

Opinion: How California invented Christmas

By Joe Mathews

Do the good citizens of New Orleans skip town during Mardi Gras? Do proper New Englanders take cruises when their trees display glorious fall colors? Would New Yorkers dare sneak out of Times Square 10 minutes before the ball drops on New Year's Eve?

Of course not. So why must I leave California this coming Christmas week? Because too many people—including my wife, who is insisting our family spend this holiday in her native Wisconsin—fail to recognize the truth: California is the true home of Christmas.



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Yes, I know that California's status as the headquarters of Christmas is not widely known, especially given the widespread cultural misperception that the holiday should be cold and snow-white. But, like virtually everything else about our 21st-century Christmas, that misperception is itself a California product.

The Golden State popularized the modern Christmas via our entertainment industries, designs it through our toymakers, digitizes it through Silicon Valley, distributes it through our ports, and provides beautiful weather in which to

celebrate it. Even the quintessential carol, “White Christmas,” is set in California on Christmas Eve. Here is its mostly forgotten first verse.

The sun is shining. The grass is green.

The orange and palm trees sway

There has never been such a day

In Beverly Hills, L.A.

But it's December the 24th. And I'm longing to be up north.

Then comes the familiar chorus. Sadly, some fools overlook the key “I’m dreaming” phrase and travel to cold, bleak places to recreate such white Christmases. The dream, for those stranded in airports throughout the Midwest and Northeast, often becomes a nightmare.

What’s more, the song’s writer, Irving Berlin, author of hundreds of hits (including “God Bless America”), bragged that “White Christmas” was both “the best song I ever wrote” and the “the best song anybody ever wrote.” He told a historian that he composed it at the Beverly Hills Hotel. The version sung by Bing Crosby, who gave California the Del Mar Racetrack and the annual golf tournament at Pebble Beach, is probably the best-selling record of all time.

The 1942 recording—and the films and TV that used it and similar tunes—actually redefined the holiday. Berlin, a Russian-Jewish immigrant, has been credited with taking the “Christ” out of Christmas, turning a religious holiday into a unifying national one. Today, 90 percent of Americans—including 80 percent of non-Christians—celebrate Christmas.

Subsequent generations of California creators have updated this tradition. For my money, the best California Christmas

film is the original “Die Hard”—an action film set in a Century City skyscraper that ends with snow in Los Angeles—and the best Christmas music came from former Alhambra resident Phil Spector (now in prison after his murder conviction by an L.A. jury) and the Carpenters, the city of Downey’s gift to the world.

And this year, California’s Christmas present to the rest of the world is the long-awaited resurrection of the “Star Wars” movie franchise, courtesy of those California giants of American storytelling: Disney and Lucasfilm.

California’s Christmas leadership goes beyond the screen. It’s impossible to imagine Christmas without Mattel, the toymaker, incorporated in California after the Second World War and based in El Segundo. Its brands include Barbie, Hot Wheels, American Girl, and Fisher-Price. While Mattel faces financial challenges, other toymakers—from the giant Hasbro to smaller firms like Jakks Pacific—have established stronger presences here in recent years, making Southern California Santa’s workshop, or the unofficial capital of toys.

Now, while we all know Santa Claus delivers toys and other gifts to good girls and boys, we should be honest with our kids and let them know that Kris Kringle, who was early to embrace globalization, relies on overseas manufacturers, often in Asia. Many gifts enter the U.S. through our giant ports in Los Angeles and Long Beach, and are distributed via inland California warehouses. It’s only from there that they go to local staging areas where Santa, by some mysterious process, gets them into your home.

Southern California’s Christmas leadership is not purely secular. L.A. is the largest archdiocese in the country, with 4.3 million Catholics. And Orange County hosts the church of this era’s most prominent evangelical Christian pastor, Rick Warren.

But let's not kid ourselves. The 21st century Christmas is about capitalism and dreams and artifice, and no place does dreamy capitalistic artifice with the skill and gusto of California. Heck, our largest city, Los Angeles, even derives one of its most popular nicknames from a popular Christmas decoration. They don't call us Tinseltown for nothing.

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