



Christmas History, Tradition & Symbols

The History of the Candy Cane

Perhaps no sweet treat is more reminiscent of Christmas than the candy cane. When was this sugary delight invented, how did it come to be identified with the holidays and do recent articles suggesting religious symbolism have any basis in truth?

The candy cane began as an all-white, straight, sugar treat, and is believed to have been invented by French priests in the early part of the 15th century. By the 16th century, the decorating of Christmas trees, which had begun in Germany, had become popular in other parts of Europe as well. Early trees were adorned with fruits, colored paper, flowers and candy. The straight, white sticks of candy were one of the items used in garnishing the trees.

According to legend, the candy cane gained its current shape circa 1670, when craftsmen created them in the shape of shepherds' crooks at the request of the choirmaster at the Cologne Cathedral in Germany. The choirmaster purportedly passed out the confections to young children attending the services at the living creche, or Nativity scene, in order to keep them quiet during the long ceremony. Due to their success in hushing youngsters, their appeal to the taste buds, or perhaps a combination of both, the custom of passing out the treats at such ceremonies spread.

America's National Confectioners Association reports that August Imgard, a German-Swedish immigrant, used candy canes to decorate a small Christmas tree in Wooster, Ohio in 1847. Approximately 50 years later, red stripes finally appear in candy canes. Though it is uncertain who first added the stripes, Christmas cards prior to 1900 show that before the turn of the century, candy canes were available in only one color — white. Around that same time, peppermint was added as flavoring and has since become the perennial favorite.

In 1919, a group of businessmen led by Bob McCormack opened McCormack's Famous Candy company in Albany, Georgia. Candy canes were one of McCormack's featured products. As the years passed, advances in manufacturing made the creation of candy canes less labor intensive, but by the early 1950s nearly one fifth of Bob's striped canes were still being broken during production. Bob's brother-in-law, priest and inventor Father Harding Keller, began work on the problem. Before the decade was out, Keller had created and perfected the Keller Machine which twisted the candy while still soft into spiral stripes, then cut each stick to an exact length. The Keller Machine and packaging innovations such as vacuum wrapping allowed Bob to mass produce candy canes and ship them nationwide. Though later sold to Farley's and Sathers Candy Company, Bobs Candies help to popularize the candy cane.

Recent books, articles and websites have injected religious meaning into the creation of the candy cane. In some accounts, an Indiana candy maker invented the treat to tell the true story of Christmas. Symbolism is found in the candy's white stripe representing Christ's purity, the red stripe representing the blood he shed, the peppermint flavor representing hyssop (associated with purification in the Old Testament) and the shape representing the letter "J" for "Jesus". Some writings have even declared that the candy cane was used as a secret means by which Christians could identify themselves in 17th century England when religious symbols were banned. However, evidence for these notions does not exist, though they have become increasingly common and at times are mistakenly presented as fact.

The candy canes only true ties to Christianity are reports that it was used to quiet children at Living Creches in the 1600s and the fact that a priest invented the machine enabling its mass production in the 1950s. In spite of its lack of religious meaning, the candy cane can still be appreciated for what it is: a colorful Christmas decoration and delicious treat with an interesting history.

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