

Shmanners 386: Santa Claus Part 1

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[theme music plays]

Travis: Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

Travis: And you're watching— Nope. You're listening to Shmanners.

Teresa: It's extraordinary etiquette...

Travis: ... for ordinary occasions. Hello, my dove.

Teresa: Hello, dear.

Travis: This is like my fourth thing of the day.

Teresa: I know, you're a busy man.

Travis: It's 11:45 and I'm a little burned out.

Teresa: Hey, that's okay because this one is a really, really fun one.

Travis: Oh?

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Not like our normal slogs.

Teresa: No. It is, we haven't done a biography in a while. And so, and I hesi— Let's call it an origin story.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: That's what I wanna call it.

Travis: Are we talking about Superman?

Teresa: No.

Travis: Oh.

Teresa: But, the man, the myth, the mystery is very close. It is Santa Claus.

Travis: Now listen, if there's any children here, this is a— These are grown up secrets that we keep reserved for grownups. You will learn about them in time, but for right now, if you're child listening to this, this is just for grownups. This is too much power and information for you. Do you hear me?

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: So you need to leave the room or get out of the car and walk the rest of the way to school. You take over doing the dishes for your parents so they can go in the other room.

Teresa: I think it would be interesting for some children to listen, too. I think they might enjoy it.

Travis: We'll see. Um, do you remember in the first Santa Claus movie, The Santa Claus, with Tim Allen, and he's listing off all his different names, he's, like, being questioned by the police. And he's, like, "In such and such, they call me such and such."

And he goes, "Po-Bo-Gi-Jo." That's a thing from, like, the Johnny Carson, like, Tonight Show, which I did not know for the, 'cause I was a kid when that came out, I saw that and, like, I just thought that was another one of Santa Claus's names. I didn't know...

Teresa: He does say several of them.

Travis: Yes.

Teresa: Pierre Noel...

Travis: But Po-Bo-Gi-Jo is not...

Teresa: No. [laughs]

Travis: That's not Santa.

Teresa: That's Tim Allen throwing in a joke for the old folks.

Travis: Mm.

Teresa: [laughs] Okay, hey.

Travis: How closely does this go with the Life and Times of Santa Claus, the Rankin/Bass movie?

Teresa: It does not.

Travis: Oh, it doesn't match up? He wasn't raised by fairies and a lion?

Teresa: I mean, listen, just like comic books, Santa Claus could have more than one origin story.

Travis: Sure. Okay, let's start at the very beginning.

Teresa: Let us. First, I think that you need to know that Santa Claus has been around for centuries, as with most famous immortals, and he has popped up in a number of places under several different aliases. Right?

Travis: Mm. Father Christmas.

Teresa: Indeed. At present, he has settled in a vast country estate at 123 Elf Road, North Pole, 888888.

Travis: Is it—

Teresa: And you can Google it because he has tax records that he shares of

his workshops...

Travis: Excuse me?

Teresa: ... and home with his wife, Mrs. Jessica Claus, to whom he has been married to since 1849.

Travis: Now hold on, this is a lot. But mostly can I zero in on the fact, who's making Santa Claus pay taxes?

Teresa: Oh, I don't know if he pays taxes, he just reports on it.

Travis: He files.

Teresa: He files. I don't think that any municipality would deign to make Santa Claus pay taxes.

Travis: Also, if you live in the North Pole, can you really call it a country estate? Like, I mean, I guess it's as far removed from the city as you can.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Interestingly, Mrs. Jessica Claus, her occupations were listed as head cookie baker, president of reindeer affairs, and head of holiday morale.

Travis: Okay, listen, Mrs. Claus, if you're listening to this, please, I'm so sorry for what I'm about to say, but do you think she's a good baker if he needs to get all his cookies out and about in the world?

Teresa: Those are replenishing supplies. He can't, he doesn't need to bring all of the cookies he needs for the night with him.

Travis: But maybe if he—

Teresa: Those are replenishing his stores.

Travis: We gotta get him some protein powder, gotta get him some veggies in there, 'cause if he's in it to get—

Teresa: Listen—

Travis: Wait, is his magic cookie fueled?

Teresa: Ooh.

Travis: Maybe it's sugar powered?

Teresa: Interesting.

Travis: That's how he moves so fast to get from house to house.

Teresa: Maybe.

Travis: It's like maybe give a five-year-old bunch of sugar and let him loose if you've got to keep them.

Teresa: [laughs] You might find that those have been debunked by science, but anyway, anyway.

Travis: Wait, sugar rushes?

Teresa: Sugar rush is something that probably doesn't exist. I mean, sugar is a very easily broken down substance. And so yes, does it contain energy? Indeed it does. But if you gave a child also something else with easily broken down energy, they would behave very similarly.

Travis: So maybe it's just the excitement.

Teresa: Maybe. If you want to hear any more about Jessica Claus or about their country estate, you can check out an article printed by Vice in 2016. Santa Claus is reported to be extremely healthy and feeling great.

Travis: Awesome.

Teresa: And he's also listed as one of the most top 10 recognizable figures in the world.

Travis: Now that's interesting to me because I would say at least here in the US, most of our image of him is fairly recent.

Teresa: Indeed, yes, because in recent times, he's become sort of influencer status, working with such brands like Coca-Cola and M&M's.

Travis: But even then, like until we got to Clement Moore, right, Clement Moore who did... Not Nightmare Before Christmas, 'Twas the Night Before Christmas, he described him in that. And before that, there wasn't like a...

Teresa: Oh, but there was.

Travis: Oh, really?

Teresa: Yes. We'll get to that.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: We are told that all of his wealth from the different royalty checks regarding Coca-Cola, M&Ms, children's books, movies, television shows, appearances, go to infrastructure and outreach to improve Christmas for all children.

Travis: Amazing.

Teresa: But he wasn't always so famous.

Travis: Oh?

Teresa: Let's travel way back to the humble origin stories that regale us.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Historians point to, in one origin story, of course, fourth century Myra, which is now a modern day Turkey-ish. And as a lad, he was called

Nicholas of Bari.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Um...

Travis: That explains the Saint Nick. It'd be weird if his name was Matt.

Teresa: Indeed, indeed. And he himself was considered quite the gift. His parents had difficulty conceiving a child and so the day when they got Nicholas, they were very happy indeed.

Travis: So this is like Superman.

Teresa: A little bit.

Travis: Okay. Did he land in a pod?

Teresa: No.

Travis: You don't know that though. You hesitated. That was a confident note. You don't know that they didn't find him in a cornfield in a pod.

Teresa: But much like Superman, his parents unfortunately died soon after he was born.

Travis: Now hold on, babe. Hey babe. Babe.

Teresa: What?

Travis: Martha Kent lives— She's— His parents are still alive.

Teresa: No, what I'm saying is, I mean, Superman's mom and dad.

Travis: You mean like Jor-El and...

Teresa: Kal-El? No.

Travis: Lar-EI? No.

Teresa: Anyway.

Travis: Anyways, his mom.

Teresa: There was a plague going around, so both his mother and father were lost to disease, but fortunately, he was taken in by his uncle, who was the Bishop of Myra.

Young Nicholas was very close to his uncle, and his uncle, of course, adored him, because he didn't have a son of his own, and he took great care of him. And he had even shared with his congregation, being a bishop and all, that he had a vision that Nicholas would grow up to bring joy to many people.

Travis: Okay, listen, I get that, that's great. I have kids too, and it would be ridiculous to get out and be, like, "I've had a vision that my kids are real turds."

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: "When they grow up, oh my gosh, guys."

Teresa: This isn't where I thought you were going.

Travis: "Ugh. People are not gonna like being around them." Come on.

Teresa: I mean, that's not something that you share with a congregation.

Travis: But that's what I'm saying. It's, like, if you're gonna be, like, "This kid's great." Yeah, of course.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Of course.

Teresa: He was a very well-known to be well-behaved young man and had

a special place in his heart for children in his very similar situation, right? And he did teach and provide for children by helping them make toys for themselves.

Travis: Excellent.

Teresa: And, you know, this is where he begins to explore his love of toymaking as a method of giving.

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: But there were a few people in his community whose problems could not be solved by a toy.

Travis: The naughty list.

Teresa: No, no, no. I'm referring to those less fortunate.

Travis: Oh, okay.

Teresa: And so he had heard the story of a man in his community who had three beautiful daughters. Well, at that time, one had to provide a dowry as part of a marriage agreement, and the man had no money for a dowry for any of the girls.

And this was the first step to bettering their lives, right? Having a good dowry, having them marry well, this would ensure that they would live comfortably.

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: So Nicholas, whose uncle was the bishop, he had money...

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: ... wanted to help him, but didn't want to insult him by giving him money straight to his face, right?

Travis: So he dropped it down the chimney.

Teresa: He did, he dropped a bag of gold down the chimney—

Travis: Wait, really?

Teresa: Yep, and the money landed in the stockings that were drying by the fireplace.

Travis: I was serious about the giving the money, I was joking about the chimney. It's wild that that's the whole thing.

Teresa: No, you totally got it, you totally got it.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: And so when the family awoke, I mean, they found gold pouring from their socks, believing that God had finally answered their prayers. And...

Travis: I guess that is where you would jump to at that time. If today I woke up and I grabbed some socks I'd been wearing the day before or something, and I was like, "There's money in here."

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: I would assume I've been a victim of the weirdest reverse robbery.

Teresa: Or memory loss.

Travis: I don't know.

Teresa: "When did I put this here?"

Travis: I'd be like, either way, we're moving. This house is either haunted or someone has access to my socks. I don't know, babe. I don't feel safe in this house anymore.

Teresa: Well, so he found that this was his calling. He loved to give people things.

Travis: To put money in socks.

Teresa: And socks are a great receptacle for little presents.

Travis: And feet.

Teresa: Indeed, that's where they go.

Travis: Mm-hmm.

Teresa: So he returned twice more to this house to deliver more money. And he was eventually caught.

Travis: And arrested.

Teresa: [laughing] No, no. But the man was certain that at that point, the money probably came from somewhere. And so he, you know. He definitely used the money for the ladies' dowries.

But here's the thing. It began a sort of whisper campaign about how awesome Nicholas was. And people started to copycat him in this little town because it became very clear that Saint— that Nicholas could be using his wealth to help people, other people in the town.

Travis: And no one had ever done that before.

Teresa: I mean, I don't know.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Not to this kind of scale, maybe. The people of Myra began placing slippers and stockings and other things next to the fireplace, hopeful that St. Nicholas would drop coins down their chimney.

And other people started leaving anonymous presents for people in the community. Like, it was a really great kind of, like, a rising tide raises all boats kind of thing, right?

Travis: And they're paying it forward.

Teresa: Absolutely.

Travis: They're all paying it forward.

Teresa: So this, you know, this newfound sense of community, generosity is amazing, right? And some of the gifts were certainly left by Nicholas. Some of the gifts certainly weren't left by Nicholas, but this is where the kind of, like, magic starts, right? Because...

Travis: Wait, hold on. I'm excited to talk about the magic, but first, how about a word from some other Max Fun shows?

[ad break]

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[ad break ends]

Travis: Okay, we were talking about the magic.

Teresa: We were.

Travis: The magic begins. Tell me everything.

Teresa: Everyone really denied leaving each other presents in this way, but they knew that Nicholas had gotten caught doing it, so maybe he was the only one doing it?

Travis: Maybe the only example of a positive time of, like, "Yeah, but one time you did do it, so we're just gonna assume anytime it happens from now on, it's your fault."

Teresa: I mean. He'd have to be in so many places at once and he could do that because he was... magical?

Travis: Hmm.

Teresa: He was unconcerned with that idea. He continued to do what he loved to do. In fact, he traveled all the way across Turkey and gave away almost all of his worldly possessions. And once he ran out of stuff to give away, he dedicated his life to becoming a monk, eventually taking over his uncle's post as a bishop.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Um, more and more, his magic starts to show at this point. He speaks out vocally against the corruption in the Catholic Church.

Travis: Magical.

Teresa: He fought for the protection of those less fortunate.

Travis: Magical.

Teresa: There's even a story of him rescuing a group of kidnapped children and bringing them back home safely.

Travis: Now that is in the Life and Times of Santa Claus, right? Or something, but it's like, there's monsters or something.

Teresa: Yeah, something like that.

Travis: Yeah, took the toys, I think.

Teresa: By the Renaissance and even the Protestant Reformation, Saint Nicholas...

Travis: He'd been canonized at this point. Is that right? Canonized? I'm not Catholic.

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Isn't that when you become a saint, you get canonized?

Teresa: Yes, he became venerated as the protector and patron saint of children. Also though, patron saint of sailors. Because I mean, they also travel all around the world in the same way.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Interesting.

Travis: You gotta be a patron saint. Someone's got a patron saint of sailors, why not Santa?

Teresa: Yeah. His feast day is December 6th. And it, you know. It is still

celebrated today, especially, and it is very popular in Holland, where he is known as Sinterklaas. And, you know, it's a very lucky day to make big purchases or to get married.

Travis: It was yesterday, I didn't know. I didn't know!

Teresa: Well...

Travis: We could've gotten married yesterday.

Teresa: [laughs] We're already married.

Travis: What?

Teresa: [laughs] Okay. With all of these things, we always see that they're, wherever people are, like, popular, there's also people who hate the thing that's popular.

Travis: Oh sure, yeah.

Teresa: During the Protestant Reformation—

Travis: They're called hipsters.

Teresa: Oh, yeah, that's it. [laughs] During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther wanted to do away with the glorification of Catholic saints. I think his heart was in the right place. It did become a little bit of a problem.

Travis: There is some stuff in there we need to talk about. Put no false things to worship, no one before me, whatever the commandment is.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: And then you start to get to...

Teresa: There's a lot of muddy waters in this area. But he knew that he couldn't quite literally take presents away from children.

Travis: Yeah, man.

Teresa: So instead of completely doing away with the tradition, he tried to start the rumor that the gifts were being delivered by the baby Jesus or *Christkindl*.

Travis: Hmm. Okay. Chris Kringle.

Teresa: Ah-ha.

Travis: Yes, okay.

Teresa: That's it.

Travis: I was trying to— It took me a second to make the connection because I was too busy picturing a baby sliding down a chimney.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Um...

Teresa: That's right, *Christkindl*, people misheard as Chris Kringle. And I mean, that was a great nickname and it turned out to be the rebrand that St. Nicholas desperately needed at this point. Um, and so why not, right? It's extremely flattering...

Travis: Makes more sense than a baby.

Teresa: ... to be hailed as a saint.

Travis: People brought gifts to the baby. Jesus didn't roll up in the manger and be, like, "Goo-goo-ga-ga. Also, here's some myrrh for you, wise man. Here's some frankincense for you." That's not how it worked. People brought presents to him. Martin Luther, you could have done better.

Teresa: Okay. In his defense, when, a very, very long time ago, we're talking the roots of the biblical kind of times, on your birthday, you gave everybody else presents. You had a large party for yourself and gave people

in the town presents and food. And things like that.

Travis: I'm glad we fixed that. I'm glad that we fixed that and made it about me.

Teresa: [laughs] And it was great because Chris Kringle, who wasn't branded as a saint anymore...

Travis: Just a cool dude.

Teresa: Gave presents to all children, not just Catholic children, right? As it should be. Around the 1700s, this is where we need another kind of, like, refresh, right, or rebrand, like we say.

This was when Santa Claus starts getting really dedicated again to the idea of generosity, right? It goes back and forth, swings back and forth between things for me, right? Santa, give me the things on my list, and Santa, let's make everybody have a great time this holiday season, right?

Travis: And Santa, baby.

Teresa: Mm. [laughs] But to reach a deeper...

Travis: I was making a joke about the song, but then it also connects back to a baby Santa.

Teresa: Yeah. Oh!

Travis: I would like to hear a version of Santa Baby, [singing] "Santa Baby crawling along on the floor."

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: [singing] "Santa Baby can't reach the knob on the door. Santa Baby coming down the chimney, oh no!"

Teresa: [laughs] I was wondering how long you were gonna... You sustained that, that was great. Prayers were originally how one would

deliver requests to a saint, right? But at this point, we start to see the development of the letters, right? Record keeping, organizing, much easier when you have letters, physical form of things. And it can encourage children to practice reading and writing.

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: Also very good. And like I said before, non-religious children don't have to feel left out. Maybe you don't do the prayer thing. And that's okay, you can write him a letter.

This is when, in the 1700s, I'm talking about, his popularity starts to grow in the US. The colonies, of course, had a lot of different groups of people from different places. But one of the things that they really wanted to move away from was British traditions. And...

Travis: They just left there.

Teresa: They just left there! So, Dutch families. began to spread the idea of Santa Claus, and everybody really loved it.

Travis: It is a shame, and I don't think it even existed at that point, but that we didn't have any Australian, like, traditions mixed in there, because I would love it if we lean more into the surfboard Santa that they have.

Teresa: Mm.

Travis: Trying to explain to our children that it's summer right now in Australia is...

Teresa: They did not understand.

Travis: It's bending their brains.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And I just think if we had a little more iconography of Santa surfing his way into town to deliver presents, we'd all be a little better for it.

Teresa: It'd be cool. These Dutch families, like I said, referred to him as Sinterklaas. They would gather in groups to celebrate and have stockings filled with fruit and, like, little gifts and things like that.

And these events were originally organized by communities, became so popular that in 1804, the New York Historical Society began to distribute little woodcuts of St. Nicholas or Chris Kringle at their society's annual meeting.

And these beautiful engravings, images of Nicholas as well, and the stockings and the toys and the fruit, they hung them over the fireplaces, it was beautiful, right? And so this is where over time, Sinterklaas becomes Santa Claus.

Travis: Mm.

Teresa: I mean, I think it's a great nickname anyway.

Travis: It's good. I like it. Better than Po-bo-gi-jo. No, I'm kidding.

Teresa: [laughs] This is when Santa Claus becomes close personal friends with an iconic American writer named Washington Irving.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: The turn of the 19th century...

Travis: And also Bugs Bunny. Not a lot of people talk about that.

Teresa: The turn of the 19th century. It'd be a little while longer for Bugs Bunny.

Travis: You don't know that. Just because Bugs Bunny didn't start starring in cartoons until way later, doesn't mean he wasn't... What if Bugs Bunny's the Easter Bunny?

Teresa: Ooh, I love it.

Travis: And this is just how he spends his... Have you ever seen the Easter Bunny and Bugs Bunny in the same place?

Teresa: You know what, I haven't.

Travis: Oh my God, I'm cracking this whole thing wide open.

Teresa: He was already very popular, Washington Irving.

Travis: I thought you were gonna say Santa Claus. I'm like, yeah, babe.

Teresa: [laughs] He cataloged some wonderful American folk tales like Rip Van Winkle and The Legend of Sleepy Hollow. And one night, he and Santa Claus had some cocoa together. He seemed to really enjoy this gathering so much that he pretty much interviewed and wrote his story down.

He admitted, Santa Claus of course, admitted to Washington Irving, that he adored bringing joy to children of all ages, and he used his feast day as an excuse to deliver toys to any children who might have need of them.

Um, you know, he was a humble monk and didn't really like to brag about his charity work, but Washington Irving was spellbound, and he wrote it down, and he had this beautiful story. It is called The Knickerbocker's History of New York, in which Washington Irving declared that Santa Claus was the patron saint of New York.

Travis: Okay, all right.

Teresa: Even went so far as describing how he ran into Santa at Central Park.

Travis: Hey New York, you've got a lot of good stuff going for you. You don't get to claim Santa, all right? New York? Hey, New York? You don't get to claim Santa as yours, okay? I'll fight you, I'll fight the whole city. No, I won't, please don't fight me.

Teresa: This is when we really start to see the explosion of kind of, like,

Santa stories and tales and newspaper articles detailing Santa's whereabouts and questions to Santa and things like that, right?

And it really just hasn't slowed down since. This is just a really great way. to make sure that his message of generosity is out into the world. And being so popular, knew that he could not spread his message by himself.

Travis: Mm.

Teresa: And next week, we will learn about how Santa gets organized.

Travis: Oh, I love that. Hey everybody, thank you so much. Thank you for listening. Thank you to our editor, Rachel, without whom we could not make this show. Thank you to our researcher, Alex, without whom we could not make the show.

And thank you to you for listening. You're great and we appreciate you. If you haven't gotten your tickets yet for Candlesnights, it's going to be, it's coming up, it's on the 16th at 9 PM Eastern Time. You can watch it streaming. We're gonna do, like, a premiere of it live, so it goes live at 9 Eastern Time. It is pre-recorded.

Teresa: But it'll be available for what, 15 days, two weeks?

Travis: It's available for two weeks.

Teresa: Something like that.

Travis: It'll be up until the first, video on demand. You can watch it anytime in there. And all proceeds from it and from the poster and ornament designed by Zachary Sterling, all proceeds go to support Harmony House in West Virginia, which is an organization that is helping people experiencing homelessness.

You can go to bit.ly/Candlesnights2023 to get your tickets. Tickets are only \$5, but you do have the option to give more if you want to give a little bit more to support Harmony House. It's a really, really good special this year. I think you're gonna like it, and it's a good cause. So go check that out,

bit.ly—

Teresa: Full of much cheer and song.

Travis: Much cheer and song, bit.ly/candlenights2023. Also the event that I've been planning for a while now, the weekend long immersive tabletop RPG event known as Adventure Quest.

Tickets go on sale if you're listening to this today, Friday the eighth at 3 PM, Eastern time. And if you're listening to it after that, maybe there are still tickets. I don't know, it's a very limited number, but you can go check it out at theadventure.quest for all the details, see if there's any tickets still available.

Teresa: It's an intimate event.

Travis: An intimate event. Find out all the information there. What else, Teresa?

Teresa: We always thank Brent "Brentalfloss—" Uh, wait, Brent Black, Brentalfloss.

Travis: Brent "Brentalfloss" Black.

Teresa: [laughs] For writing our theme music, which is available as a ringtone where those are found. Also thank you to Bruja Betty Pinup Photography for the cover picture of our fan run Facebook group, Shmanners Fanners.

If you love to give and get excellent advice from other fans, go ahead and join that group today. And as always, we are taking your topics, submissions, suggestions, questions, all of that, and keep sending those idioms to shmannerscast@gmail.com and say hi to Alexx because she reads every one.

Travis: And that's going to do it for us, so join us again next week.

Teresa: No RSVP required.

Travis: You've been listening to Shmanners.

Teresa: Manners, Shmanners. Get it?

[theme music]

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