

Saint Nicolas

by Lynne Belluscio

This week, the second grade students from the Wolcott Street School will be visiting LeRoy House to learn a little about how Christmas was celebrated many years ago.

They are surprised to learn that the LeRoy children, probably didn't celebrate Christmas in LeRoy. Maybe their grandfather, Herman LeRoy in New York City, went to a party or at least knew about the raucous celebrations in the streets of New York.

Perhaps someone read the poem, "The Visit of Saint Nicholas" published in the *Troy Newspaper* in 1823. The whole story of Santa Claus, his sleigh, the presents, the reindeer and stockings were mentioned in Clement Moore's poem.

Traditionally, Protestants did not participate in Christmas celebrations. In fact, in Puritan times, Protestants were prohibited from participating in any type of Christmas event – even going to church. The religious part of Christmas was considered to be a part of the Roman Catholic Church. Of course that gradually changed, first with the Anglicans and then the Episcopalians -- of which the LeRoy family were a part. When Moore wrote the poem, he was specific to note that it was the "night BEFORE Christmas" and avoided the whole issue of whether Christmas was a religious day.

Jacob LeRoy grew up in New York City where the New York Historical Society adopted Saint Nicholas as its patron saint in 1804. On December 6, 1810 they held an anniversary dinner, a tradition that continues today. In 1835, The Saint Nicholas Society was founded by Washington Irving. It was open to members whose ancestors had come to New York City prior to 1785, which included the LeRoy family. As far as I can determine, Herman LeRoy – Jacob's father – was one of the charter members, elected to the organization in 1835.

Jacob LeRoy was elected to the St Nicholas Society in 1845. The St. Nicholas Society continues today, the "purpose of which is

to preserve knowledge of the history and customs of New York City's Dutch forebears. It is one of the oldest societies in the United States ... many members are descended from the city's first settlers, who included several nationalities and faiths as well as Dutch people and descendants of Native Americans."

Saint Nicholas was a 4th Century Greek Bishop in Myra, now part of Turkey.

He is known for his compassion for children and is the patron saint for sailors, merchants, archers, repentant thieves, brewers, and

pawnbrokers. As I wrote last week, he was known to have thrown coins into socks hanging on a laundry line which became the story about stockings for Christmas. The feast of St. Nicholas is held on December 6, the date of his death. (the Eastern Orthodox Church celebrates the date on December 19).

The stories of St. Nicholas spread throughout Europe. In

Albania – my husband's ancestral home – Saint Nicholas is known as Shen Kolle and his feast day is celebrated on the evening before December 6. They light a candle and abstain from eating meat and prepare a feast of roast lamb and pork to serve their guests after midnight. Guests greet each other saying, "May the light of Saint Nicholas help you."



Merry  Christmas