

# Tradition of handmade tree ornaments lingers on

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Every year when it comes time to trim my Christmas tree, I look forward to choosing the ornaments I want to hang. Everything in the box is familiar; some of the ornaments date to my childhood, such as the white plastic reindeer with the broken leg, a green ribbon tied around its neck; and the fragile glass ornaments shaped like a cluster of grapes.

The ornaments I most treasure, however, are the handmade ones. I love the tiny felt mouse tucked under a snippet of calico serving as a blanket in a half of a walnut shell used for a cradle. There's also a turtle version. I bought those ornaments back in the early 1980s at a craft fair in Bangor.

Then there are the red and green felt socks, each one approximately 4 inches high, which my mother made one year. She cut out two sock shapes from felt and did an overcast stitch to sew them together, leaving the tops open. She decorated these with tiny gold buttons, sequins, lace, gold and silver metallic trim and whatever else her imagination dreamed up. Into each sock she placed a \$5 bill, tucked the socks into Christmas cards and mailed them to her grandchildren.

I liked the socks so much, I made a few of my own, just for the fun of it. Now when I hang the ones she made on my tree, I can see her smiling in my mind's eye.

Tucked away in an old box that once contained stationery are two paper ornaments constructed by my sons when they were in the primary grades. One is a human figure and the other is a reindeer, cut from white paper. The deer is colored brown with a crayon, and the human figure has twists of blue and magenta tissue glued to it. These ornaments remind me of the fleeting days of my sons' childhood, and how quickly they grew to be fine men, one with sons of his own.

Another ornament I especially like is a Santa head, nicely bearded, that my son's fifth-grade teacher crocheted as a gift for each of her students in 1979 or 1980. When I hang that ornament, I sense the caring that went into its making. It's no small thing to

make 20 or so Santa ornaments to give to one's students. It speaks of kindness and of the teacher's love of her vocation.

And then there are the snowflakes I crocheted in 1980s. Some have tiny glistening beads sewn to them or a pearl placed at the center. I made many of these to share with friends and family. Each one was dipped in liquid starch, dried and ironed into flat submission. To this day, the starch holds fast.

When my sons were growing up, we always made time to make tree ornaments together. Sometimes my mother or my sister joined us. We made God's eyes, twisting embroidery thread around two toothpicks we had glued together in an X shape.

We cut animal shapes from felt and created birds, raccoons, beaver and polar bears.

We glued walnut shells back together after we had eaten the nuts, and dyed them with food coloring. The trick was to open the shell without breaking it. When we glued it back together we stuck a thread loop into the seam so we could hang it on the tree.

We strung beads on pipe cleaners and created shiny wreaths embellished with tiny silver bells and narrow red ribbon bows.

One son even fashioned a rather long chain of paperclips that is still stored in the tree ornament box.

We also cut images from past years' Christmas cards and added a thread to hang it by.

My object in focusing on handmade tree ornaments when my sons were small was so the Christmas tree was something they could touch and feel invested in. I never wanted a shiny, fancy tree adorned with breakable things and have to spend the holiday season admonishing them to "don't touch." I hold to that tradition even though my house no longer is home to any children.

I wanted the tree to reflect the spirit of making and giving, to celebrate the creative spirit -- especially theirs -- and to be a symbol of the joy of togetherness that is such an important part of the season. I wanted the making and giving to be a tradition that would follow them into the future.

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These vintage Christmas tree ornaments from the late 1970s were handcrafted from felt, a bit of lace and buttons.  
BDN Photo by Ardeana Hamlin

## The man behind the beard



Every Christmas Eve, children go to bed eagerly anticipating a visit from Santa Claus. This merry gentleman is purported to visit the home of every good girl and boy, delivering gifts and cheer along the way.

Before the modern evolution of Santa Claus lived a very real and generous individual named Nicholas. In the third century, Nicholas served as the Bishop of Myrna in present-day Turkey. He had a reputation for secret gift-giving, believing that giving should be done secretly and sacrificially in Jesus Christ's name rather than one's own.

Stories tell of Nicholas paying the dowry for poor daughters to enable them to get married. He reportedly put coins in the shoes of those who left them out for him. It is believed Nicholas helped to restore the hope of hundreds of people in his community, making him a beloved and revered Bishop. Throughout his ministry, Nicholas fervently shared his life and fortune with others.

Nicholas continued to be revered and commemorated by many Christians even after his death. His charity and unselfish works helped inspire generations of the faithful, and he eventually was named the patron saint of everyone from merchants to sailors to pawnbrokers.

No one really knows what St. Nicholas looked like. But in 2005, a forensic laboratory in England reviewed historical data and photographs of the remains taken from St. Nicholas' grave in the 1950s. Researchers concluded that he was a small man, perhaps no more than five feet in height, with a broken nose.

This image certainly does not fit with the robust frame and other imagery awarded St. Nicholas in more modern years. St. Nicholas is believed to be the inspiration for Santa Claus, which was a name taken from the Dutch Sinterklaas, a contracted form of Sint Nicolass, or St. Nicholas.

Tales of the real St. Nicholas' giving spirit were blended with a fictional personification by New York-based newspaper writers who blended the St. Nicholas name with the appearance of a Dutch town citizen. The goal was to reach out to the primarily Dutch immigrants living in New York at the time. This jolly elf image was given a boost by the publication of "A Visit From St. Nicholas," which was published around the same time.

Eventually, the merry Santa Claus portrayal began to outshine the more accurate St. Nicholas version as a religious man, fostered by political drawings and caricatures that depicted Santa as a chubby sort in a red suit. That image prevails to this day.

Beneath the Christmas symbolism, the beard and the presents associated with Santa Claus lies a tale of generosity that originated with St. Nicholas.

