

Herbs Make Scents



THE HERB SOCIETY OF AMERICA
VOLUME XLII, NUMBER 12

SOUTH TEXAS UNIT
DECEMBER 2019

Co-Editors Linda Alderman (ewalderman@comcast.net) & Janice Freeman (jkfreemanHouStu@outlook.com)

December 2019 Calendar

- Dec 10**, Tues. at 10 a.m. **Day Meeting** is a Holiday Party and Gift Exchange at the home of **Jane Littell**. RSVP to Jane (281-702-3751). If you wish to participate in the gift exchange, bring a wrapped gift. **Please bring a dish to share**. Any questions call **Cathy Livingston** (713-252-5038).
- Dec 15**, Sun. at 2 p.m. **STU Holiday Potluck & Gift Exchange** is at the home of **Maria Treviño**. If you wish to participate in the gift exchange, limit the cost to \$20. **Please bring a side dish or dessert to share that serves approximately 8**.

January 2020 Calendar

- Jan 14**, Tues. at 10 a.m. **Day Meeting** is at the home of **Janice Dana**. The program, "*Herb of the Year, Rubus ssp.*" will be presented by **Joan Jordan**. RSVP to Janice at danas4086@sbcglobal.net **Please bring a dish to share**.
- Jan 15**, Wed. at 6:30 p.m. **Evening Meeting** is at the Cherie Flores Garden Pavilion in Hermann Park (1500 Hermann Drive, Houston, TX 77004). **Hosts** are **Yvette Darnell** and **Lana Fehrle**. The program, "Ayurvedic Herbs for Vitality and Healthy Brain Function" presented by **Karuna Diedericks**, Ayurvedic Practitioner and Certified Food for Life Instructor.. **Bring your plate, cutlery, napkin and a dish to share**.

Newsletter deadline: the 25th of every month
(January co-editor Linda Alderman)



12/26 Donna Fay
Hilliard



Left at Herb Fair:

A white paper bag with a decorative pillow, a vintage embroidered tea towel and velvet acorns.

Please contact **Pam Harris** at prharris014@gmail.com, if you know where it is. **Thank you!**





Chairman's Corner

What a wonderful thing to find a hidden gem of a garden deep in the heart of Houston! Thank you, Karen Cottingham for arranging two special opportunities to learn about the Holistic Garden at Rice and to hear the wisdom of **Dr. Joe Novak**.

The benefits of community extend past the garden itself and into our homes. I hope you all can attend one (or more) of the Holiday gatherings our Unit has planned. Read all about them here in the newsletter. We will also send an invitation to the December 15 party via Mail Chimp.

Here are a few things discussed at the last Board Meeting:

- **New Member Orientation** - Great idea from Janice Stuff! Use the time right before the evening meeting to meet with new members to give them information they need and to answer any questions. We will get this going in the new year.
- **Herb Day** - Fondren Hall at St. Paul's Methodist is secured for April 25. We have booked one speaker and are working on others.
- **Member Scholarships** – Once we revise the wording, we will advertise this to our members.

Julie Fordes
Chair of South Texas Unit

Help Wanted

Herb Fair 2020, is off to a good start! I would like to thank the following members who have agreed to chair committees for next year's fair. We have two very important chair positions yet to fill; **Fragrance** and **Publicity (preferably someone with knowledge of social media outreach)**. If either of these positions is a role you would like to consider please contact Donna Wheeler.

Herb Fair 2020 Committee Chairs

Publicity (signage): Virginia Camerlo

Education: Karen Cottingham

Jellies: Benée Curtis

Labels: Janice Dana

Teas: Julie Fordes

Crafts: Pam Harris

Kitchen: Mary Sacilowski

Plants/herbs: Janis Teas

Finance: Maria Treviño (will help with café)

Herb Fair Chair: Donna Wheeler

Blends: Dena Yanowski

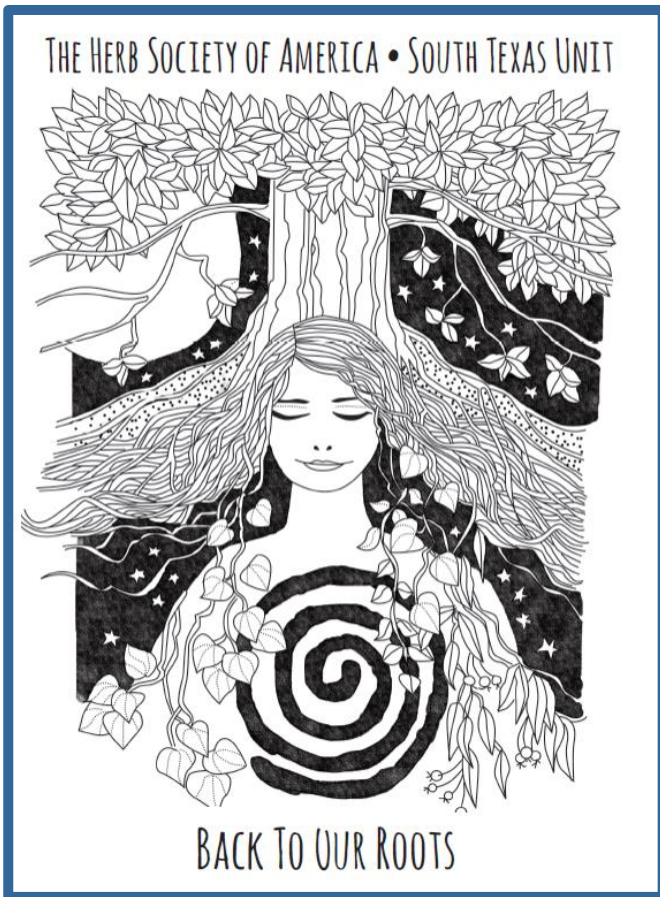
Café: Donna Yanowski

Things we need:

If you are a garage sale aficionado and you see a gently used card table OR you own a table you no longer use, the South Texas Unit would like to acquire six tables for the Herb Fair 2020.

Donna Wheeler
Herb Fair Chair





Julie Fordes

Horticulture is loosely defined as the **art** and **science** of growing plants. Many gardeners excel at one or the other of these seemingly opposite skills. I find myself on the more artsy side of things - dealing with the color, shape and design of plants. I am less comfortable dealing with the science of it all. I would like to become more skilled in the “ins” and “outs” of growing and harvesting plants. Sometimes I think I know what I’m doing and then I get an unexpected outcome - usually a dead or dying plant.

Starting in January you can go back to **your** roots by asking one of our experienced growers a specific question. We will have cards on the tables at meetings for members to fill out with their specific question or concern to be answered by email by one of our many experts.

Ask the Expert will start off with **Beth Murphy** answering questions. She will research if necessary and respond by email. In the future, we may publish the questions and answers in the newsletter. Start thinking about what you would ask...

Don't forget how much information our STU website already has. Check out the monthly to-do list and Susan Wood's article about growing cool weather herbs.

I am already thinking about teas and blends using what we can grow. Now is a good time for calendula planting. *Calendula officinalis* has antioxidant and antiseptic properties and is full of beta-carotene. We have infused the petals in oil and made skin care products, and I am beginning to read about it used as part of tea blends. I encourage you all to grow this sunny yellow flower, for all of its wonderful properties or just for the joy of it.

One of our most popular tea blends requires orange zest. I happen to have an orange tree that produces really sour, virtually unusable fruit, but the zest is fine! Last winter, **Catherine O'Brien** single-handedly produced over a pound of dried zest! We grated the peel with a cheese grater and dried it in a dehydrator. The resulting product was just perfect for tea.

On our website (www.herbsociety-stu.org [Monthly To-Do List](#)) we feature South Texas member **Beth Murphy's** “Monthly To-Do List” and **Susan Wood's** article on growing cool weather herbs.





HSA Awards Lois Sutton with the Helen de Conway Little Medal of Honor



Former longtime South Texas Unit member, Lois Sutton, will receive The Herb Society of America's highest award at the 2020 Annual Meeting held from April 17-18 in Charleston, South Carolina. The Helen de Conway Little Medal of Honor was awarded for the first time in

1960. It is given to one person each year, if a deserving candidate is nominated.

Lois joined our Unit in 1983. She immediately jumped in to participate as one of our most actively involved members. Janice Stuff compiled a list highlighting many of her contributions (see the column to the right), and wrote a letter of nomination including input from several other STU members. Also, included, is my letter of nomination highlighting an important issue of the STU, which Lois helped bring into reality while serving as Treasurer. (Both letters on the following pages of the newsletter)

Lois is now a Member-at-Large living in Asheville, North Carolina. She is an affiliate of our Unit and the Pioneer Unit in Round Top, Texas. Knowing Lois, she might now be associated with other units in her new area. Lois exemplifies the spirit of volunteer service and dedication to The Herb Society of America and the South Texas Unit.

Read about the things she has done for our Society and plan on attending the Annual Meeting in Charleston to meet her personally. Other exciting events are happening in Charleston during that time, so if you would like to attend, consider adding a day or two to explore before or after our meeting. Registration and hotel information for the 2020 Annual Meeting of Members is available online at www.herbsociety.org.

Please join me in congratulating Lois! I hope you can come to Charleston to enjoy the festivities in April next year for what I consider to be one of the best ways to see gardens with friends, old & new, in amazing places.

Submitted by Susan Wood

Lois Sutton Bio

Prepared by Janice Stuff, South Texas Unit

Offices Held

Served all major offices and committee heads, served as Treasurer twice

Publications

Supplement (pub. 2000) to South Texas Unit's Cookbook
Herbal Harvest (pub. 1996) featuring menus of various Holidays based on recipes in the cookbook
Herbs Used During Civil War - Handout (posted on Website)

Plants of Harvest and Winter Celebrations. Handout. Nov. 2015

Meeting Presentations (partial)

Lois joined HSA and South Texas Unit in 1983

- April 15, 1997 Herbal Taxonomy and Other Taxing Questions
- Jan. 17, 2001 Herb Trees in Our Garden
- Feb. 20, 2002 You Mean Someone Grew my Shirt?
- Jan. 8, 2008 Spring in the Garden and Succulents Slideshow
- Mar. 19, 2008 Famous Herbal Authors and Their Books
- Jan. 17, 2009 Romantic Herbs
- Sept. 15, 2010 Growing and Cooking with Horseradish (co-presenter)
- Sept. 13, 2011 *Chenopodium album* herb profile
- Oct. 11, 2011 Useful Herbs from the Civil War.
- Nov. 14, 2012 Go Wild with Natives
- Jan. 9, 2014 Herbal Cooking, Here and There, Then and Now (Pioneer Unit)
- Mar. 11, 2014 Return to the Texas Plant Explorers
- Sept. 8, 2015 The Herbs of China Bayles: Morning Glory
- Feb. 10, 2015 Liquors, Liqueurs, and Libations.
- Jan. 14, 2016 The Foods & Spices of Northern Africa (Pioneer Unit)
- Jan 20, 2016 The Foods & Spices of Northern Africa
- May 10, 2016 The Herbs of China Bayles: *Blood Root*
- Oct. 11, 2016 Native Alternatives to Invasive Plants.



STU Letter of Recommendation for Lois Sutton Award

Award Committee
The Herb Society of America

August 13, 2019

Dear Committee Members:

We are honored to support Lois Sutton for the Helen de Conway Little Medal of Honor of The Herb Society of America. Lois embodies amazing devotion and commitment as seen by her contributions to the South Texas Unit of HSA for the herbal growth and herbal education of the community and society members.

Lois's contributions in the three main categories of: 1) Service as officers within the South Texas Unit and HAS, 2) Educator, Researcher, and Presenter of numerous Programs and Symposiums. 3) The **Crown Jewel** of Lois's Herbal contributions has been her leadership, strength and tenacity to contribute to our Unit and keep it on track for accurate and useful Herbal Education.

Lois has held nearly all offices of our Unit: Unit Chair, Education Chair, and Treasurer and chaired various subcommittees for our annual Herb Fair and Herb Day. She presented many programs to the South Texas Unit and the Pioneer Unit (a partial list is attached) and public. Her presentations reached hundreds of persons attending the programs and by media coverage. Lois is also a gourmet cook, and since joining the Herb Society, she quickly learned and created herbal recipes; these were shared in programs, lectures, and newspaper feature articles. She spear-headed our jelly making team for many years, producing nearly 400 jars many years; she also specialized in herbal soups.

Lois's programs were carefully researched, documented, and sourced for accuracy and detail. She had an excellent command of horticulture, botany, taxonomy, and history. At the same time, she had the ability to translate technical herbal knowledge into material that was easily grasped, fun, and appreciated by those just starting to learn about herbs.

Finally, Lois is an awesome hostess and gardener. After joining The Herb Society, her garden incorporated seasonal herbs and plants. The garden served as an educational resource for members and guests. Lois and her husband opened their home for many member meetings, workshops, and Christmas parties.

In conclusion, we highly recommend Lois Sutton as a deserving recipient of the Helen de Conway Little Medal of Honor.

Sincerely,

Janice Stuff, Past Unit Chair and current Treasurer
Pam Harris, Past Unit Chair
Lois Jean Howard, Past Unit Chair
Joan Jordan, Past Unit Chair
Sally Luna, Past Unit Chair
Beth Murphy, Past Unit Garden Chair
Susan Wood, Past Unit Chair



Susan Wood Letter of Recommendation for Lois Sutton Award

Susan Wood
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Bellaire, TX 77401

713 665-3698 phone
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susanwoodtx@prodigy.net

8-14-19

Awards Committee of The Herb Society of America

Dear Committee members,

I support the nomination of Lois Sutton for the Helen de Conway Little Medal of Honor. Lois joined the South Texas Unit when I was Unit Chair in 1983. She was very enthusiastic to learn about herbs and immediately starting volunteering wherever needed. Lois was always ready to accept responsibility for a project that needed leadership. When our Herb Fair needed a new Chair, Lois stepped up to the challenge no one else would accept to keep our tradition alive.

When we needed a Treasurer, Lois volunteered. She had observed that our Unit Chair, as a member of the National Board, was expected to attend 3 Board meetings a year. The South Texas Unit at that time was only reimbursing our Chair \$100 per meeting. Lois moved at our next annual meeting to increase this support to cover the expenses of airfare, hotel and event registration so that it was no longer a financial burden for those members willing to serve. This is an example of how Lois made a difference by observing a problem and coming up with a rational solution.

Always dependable, Lois has worked tirelessly for our Unit and The Society. In addition to holding every office and chairing most of our South Texas Unit committees, she has served as national Education Chair, President & *Herbarist* Editor as well as Vice President and Nominating Committee Chair. She became an affiliate member of the Pioneer Unit to participate in their events when she and Andy bought a ranch near Round Top. Lois has extensive knowledge of all things herbal and is willing to share it by speaking to groups interested in learning about herbs. She has written many articles and prepared numerous handouts to help educate the public on herbs. She is very deserving of our Society's top award.

Sincerely,

Susan Wood



Sweet Potato and Apple Bake with Citrus Sauce Bake at 350* for one hour

Many people have asked for this recipe that I made for the November Day meeting. It is light and fresh tasting, a great counterpoint to the heavier dishes served during the holidays.

From my Aunt Pug

- 3-4 regular sized yams or sweet potatoes (or 2 large ones)
 - Partially cooked and sliced in ¼ inch wedges
- 4 Granny Smith apples (cored and sliced in ¼ inch wedges)

Sauce

- 1 ¾ cups boiling water
- ¾ cup sugar
- 2-4 Tablespoons cornstarch
- 1 -2 Tablespoons butter
- ½ tsp. salt
- 1-2 Tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- ¼ cup freshly squeezed orange juice
- ½ t. cinnamon
- ¼ t. each allspice and nutmeg

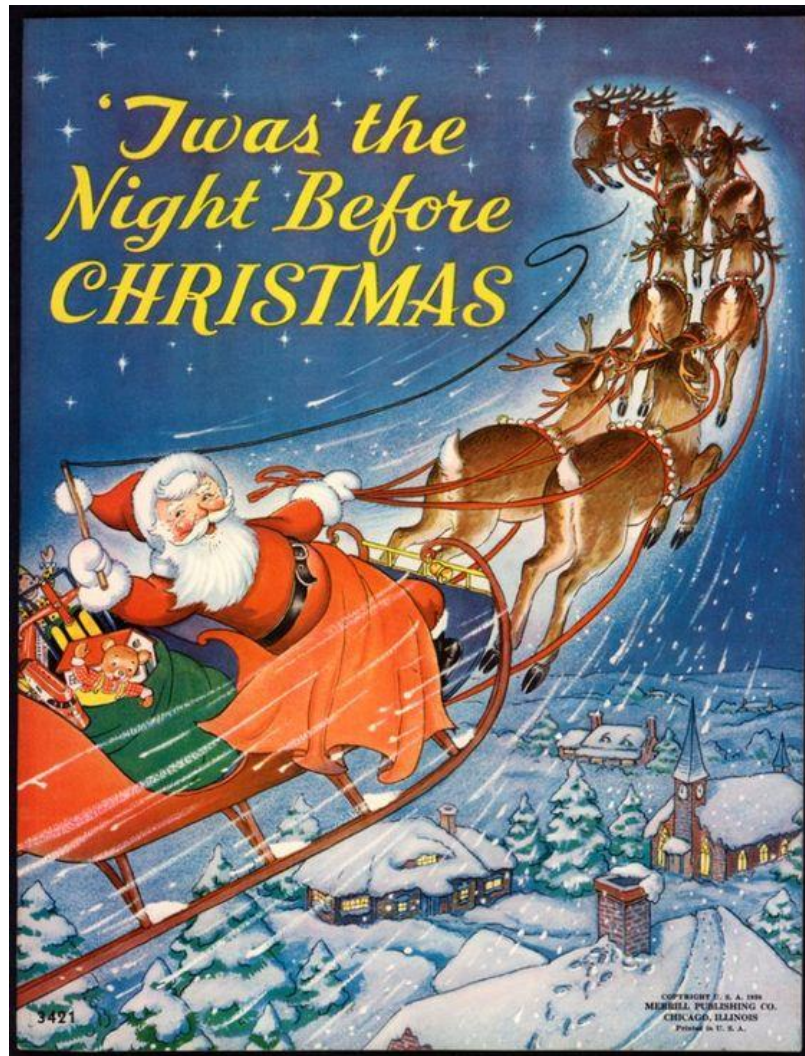
Alternate the apples and sweet potatoes in greased casserole. Make sauce by mixing sugar, cornstarch and salt in saucepan. Add boiling water a bit at a time. Use a whisk to prevent lumps in cornstarch. Add butter, lemon and orange juices and spices. Adjust the seasoning or citrus to your taste. Pour over apples and sweet potatoes. Sprinkle some cinnamon on top. Bake for an hour. I cover it for a while and then take the cover off.





SANTA'S REINDEER RIDE

Karen Cottingham



And away they all flew like down on a thistle

If you still believe in Santa Claus, **stop reading right now!** There's a dreadful rumor circulating about the Jolly Old Elf. Some people are saying that Santa's magical midnight flight is fueled by mushrooms - gasp, hallucinogenic mushrooms. And if that's not shocking enough, Santa may be "a modern counterpart of a shaman, who consumed mind-altering plants and fungi to commune with the spirit world." This is according to **John Rush**, an anthropologist and instructor at Sierra College in Rocklin, California, and several religious scholars and ethnomycologists agree with him.

The mushroom in question is the beautiful but treacherous fly agaric, *Amanita muscaria* - the red and white spotted toadstool we see on Yule Log cakes, Christmas cards, and even Christmas trees this time of year. This festive fungus is found deep in the forest beneath conifers, where it forms symbiotic relationships with other Christmas-time favorites such as pines, firs, and spruces. Finding the red-topped toadstool supposedly brings good luck to the forager just as the four-leafed clover does to its finder, and both are symbols of blessing and good luck at the turning of the year.



Vintage postcards from the early 1900s

Germans are especially fond of fly agaric, calling it *glücklicher pilz* or *gluckspilz*, which literally means “lucky mushroom”. These lucky postcard mushrooms from the early 1900s bring sweet and sincere Seasons Greetings and Best Wishes for the New Year.

Amanita mushrooms are famous not only for their dramatic looks but also for their intense psychedelic effects. Although the New Year postcards below feature cherubs, angelic children, and a respectfully-dressed young woman, they clearly refer to the sensation of being in flight that commonly occurs after consumption of hallucinogenic mushrooms.



Mushroom-themed vintage New Year postcards

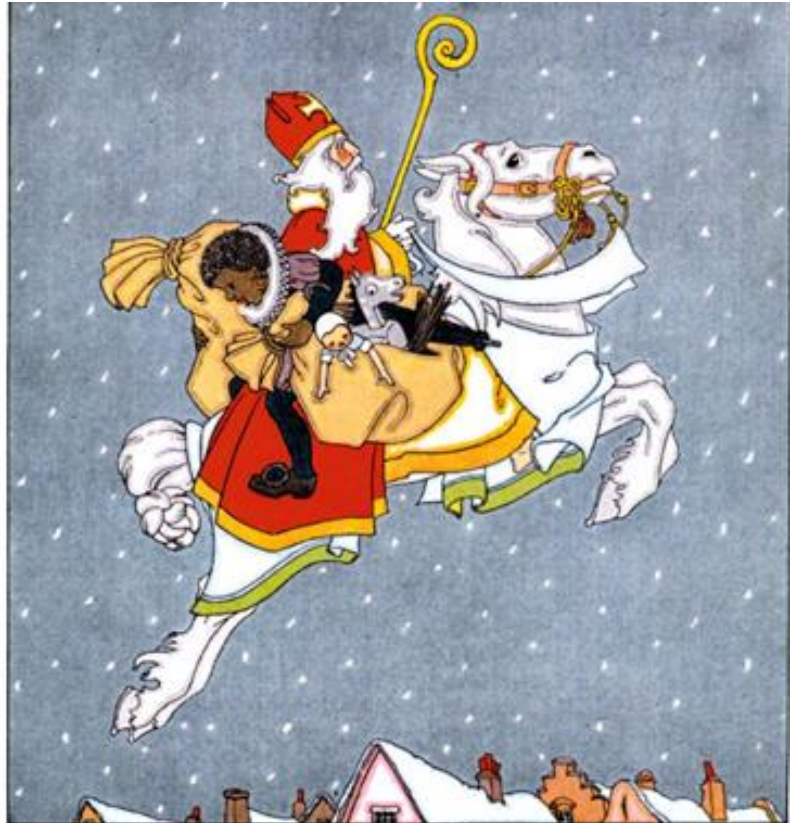
Were members of “polite society” that familiar with psychedelic mushrooms? I doubt it. More likely, the red-topped toadstools were such long-embedded symbols of Yuletide and the New Year that, along with the original meaning of holly, mistletoe, and ivy, the relationship between deep winter and toadstools was long forgotten. And considering that many of our “Christmas” traditions had their origin in pagan cultures of long ago that were subsequently Christianized, it's not surprising that we have lost our sense of what some of them truly mean.

Most of our most cherished holiday traditions are actually intricate pastiches of myths and sacred stories from diverse cultures. It is impossible to follow a single thread - the stories are so intertwined, tangled up, and tied in knots.

Christmas itself stems from pre-Christian beliefs and ancient Winter Solstice rituals and practices. And although most people see Christmas as a Christian holiday, many of the symbols and icons we now associate with Christmas are actually derived from the shamanistic traditions of the tribal peoples of pre-Christian Northern Europe.



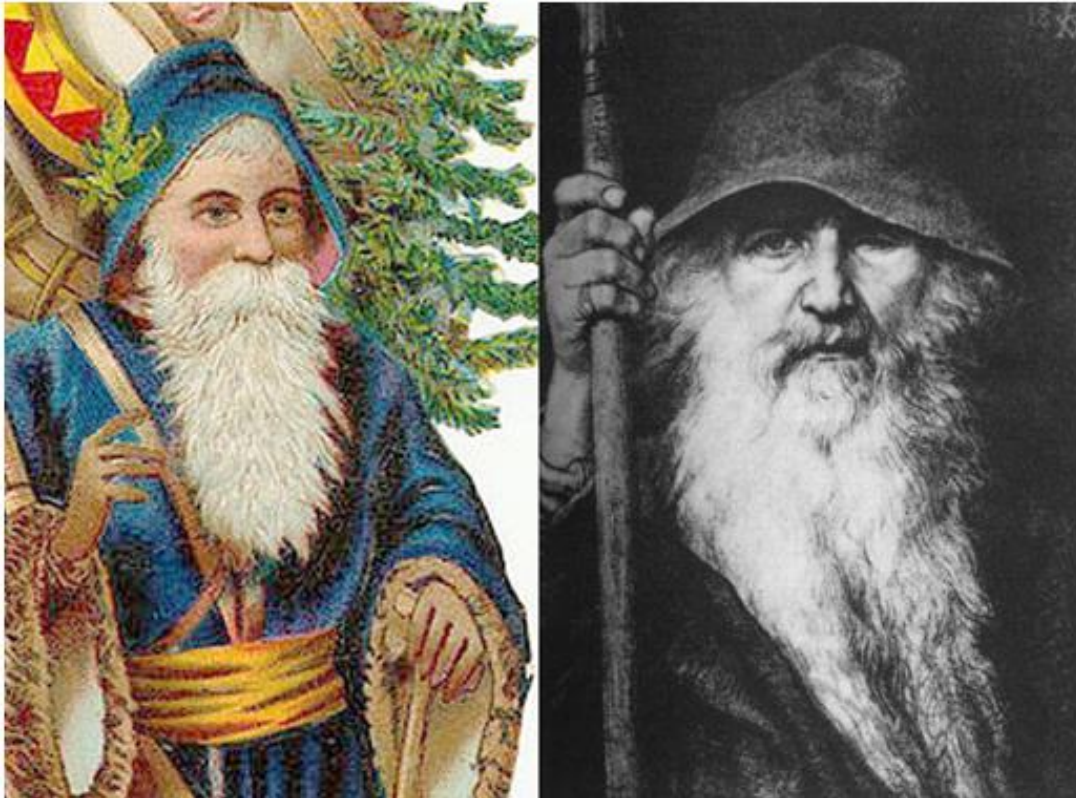
Santa Claus, too, is a composite of many figures - some historical and others imaginary. The Santa we see in department stores can be traced back to a fourth-century Greek monk, Saint Nicholas of Myra, a bearded Christian known for charitable giving. Saint Nicholas fell out of favor when all of the feast and saint's days were banned during the Protestant Reformation. After going underground for a time, the Greek monk re-emerged as Sinterklaas, the patron saint of Dutch children. Sinterklaas, in his own adaptation of the ecclesiastical red cape and mitre, rides a flying white horse and delivers gifts to children on the December name day of Saint Nicholas.



*Saint Nicholas, the patron Saint of Russia, and Sinterklass with "Black Pete" delivering Christmas gifts
The illustration is by Maud & Miska Petersham, 1926, from "Tales Told in Holland"*

The Dutch version of Saint Nicholas is sometimes assisted by "Black Pete", a gnome-like "Dark Helper", who is probably the remnant of an ancient pagan deity associated with the solstice celebration. And the British legend of Father Christmas, another incarnation of the gift-giving St. Nicholas, has him living in Lapland, a land of reindeer-herders with a strong cultural connection to Siberia.

At some point, these early versions of Santa Claus coalesced with Odin, the pagan Germanic deity, who was also linked with shamanism, gift-giving, and celestial travel. It was the all-powerful Odin riding his eight-legged, flying horse that caused the otherworldly aurora borealis to appear in the wintry sky. And the drops of blood-flecked foam that fell from his horse's mouth gave rise to the red and white amanita mushrooms so important in northern shamanic practice. Over time, the European story of a flying horse with eight legs converged with an ancient Arctic circle tale of supernatural reindeer traveling through the night sky. Details of these airborne animals merged together into the eight prancing, flying reindeer that pull Santa's sleigh today.



Traditional images of Father Christmas in blue, on the left, and Odin, right. Odin was known for taking on many forms and had many names. But one of his favorite forms was that of an old, white-bearded traveler clad in a cloak and broad-brimmed hat or hood (as seen in this 1886 black & white depiction of Odin by Georg von Rosen)

Our modern image of Santa as a plump, jolly old elf was most famously put forth in 1822, in the familiar poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” later to be called “’Twas the Night Before Christmas”. **Clement Clark Moore**, a scholar of the literature of the ancient Greeks and other civilizations, claimed authorship, but for the record, Moore may not actually be the author of the poem that made him famous. Observers have pointed out that many of the poem’s concepts, such as the Dutch reindeer names, were lifted from earlier work by Moore’s friend **Washington Irving**.

And worse yet, the descendants of **Major Henry Livingston Jr.**, a Dutch Hudson Valley gentleman farmer and poet, have claimed, with some merit, that it was Livingston who penned the famous poem.

The first known written account of reindeer in association with the legend of Santa Claus appeared one year earlier than the beloved but controversial poem. In 1821, New York printer **William Gilley** published a sixteen page booklet titled *A New Years Present: to the Little Ones from Five to Twelve Number III : The Children's Friend* by an anonymous author. In this book, flying reindeer are introduced into the Santa Claus narrative:

*Old Santeclaus with much delight
His reindeer drives this frosty night.
O'er chimneytops, and tracks of snow,
To bring his yearly gifts to you.*



During an 1822 interview, New York's *Troy Sentinel* editor **Orville L. Holley** questioned Mr. Gilley regarding the booklet's author and the topic of the flying reindeer. Though he did not identify the author, Mr. Gilley responded:

"Dear Sir, the idea of Santeclaus was not mine nor was the idea of a reindeer. The author of the tale but submitted the piece, with little added information. However, it should be noted that he did mention the reindeer in a subsequent correspondence. He stated that far in the north near the Arctic lands a series of animals exist, these hooven and antlered animals resemble the reindeer and are feared and honored by those around, as you see he claims to have heard they could fly from his mother. His mother being an Indian of the area."



A reindeer dances across the Arctic ice under the dark winter sky and the flickering lights of the Aurora Borealis. The illustration is from a Victorian travel book documenting mysterious natural phenomena.

A few years later, through the drawings of the German-born American cartoonist **Thomas Nast**, Santa's home was determined to be at the North Pole.

Deep winter in the far north, when the sun would have almost or completely disappeared, must have been a time of intense physical and spiritual hardship. As the world sank into darkness, food supplies dwindled and people despaired of the sun ever returning. Mental health suffered terribly in the unrelenting darkness. In old Europe, this Winter Solstice time was known as Yule, from the Norse, *Jul*, meaning wheel. Winter meant death in the eternal cycle of life, death and rebirth.



Thor riding his magic goat, left, and The Holly King at the Winter Solstice

Midwinter celebrations honored the Norse gods Odin and Thor with “sacred” evergreens representing immortality and featured huge bonfires to attract the sun. Thor, above left, is depicted as the triumphant warrior returning home with the wayward sun and a basket of gifts. On the right, the Anglo-Saxon Holly King also plays his assigned role in the yearly cycle of creation and destruction. As the God of the Waning Year, the Holly King rules over the dark months from Midsummer to Yule. At the Winter Solstice, though, he surrenders his life force to the Oak King so that the light part of the year may return. His sacrifice means that life itself may return and flourish.

Changes of the seasons were always precarious times. Intense spiritual interventions - shamanic rituals, sacrifice, and gift-giving - were required to keep the yearly cycle on track. And, especially at the darkest time of the year, life itself was at stake.

To ensure the survival of their people, shamans needed to travel to the realm of the gods and successfully petition the dying sun to return to life. There were many channels for shamanic intervention, but central to many of the northern Winter Solstice ceremonies was the collection, preparation, and ingestion of the hallucinogenic fly agaric mushrooms (*Amanita muscaria*).



Tatiana, a shaman in Kamchatka, in the Russian Far East, seen here enacting the ancient Amanita ritual hinted at in the vintage postcard

The epicenter of traditional *Amanita* use was Siberia, although researchers have also documented its use or presumed use by numerous cultures throughout Europe and Asia. During the migration across the Bering Straits, fly agaric entered Alaska along with the nomads, spread out across North America, and eventually reached as far south as Mesoamerica.

Siberia was, and still is, home to dozens of distinct ethnic groups, many of whom have retained their identities and shamanic practices to the present day. The word '*shaman*' - "one who knows or knows the spirits" - actually comes to us from the language of the **Evenk**, a small Tungus-speaking group of hunters and reindeer herders. "Shaman" originally referred specifically to a Siberian spiritual practitioner, one who would have been familiar with the ritual use of *Amanita*.

Sandy Krolich, PhD, shares his experience of living with shamans in Siberia with the following vivid description:

The shaman was a specialist in ecstatic trance. In altered states of consciousness, he could fly away and visit with the powers that animate this world. It is believed that the shaman's soul was able to leave the body and travel to other parts of the cosmos, particularly to an upper world in the sky and To a lower world underground. This specialty provided him a unique status as technician of the sacred. In this respect he served as an intermediary figure between the seen and the unseen, healing sick members in his community, leading their souls at death to the other world, or discovering the source of larger social ills. And while the shaman had different tools to assist in achieving trance – herbs, drumming, chanting, and dancing – the techniques of ecstasy came to reside solely with him or her. In the final analysis, the shaman's role was to restore balance in a world that was apparently going off track. (kulturCritic)

The herb most frequently used for insight and transcendental experiences by Siberian shamans was *Amanita muscaria*. This powerful entheogen (a visionary or religious hallucinogenic) induced spectacular visions or dreams, the feeling of flying, and the ability to see the future as well as all past life.



Drumming and ingesting powerful Amanita are methods still used by Siberian shamans to enter trances

Again, according to **Krolick**,

'Muscimol' – the psychoactive agent in this mushroom – has sedative, hypnotic, and dissociative effects, transforming one's normal sense of self encased in a bag of skin, and thereby creating a real sense of being-beside-oneself or outside-oneself, providing the hallucinogenic experience of traversing other cosmic realms. To Siberian shamans, the Amanita mushroom may represent at least one key trigger for achieving spiritual flight, the soul's experience of ecstasy, a trance-like state enabling him to reach other worlds, and obtain fantastic visions. (kulturCritic)



This shamanic journey or soul flight is of paramount importance in shamanic practice - in order to interact with the spirits, the shaman has to be able to leave this world and enter theirs. The best documentation of *Amanita*-induced shamanic voyages comes from ethnographic studies of the **Koryak**, a tribal group from the Kamchatka Peninsula on the coast of the Bering Sea. These people venerate *Amanita muscaria* as a sacred gift from Big Raven, the first shaman and the progenitor of the human race.

On the night of the winter solstice **Koryak** shamans embark on a spiritual journey to the tree of life, an annual journey that is essential for the well-being of their communities. Under the influence of *A. muscaria* mushrooms, they “travel” to a large pine tree at the North Star. When they return from this “Tree of Life”, they bring solutions to all the unresolved problems of their people from the previous year. In this way, they bring the gift of reconciliation and wholeness to their group.



Tungus (Siberian) shaman, detail of an engraving from Witsen's Noord en Oost Tartarye, 1785

A point that still needs to be made is the prominent role reindeer played in Northern life, spirituality and shamanic practices. For these reindeer herding groups, reindeer have been and still are the cornerstone of life - the source of sustenance, clothing, tools, and transportation - and also the key to the sacred connection with the spiritual world.

A complex sacred alliance has existed for millennia between reindeer and their herders and various ancestor spirits, deities, and other animal totems. In the Russian Far East tales were told of the creator bringing reindeer from the stars as a gift to the earth. The **Sami** people believed that their reindeer created a bridge between this world and the spiritual world and they could travel between the worlds at will. A flying white reindeer with glowing antlers represented the sun in **Sami** cosmology - if taken down by a hunter, the light from the sun would be extinguished, just as it is in deep winter. Chaos, darkness, and death would soon ensue.



Carved and gilded flying deer, upper left, a standing stone from an ancient burial site, center, and a Horned Kichko, a sacred headdress of a Russian female shaman, upper right. Below, a "fairy circle" of Amanita

Flying animals, frequently reindeer, have consistently appeared in shamanic tales of life, death, and journeys to the spiritual realm. Northern shamans preparing for a spiritual journey often wore headdresses of reindeer antlers tipped with wings or feathers to facilitate their flight.

The standing stone pictured above depicts two abstract flying reindeer with greatly elongated antlers. These were placed above burial sites 3,000 years ago, presumably to guide the departed to the spirit realm. **Pazyryk** people, an ancient nomadic tribe, created the exquisitely carved and gilded deer above as well as the carved gravestones. The **Pazyryk** are best known for the elaborate winged deer tattoos found on their mummified remains.



The distinction between shaman and reindeer was often deliberately obscured. To increase their spiritual power, shamans would assume the identity of reindeer by wearing hides and antlers. The ancient horned *kichko* above is a good example of stylized representations of horns or antlers that were worn by a female shamans.

The other avenues used to induce trances, such as drums, also centered around reindeer - they were made entirely from reindeer hides and tendons and the mesmerizing rhythms were beaten out with a reindeer bone.

The symbiosis between shaman and reindeer even extended to their mutual attraction to the *Amanita* mushroom - reindeer actively seek out and eat the same red and white hallucinogenic mushrooms that the shamans use to enter another reality. They are so fond of the fly agaric that reindeer herders use it to lure stray animals back to the herd.

The reindeer that are normally quite docile become frisky and difficult to manage while under the influence of *Amanita*. Stories abound of intoxicated reindeer leaping and cavorting across the tundra. If their flesh is eaten at this time, those who ingested the reindeer meat would also become intoxicated. It may even be that the native Siberians first deduced the probable hallucinogenic effects of *Amanita muscaria* by observing intoxicated reindeer.

So both the shaman and his reindeer are high on *Amanita*! Since the effects of the mushroom, at least for humans, include sensations of flying, unnatural strength and endurance, clarity of thought, euphoria, and spiritual receptiveness, this double intoxication would certainly have facilitated the desired soul journey.

Soul journeys are critical to people like the *Sami*, for whom the purpose of the shaman's trip to other realities is to restore the harmony of the group, to heal their afflicted people, and to control the cycles of nature. When the shamans travel and return as flying reindeer, they bring the precious gift of knowledge. And knowledge, after all, is the ultimate determinant of whether or not life can proceed, especially in a harsh environment.

Does any of this sound like Santa Claus? Actually, in certain respects, yes. Especially if the layers of superimposed commercialization and sentimentality are peeled away and Santa is seen through the prism of his earlier iterations.

It is significant that the traditions that contributed most robustly to the Santa-composite are those of the northern latitudes - the cultures most closely aligned with shamanic practice.

Santa's mode of transport by flying reindeer certainly resonates with the sacred stories of many cultures, especially the supernatural travel required during critical times of spiritual or seasonal transitions.

And since psychedelic mushrooms, specifically *Amanita*, were the favored spiritual tools in the Northern lands, it makes sense that fragmented cultural memories of the magic of mushrooms might still appear in our popular culture in winter.

Shamanic activity would, of course, have increased during the darkness of Midwinter, and this may account for the otherwise mysterious associations between the red-topped mushroom and the transition from the old year to the new.

The persistent folk belief that *Amanita* mushrooms in particular are harbingers of good luck and prosperity may well harken back to these nearly forgotten shamanic rituals of seasonal transitions such as the Winter Solstice.

And finally, Santa Claus, along with his remote predecessors, is a Gift-giver. Odin brought the gift of ongoing life with the return of the sun and Saint Nicholas brought the gift of the Christmas Christ Child.

The shamans of the many Northern cultures brought the gift of harmony, healing, and reconciliation to their people.

What does Santa bring? That is a question that we should all be asking ourselves in this time of deep reflection.

The South Texas Unit is a non-profit educational organization incorporated under the State of Texas. The South Texas Unit has no paid employees. Our activities are accomplished through the efforts of our volunteers.

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