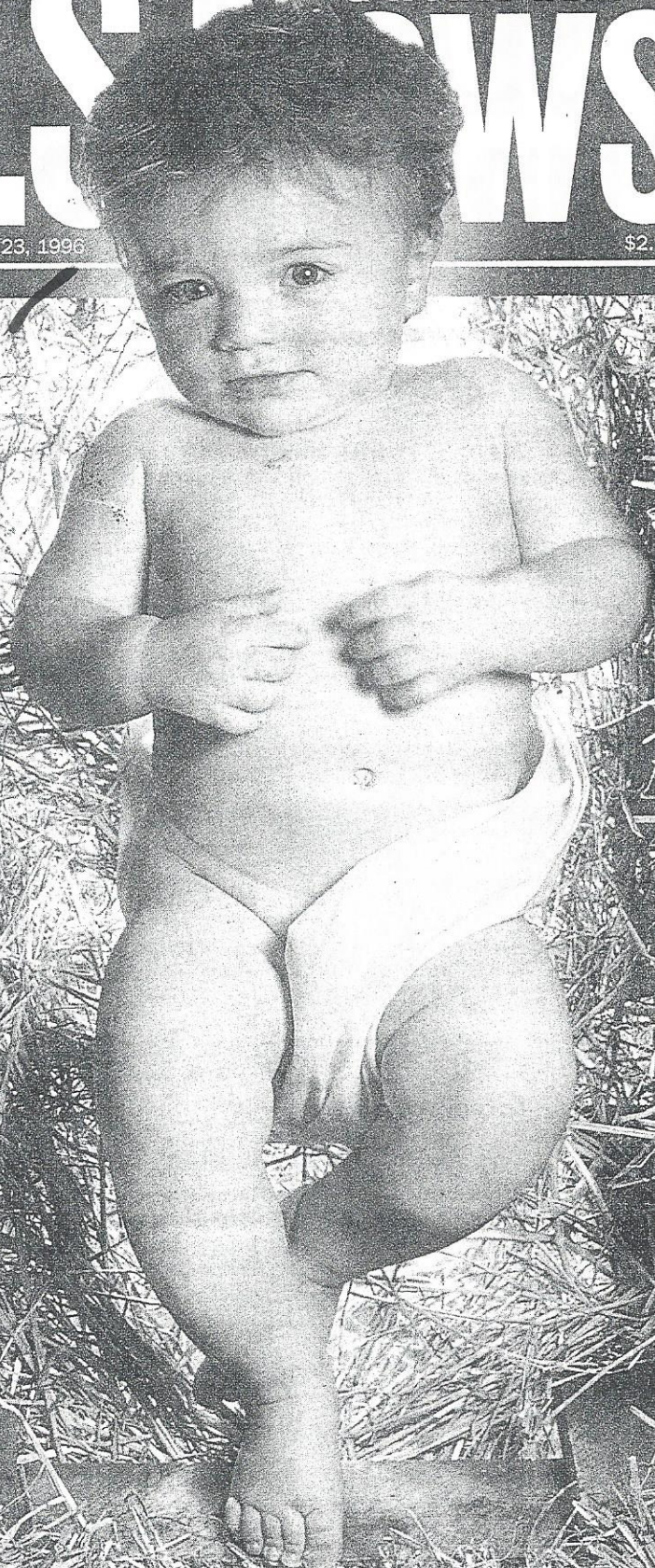


IN SEARCH OF CHRISTMAS

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IN SEARCH OF CHRISTMAS

Imagine a purer, less commercial, more spiritual Christmas. But don't call it history

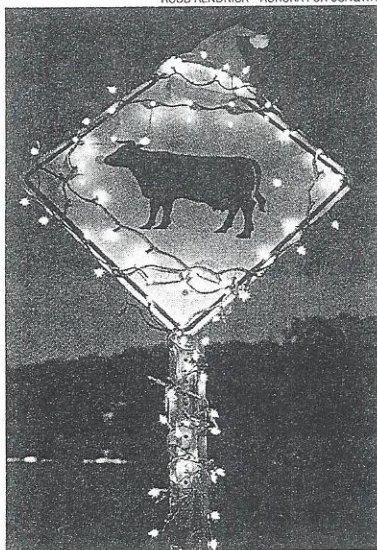
The yearning begins with the first shimmer of tinsel on a streetlamp downtown, the first tree glimpsed through a frosty window, the first familiar notes filtering into consciousness at the grocery store or at the mall. It is a longing impervious to the assaults of the season: to the car salesmen dressed up as reindeer, the 1,652nd reprise of "White Christmas" on the radio, the 14th marital spat that ends with "She's *your* relative!" And as the season ripens, it grows, displacing a year's worth of weariness, cynicism and general, late-20th-century anxiety. You can see it in the eyes of a child dragging a Christmas tree across the snow in Maine, in the faces of carolers at New York City's South Street Seaport, in the Santa hat atop a "cattle crossing" sign near Blanco, Texas.

Christmas is an American passion—96 percent of Americans say they celebrate it in some form, according to a recent *U.S. News/Bozell* poll. Yet for most people, the holiday triggers an intense search for some dimly remembered Christmas past, a nostalgia for a time when yuletide was more pious and more peaceful, when it was free of gaudy commercialism and focused more on the birth of the Savior than on the 20 percent-off sale at the local department store.

The only problem is that, as historians are increasingly discovering, this purer, simpler, more spiritual past is more a product of our cultural imagination than of historical fact. A series of new studies suggests that the observance of Christmas was never an entirely religious affair, that many of the most popular seasonal traditions are relatively modern inventions and that complaints of crass overindulgence and gross commercialism are nearly as old as the holiday itself.

An affront unto God.

Through most of its history, the Christmas season has been a time of raucous revelry and bacchanalian indulgence more akin to Mardi Gras or New Year's Eve than to a silent, holy night. So tarnished, in fact, was its reputation in colonial America that celebrating Christmas was banned in Puritan New England, where the noted minister Cotton Mather described yuletide merrymaking as "an affront unto the grace of God." In a new book, *The Battle for Christmas*, University of Massachusetts history professor Stephen Nissenbaum describes the annual birthday celebration of the Prince of Peace as a perennial battleground for competing cultural, religious and economic forces. "There never was a time when Christmas existed as an unsullied domestic idyll,



STREET SIGN, BLANCO COUNTY, TEXAS
SUNDAY, 4:30 P.M.

On the weekend of December 7 and 8, U.S. News sent 10 photographers in search of Christmas in America.

CULTURE & IDEAS

immune to the taint of commercialism," Nissenbaum writes.

The earliest celebrations of the Nativity were surprisingly late. There is no record of official observance of Christ's birth until the fourth century, when Constantine, a Christian convert, was emperor of Rome. The absence of a Nativity celebration before then, scholars say, reflects at least in part the fact that no one knew for sure when Jesus was born. While some church traditions place his birth between 6 B.C. and 4 B.C.—near the end of the reign of Herod the Great—the gospels are silent on the year, let alone the exact month or day.

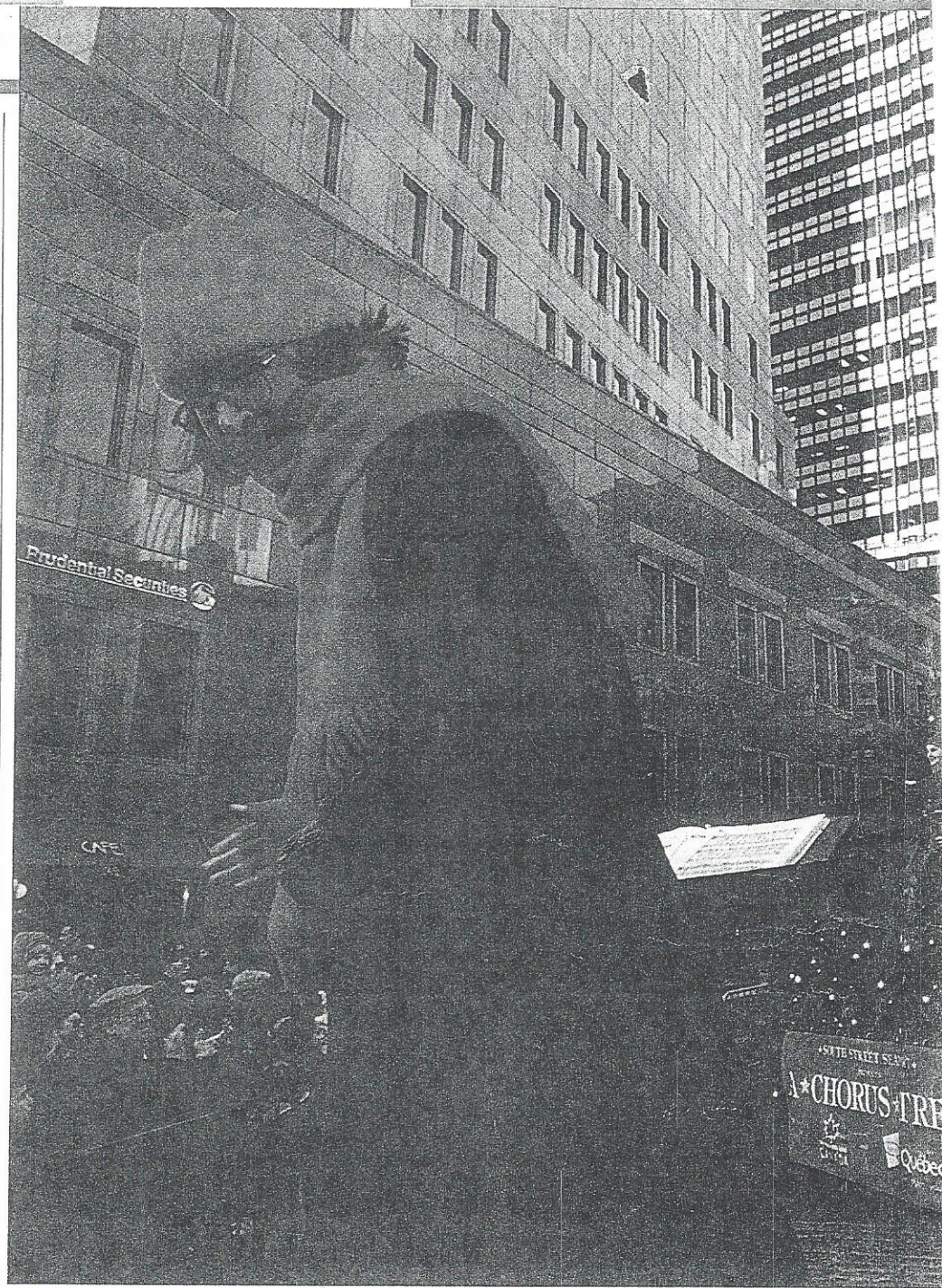
Lacking any scriptural pointers to Jesus's birthday, early Christian teachers suggested dates all over the calendar. Clement, a bishop of Alexandria who died circa A.D. 215, picked November 18. Hippolytus, a Roman theologian in the early third century, figured Christ must have been born on a Wednesday—the same day God created the sun. The *De Pascha Computus*, an anonymous document believed to have been written in North Africa around A.D. 243, placed Jesus's birth on March 28, four days after the first day of spring.

But even if they had known the date, says University of Texas historian Penne Restad, the earliest Christians simply weren't interested in celebrating the Nativity. "They expected the Second Coming any day," writes Restad in her 1995 book, *Christmas in America: A History*. To celebrate Christ's birth would have seemed to them pointless. Moreover, she says, they "viewed birthday celebrations as heathen." The third-century church father Origen had declared it a sin to even think of keeping Christ's birthday "as though he were a king pharaoh."

Raised from the dead. What interested the early Christians more, historians say, was proclaiming the central message of their faith: that the crucified Christ had been raised from the dead. So important was the Resurrection to church life that the Apostle Paul, writing in about A.D. 56 to the church in Corinth, asserted:

If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. . . . But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.

The early focus on the Resurrection explains why the Pascha, the Easter festival commemorating the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus during the Jewish Passover, was the only annual celebration known to the early church, says Brian Daley, a theology professor at the University of Notre Dame. Today, Eas-



CAROLERS, NEW YORK CITY, SUNDAY, 3 P.M.



Many Americans think Christmas is too commercial: Forty-eight percent say the Santa Claus tradition and gift giving detract from the religious celebration.

ter remains the most important event on the Christian calendar, even though 70 percent of Americans—including 62 percent of those who attend church regularly—told *U.S. News/Bozell* pollsters that they consider Christmas the most significant Christian holiday.

The fact that the earliest gospel—St. Mark's, written about A.D. 50—begins with the baptism of an adult Jesus at the start of his public ministry is yet another indication that the earliest Christians lacked interest in the Nativity, scholars say. Only St. Matthew's and St. Luke's gospels, written two to four decades later, include stories about Christ's birth. By that time, says Paul Maier, professor of



professor of ancient Christianity at Boston University. "If Christ had no body, then there was no bodily Crucifixion or Resurrection." But by the fourth century, the official stand of the church in Rome was that Christ was raised in both body and spirit and, consequently, both the believer's body and soul are redeemed in salvation. Celebrating the birth of Jesus then, says Fredriksen, "was one way of emphasizing that Christ had a real human body."

Matter of conjecture. Exactly when the church began celebrating Christmas, however, is unclear. The first mention of a Nativity feast, scholars say, appears in the Philocalian calendar, a Roman document from A.D. 354, which lists December 25 as the day of Jesus's birth in Bethlehem of Judea. How the church arrived at December 25, when the actual date of Christ's birth was unknown, is a matter of conjecture.

Most widely held is the view that the holiday was an intentional "Christianization" of Saturnalia and other pagan festivals. In the third and fourth centuries, the church in Rome found itself in fierce competition with popular pagan religions and mystery cults, most of them involving sun worship. From the middle of December through the first of January, Romans would engage in feasts and drunken revelry, paying homage to their gods and marking the winter solstice, when days began to lengthen. In A.D. 274, Emperor Aurelian decreed December 25—the solstice on the Julian calendar—as *natalis solis invicti* ("birth of the invincible sun"), a festival honoring the sun god Mithras. In designating December 25 as the date for their Nativity feast, says Restad of the University of Texas, Rome's Christians "challenged paganism directly." They also were able to invoke rich biblical symbolism that described Jesus as the "Sun of Righteousness" and God's "true light," sent to dispel darkness in the world.

ancient history at Western Michigan University, "Christians, believing in both the divinity and humanity of Jesus, were curious to know how he came to be." Even so, there is no mention in the New Testament of Christians gathering to commemorate the birth of Jesus.

It was conflict that eventually propelled the church toward celebrating the Nativity, some scholars contend, as it attempted to counter heresies growing within its ranks. Among the most contentious of the heresies was Docetism, the belief that Christ was a spirit and did not possess a human body. "This had momentous significance for the Christian view of salvation," says Paula Fredriksen,



"REINDOG," PITTSBURGH, SATURDAY, 9 A.M.

A second view suggests that church leaders arrived at the December 25 date based on the belief, inherited from ancient Judaism, that significant religious figures are born and die on the same day of the month. One prominent church tradition of the time held that Jesus died on March 25—the same date as his conception, according to the tradition. Were that the case, he would have been born nine months later, on December 25.

Whatever their reasons,



"NUTCRACKER SUITE," DENVER, COLO., SATURDAY, 2 P.M.

by assigning Christmas to late December, when people already were accustomed to celebrating, church leaders ensured widespread observance of the Savior's birth. But in doing so, says Nissenbaum, the church also "tacitly agreed to allow the holiday to be celebrated more or less the way it had always been." As one historian put it: "The pagan Romans became Christians—but the Saturnalia remained."

Not surprisingly, the combination of the sacred and the profane made some church leaders uncomfortable. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, a fourth-century theologian and bishop of Constantinople, cautioned against "feasting to excess, dancing and crowning the doors" and urged celebration of the Nativity "after an heavenly and not after an earthly manner." But while there were always people for whom Christmas was a time of reverence rather than revelry, says Nissenbaum, "such people were in the minority." Christmas, he says, "has always been an extremely difficult holiday to Christianize."

The custom of honoring Jesus's birth on December 25 quickly spread to the Eastern Church, which at one time observed Epiphany, January 6, as a joint feast of the Nativity and the baptism of

Jesus. Over the next 1,000 years, Christmas observance followed the expanding church from Egypt to northern Europe. In Scandinavia, it became entwined with a pagan midwinter feast known as yule. And by 1050, the words *Christes maesse* ("festival of Christ") had entered the English language. "From the 13th century on," notes Restad, "nearly all Europe kept Jesus's birth."

Pagan pleasures. Indeed, they kept it much as the Romans had—in gluttonous feasts and raucous public revelry. Lead-



**Forty-four percent
of Americans
think they spend
too much money on
gifts at Christmas;
48 percent
say they spend
just the right
amount.**

ing clergy, from time to time, tried to rein in abuses of Christmas merriment but usually to little avail. In England, Restad notes, "celebrants devoted much of the season to pagan pleasures... discouraged the remainder of the year." Writing in 1725, Anglican minister Henry Bourne said the way most people behaved at Christmas was "a scandal to religion and an encouraging of wickedness." For many, he said, Christmas was "a pretense for drunkenness and rioting and wantonness." England's Puritans inveighed against keeping the holiday at all and succeeded for a while in having it banned. The Puritans, says Nissenbaum, "were correct when they pointed out—and they pointed it out often—that Christmas was nothing but a pagan festival covered with a Christian veneer."

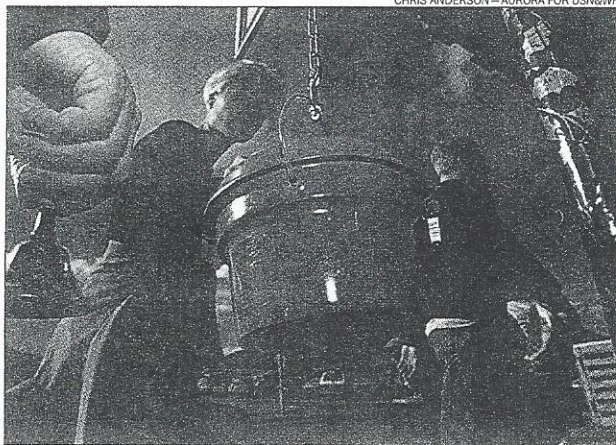
When Christmas landed on American shores, it fared little better. In colonial times, Christ's birth was celebrated as a wildly social event—if it was celebrated at all. Virginians hunted and danced and feasted, while poor city dwellers partied and thronged the streets in boisterous demonstrations, often begging food and drink at the homes of the well-to-do. Puritans in New England flatly refused to observe the holiday.

In some cities, says Nissenbaum, the

ther benign English tradition wassailing took on an increasingly menacing edge. In New York City and Philadelphia, bands of young men would march into houses of the wealthy, who were expected to proffer gifts of food and drink, sometimes in exchange for a song or an expression of goodwill. Often, says Nissenbaum, exchanges included "an explicit threat" as contained in one surviving wassail song:

*We've come here to claim
our right . . .
And if you don't open
up your door
We will lay you flat
upon the floor.*

Variations on the practice were common. In some cities, Christmas revelers would cross-dress or wear blackface as they went noisily from door to door. In each case, says Nissenbaum, Christmas exchanges amounted to a passing of goods from master to servant, patron to apprentice and wealthy poor. It was a time, the historian says, "when the social hierarchy itself



BELL RINGER, BOULDER, COLO., SUNDAY, 4 P.M.

was symbolically turned upside down." Into the early 19th century, quiet family celebrations and gift exchanges among family members were largely unknown.

But Christmas in America was about to change. And when the changes came, they came quickly and quite deliberately. By the early 1820s, cities had mushroomed with industrialization and their Christmas celebrations had turned increasingly boisterous and sometimes violent. In 1828, according to Nissenbaum,

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New York City organized its first professional police force in response to a violent Christmas riot. A concerned group of New York patricians that included Washington Irving and Clement Clarke Moore, author of *A Visit From St. Nicholas*, began a campaign to bring Christmas off the streets into the family circle.

Invented tradition. Moore's classic poem, written in 1822, provided the new mythology for this Christmas makeover. Moore's St. Nick—far from being the creature of ancient Dutch folklore—was an "invented tradition," says Nissenbaum, "made up with the precise purpose of appearing old-fashioned."

To Moore's patrician audience, the midnight visitor who "looked like a peddler" would have evoked plebeian wassailers. But rather than demanding food and drink, this "jolly" and unthreatening visitor bore gifts for the children who, until then, had played a rather insignificant role in Christmas celebrations.

The poem quickly caught on, and newspapers soon began to editorialize



TWO SANTA CLAUSES, PITTSBURGH, SATURDAY, 2 P.M.



LIVING CRECHE, TEMPLE OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS, KENSINGTON, MD., SUNDAY, 8 P.M.

CHARLIE ARCHAMBAULT—US&WR

about the “domestic enjoyments” of Christmas. Giving gifts to children and loved ones eventually supplanted the wassail as the mainstay of holiday celebration. And by the mid-19th century, what began in New York had spread throughout the country. Even some New England Presbyterians and Congregationalists, heirs to the Puritan legacy, became open celebrants of the Nativity. Christmas, says Nissenbaum, had been taken from the streets and domesticated.

Not surprisingly, the nation’s merchants were favorably disposed to this turn of events. The new tradition of Christmas gift giving created an instant retail bonanza, and merchants and advertisers soon began to promote the season nearly as much as they promoted their wares. By the 1870s, one historian observes, “department stores often outdid the churches in religious adornment and symbolism, with pipe organs, choirs, . . . statues of saints and angels” in a manner that bathed “consumption in the reflected glory of Christianity.” Indeed, the holiday was on its way to becoming what Princeton University professor of religion Leigh Eric Schmidt called in his 1995 book, *Consumer Rites*, a “grand festival of consumption.”

By the early 20th century, stores had

largely abandoned overtly religious motifs, says Restad. But they “continued to undergo marvelous alteration at holiday time, becoming strikingly ‘other’ places.” As competition for the attention of holiday shoppers escalated, so did the Christmas displays. During the 1940s, Chicago’s Marshall Field & Co. began to turn its huge department store into “a glittering fairyland” at Christmastime and each year came up with a secret new theme for its decorations.

Santa on parade. To expand holiday profits, many stores made Thanksgiving

the official springboard for Christmas sales; others started as early as Halloween. In 1920, Gimbels in Philadelphia organized the first Thanksgiving Day parade and featured Santa Claus as the main attraction. And in 1924, both Hudson’s in Detroit and Macy’s in New York followed suit.

So vital was Thanksgiving in launching the Christmas season, says Restad, that commercial interests “conspired in resetting its date.” In 1939, after years of Depression-deflated sales, the head of Ohio’s Federated Department Stores argued that by advancing the date of Thanksgiving one week, six days of shopping would be added. Convinced by his logic, says Restad, President Franklin Roosevelt moved the feast from November 30 to November 23. And in 1941, Congress set the annual date of Thanksgiving as the fourth Thursday in November—ensuring a four-week shopping season each year. The nation’s recognition of Christmas as a powerful economic force had reached its highest levels.

In the years since, the reinvented traditions of this modern American Christmas have permeated the culture through a potent combination of commerce and new communications media. Annual reruns of holiday television spe-



**The spiritual aspect
of the holiday is
important to many
Americans: Eighty-two
percent agree that
“Christmas is a time
of reflection for me.”**





CHRISTMAS-TREE CUTTING, STOW, MAINE, SUNDAY, 3 P.M.

cial and films like *Miracle on 34th Street* have become rituals in themselves, homogenizing the Christmas experience for many Americans. And retailers have come to count on yuletide sales for up to 50 percent of their annual profits. The shopping season now pumps an estimated \$37 billion into the nation's economy—making the American Christmas larger than the gross national product of Ireland.

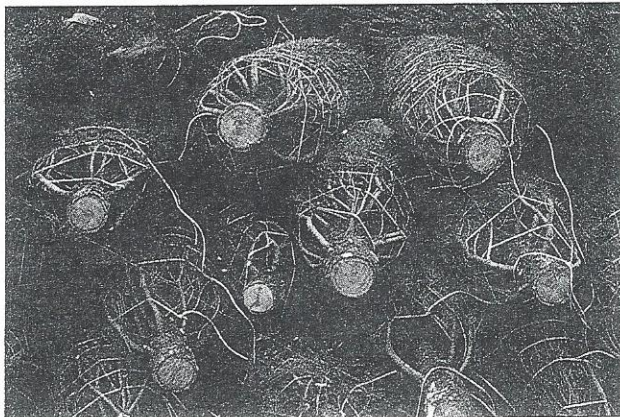
What many historians find most fascinating about the reinvention of Christmas is that its commercialization, now so frequently denounced, is what spawned the transformation in the first place. The "commercial forms" associated with Christmas and other holidays, says Schmidt of Princeton, "have become integral to their survival." The consumer culture "shapes our holidays," Schmidt says, "by taking in diverse, local traditions and creating relatively common ones." To turn Christmas into a purely religious celebration now might cheer those who want to "take

back Christmas," he says. But such an observance "would lack the cultural resonance and impact of a holiday deeply rooted in the marketplace." If Christmas came to that, adds Restad, "we probably wouldn't keep it as a society."

Piety or profit. Yet there seems little danger of that happening. Christmas has far too powerful a grip on American culture: It is no more the church's sole possession today than it was in ancient Rome. But given its long history of con-

trovery and the unremitting tension between piety and profit in its observance, the "battle for Christmas" is all but certain to persist.

No matter how people choose to keep it—in the quiet of their homes or churches, or in the noisy cathedrals of suburban shopping malls—the arrival of Christmas, says Restad, prods celebrants once again to "confront our ideals" and to "examine our relationships with our families, our communities and our faith." Adds Nissenbaum: Christmas rituals, whether old or new, sacred or secular, will serve as they always have to "transfigure our ordinary behavior" in ways that reveal "something of what we would like to be, what we once were or what we are becoming despite ourselves." As thoughts return to a Bethlehem manger, the search begins again. And, at least for a season, it seems "peace on Earth, goodwill toward men" might be possible after all. ■



KEVIN HORAN FOR USN&WR

TREE LOT, BERWYN, ILL., SUNDAY, 3:10 P.M.

BY JEFFERY L. SHELTER