1972 book chronicling the merchandizing history and collectibles of The Coca-Cola Company (see bibliography), I devoted a whole chapter to the "Stereotyping of Santa Claus." More age, experience, and research have proved that I was somewhat naïve and overly influenced by the "help" I received with my research during those several months I spent in Atlanta in the archives of the venerable cola-manufacturing soft drink company.

That The Coca-Cola Company had an influence on today's fairly standardized portrayal of Santa Claus is undeniable. I was on the right track when I wrote:

"By mid-1931 artist Haddon Sundblom was hard at work



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

for The Coca-Cola Company developing a Santa Claus that would be both realistic and symbolic. In 1931 the first of the now-famous Sundblom portraits of Santa Claus appeared on posters and in magazines advertising Coca-Cola.

"The quality of Haddon Sundblom's work, teamed with the company's extensive advertising, has created [oops] what is probably the most common conception of Santa Claus...."

The Santa Claus figure, although not yet standardized, was ubiquitous by the late 19th century. Santa was portrayed as both large and small; he was usually round but sometimes of normal or slight build; and he dressed in furs or cloth suits of red, blue, green, or purple.

A Boston printer named Louis Prang introduced the English custom of Christmas cards to America, and in 1885 he issued a card featuring a red-suited Santa. The chubby Santa with a red suit began to replace the fur-dressed image and the multicolored Santas.

Although some versions of the Santa Claus figure still had him attired in outfits of various colors past the beginning of the 20th century, the jolly, ruddy, sack-carrying Santa with a red suit and flowing white whiskers had become the standard image of Santa Claus by the 1920s. That was around the time White Rock issued its version of Santa beginning in 1923, eight years before Sundblom painted his first Santa illustration for Coca-Cola. In 1927 The New York Times reported:

"A standardized Santa Claus appears to New York children. Height, weight, stature are almost exactly standardized, as are the red garments, the hood and the white whiskers. The pack

full of toys, ruddy cheeks and nose, bushy eyebrows and a jolly, paunchy effect are also inevitable parts of the requisite make-up."

As the title of this article proclaims, "SANTA CLAUS – White Rock's Pre-dates Coca-Cola's." The people who produced White Rock mineral water and ginger ale ran at least two full-page advertisements, by an anonymous artist, featuring a portly grandfatherly Santa with flowing white whiskers, a ruddy complexion and dressed in a red suit trimmed with white fur. Both of the ads were published in Life magazine. One of the ads (Fig. 1) appeared in Life's December 13, 1923 issue and another (Fig. 2) appeared in Life's December 4, 1924 issue.

The December 1923 advertisement and subsequent ones were part of White Rock's annual winter campaign just as was Coca-Cola's beginning in 1930. The difference is that White Rock began their Santa Claus advertisements seven years before 1930 when Coke offered their first Santa, also by an anonymous artist.

Two other comparisons between the two historic firms: (1) The White Rock Natural Mineral Spring Company, was founded in 1871; The Coca-Cola Company didn't become a company until 1892 – twenty-one years later. (2) White Rock water was first sold in bottles in 1876 and White Rock Ginger Ale was first bottled in 1882; Coca-Cola (invented in 1886) was first sold in bottles in 1894 – eighteen and twelve years later respectively.

All of that wasn't to say that Coca-Cola didn't have anything to do with cementing the image of Santa Claus in the public consciousness. The Santa image may have been standardized before White Rock (1923) and Coca-Cola (1930) adopted it for their annual Christmas advertisements. But Coca-Cola did have a great deal to do with establishing Santa Claus as a ubiquitous Christmas figure in America at a time when the holiday was still making the transition from a religious observance to a largely secular and highly commercial celebration. In an era before color television, color films, and the widespread use of color in newspapers, it was Coca-Cola's annual magazine advertisements, billboards, and point-of-sale store displays that exposed nearly everyone in America to the modern Santa Claus image.

Coca-Cola certainly helped make Santa Claus one of the most popular men in America, but they didn't invent him.

History of the Original Santa Claus

Like many other American traditions, Santa Claus is a product of a blend of many different cultures and customs. His earliest ancestors date back to pre-Christian days, when a wide variety of gods supposedly ruled the earth. The mythological characters Odin, Thor, and Saturn provided the basis for many of Santa's distinctive characteristics.

But the most influential figure in the shaping of today's Santa was a real man. He was a monk who was born in Partara, in the city of Lycia in Asia Minor around 280 A. D. As legend has it, the real Santa Claus was Saint Nicholas the monk who

ultimately became the Bishop of Myra, Turkey. Nothing is really known, but many legends paint him as a very generous man with a tremendous interest in children. For those reasons he was elevated to the position of the patron saint of children. [Because the saint's life was so unreliably documented, Pope Paul VI ordered the feast of Saint Nicholas (and others) dropped from the official Roman Catholic calendar in 1969.]

Although many of the stories about Saint Nicholas are of doubtful authenticity, his legend spread throughout Europe, emphasizing his role as a traditional bringer of gifts. The Christian Saint Nicholas was called Sanct Herr Nicholaas or Sinter Klaas in Holland. The term Christkindl evolved to Kriss Kringle, another nickname for Santa Claus. Various other European Christmas gift givers were more or less similar to Saint Nicholas: in France he was called Pere Noel, in Germany he appeared as Weihnachtsmann, in Scandinavia he was called Julenisse, and Father Christmas in England.

History of the Early American Santa Claus

The American version of the Santa Claus figure received its inspiration and its name from the Dutch legend of Sinter Klaas, brought by settlers to New York in the 17th century. Other immigrants to the New World brought along their various beliefs when they crossed the Atlantic. The Scandinavians introduced gift-giving elves, the Germans brought their decorated trees and the Irish contributed the ancient Gaelic custom of placing a lighted candle in the window.

As early as 1773 the name appeared in the American press as

"St. A. Claus," but it was the popular author Washington Irving who gave America its first detailed information about the Dutch version of Saint Nicholas. In his History of New York, published in 1809 under the pseudonym Diedrick Knickerbocker, Irving described the arrival of the saint in a horse-drawn wagon riding over treetops and dropping gifts down the chimneys of his favorites. He also described Santa as a jolly Dutchman

who smoked a long stemmed clay pipe and wore baggy breeches and a broad brimmed hat. Also, the familiar phrase, "...laying his finger beside his nose..." first appeared in Irving's story.

That phrase was used again in 1822 in the now-classic poem by Dr. Clement Clarke Moore, "A Visit from St. Nicholas," more commonly known as "The Night Before Christmas." His verse gave an Arctic flavor to Santa's image when he substituted eight tiny reindeer and a sleigh for Irving's horse and wagon. It's Moore's description of Santa that we most often think of today: "He had a broad face, and a little round belly, that shook when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly."

Up to that point, Santa's physical appearance and the color of his suit were open to individual interpretation. Then in 1863, Thomas Nast, a German immigrant, gave us a visual image of the cheerful giver that was to later become widely accepted for most of the 19th century.

When Nast was asked to illustrate Moore's charming verse for a book of children's poems, he dressed the elfin

Both of those advertisements by White Rock feature Santa posed with not only a bottle of mineral water or ginger ale but with a bottle of whiskey and a glass. That suggested Santa liked mixed drinks. That's an interesting suggestion to make when it is recalled that the 18th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, establishing national Prohibition (Volsted Act 1920-1933), was in effect.

Still another comparison of firsts that is of peripheral interest to bottle collecting historians is the one I fully developed in an article entitled, "The Six-Pack Cometh (see bibliography)."

"The first six-pack bottle carton by the Orange Crush Company, the "Handi-Pack," was patented by them on September 19, 1923; the Coca-Cola six-pack bottle carton, the "Home-Pack," was patented by The Coca-Cola Company on September 23, 1923 – four days after Orange Crush's."

figure in red and endowed him with human characteristics

Most important of all, Nast gave Santa a home at the North Pole. For twenty-three years or until 1886, his annual drawings in Harpers Weekly magazine allowed Americans to peek into the world of Santa Claus and set the stage for the shaping of today's merry gentleman.

Louis Prang the printer who in 1885 issued a Christmas card featuring a red-suited Santa; and the unknown artist who painted Santa Claus for White Rock; and the anonymous Coke artist in 1930; and Haddon Sundblom who, from 1931, painted numerous scenes of Santa Claus for Coca-Cola added the final touches to Santa's modern image.

One concluding piece to the story of a modern Santa Claus might be that an advertising writer for the Montgomery Ward Company invented Rudolph, the ninth reindeer, with a red and shiny nose, in 1939.

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Just for fun...

Practical Jokes

(or who says you cannot have fun when the show slows down?)



Collector: "I'd just like for you to explain to me why this jar is marked \$1200.00 and the very same jar next to it is \$1.00?"

Dealer: "Well, ma'am, they aren't the same jar... You see, this one is a very rare jar and ever though it is clear, like the other jar, it is from a very rare mold and company. See here, it says, 'Drey Perfect' ... 'Wait a minute, that's not MY label...!'"

As laughter explodes from the dealers around him, we say, "Gotcha Jackie!! And, you were so sincere in attempting explanation...!"

(Collector - unknown, Dealer - Jackie Barker, and Bill Henderson as the Merry Prankster.)



Send your practical jokes, cartoons, etc. - to the Editor:
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