

# Welcome to a Trentino Christmas!



*In Trentino, one tradition at Christmas includes caroling with a twirling star.*

**Buon Natale!** (“Merry Christmas”), or in *Nonës*, an ancient Trentino dialect, **Bon Nadál!**

It’s great to come together and celebrate this Christmas with our fellow Trentino Americans. Nowadays Christmas has gotten so busy, the important things can seem to get squeezed out – but not so in the old country. Our *parenti* (relatives) always seemed to find the time for family and friends, as they still do. And that’s not the only difference between Christmas here and there –

## **Christmas without Santa?**

Today we sometimes ask ourselves how Christmas could be possible without the jolly man in the red suit. But Christmas without Santa would have been typical in Trentino villages in the old days. And poor as they were, our people got by well enough without him.

Today in Italy, Santa does make the scene – but he is clearly a recent borrowing from “world Christmas culture.” When you find him, he’s called *Babbo Natale*, a translation of the British, “Father Christmas.”

For example, in my ancestors’ village of Revò in the old days, the gifts were not brought by Santa Claus, but by *Santa Lucia* (Saint Lucy). And they were a far cry from the elaborate presents our kids receive in America!

St. Lucy’s feast day took place on December 13. On that special day, the children would say a rhyme that began, “*Santa Lucia benedetta...*” (“Blessed Saint Lucy...”.) They would also leave their shoes out on the windowsill, with some oatmeal for the saint’s donkey. If they had been good, they would find a gift in their shoes - an orange or some St. John’s bread (carob) or maybe some nuts.

## **Caroling through the town...**

In our musical part of the world, singing carols is a major part of the season, and groups of singers made their way through the narrow streets of Trentino villages.

To form our caroling customs, two traditions came together. As is typical of our area, one originated in Italy, while the other was probably taken from the German-speaking

Tyroleanes who still share our region today.

From Italy came the tradition of the manger scene or *presepio*. This originated in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and is traced to the important Italian saint, Francis of Assisi. Manger scenes – often elaborately decorated – remain a big part of Christmas in Italy. In Revò, the carolers traditionally brought a portable manger scene with them as they sang their way through the town.

The other traditional feature of caroling in Trentino was the “starring wheel.” This custom probably began in Austria and spread even to Slavic countries like Poland and Russia. Some of these “caroling stars” are simply fixed to the top of a pole – but the “best” ones (as in the Trentino tradition) are twirled as the carolers sing. In Trentino, the star may also have a lit candle in the center.

Interestingly, one place in America where you can still see this tradition is among the Natives of Alaska – a tradition they received from Russian missionaries. The Alaska Natives make very large starring wheels, and even refer to going caroling as going “starring.”

In Revò, as the carolers moved through the town with their manger scene and starring wheel, they would stop at each house...

If the homeowner came to the door, they would say, “*presepio*”? and begin to open the manger scene. If the answer was “Yes,” this meant they would receive a “tip” for their singing – some candy, an apple, or even a few coins. But if the homeowner had nothing to give, he would say, “*Ni l’ultima sera*.” That meant, “Come the last night” (January 5<sup>th</sup>, Epiphany Eve) – and the disappointed carolers continued on their way.

## ***“I’m dreaming of a dark Christmas?”***

Today, of course, Trentino has electricity, to brighten the dark winter nights. But this was not the case when my grandmother, Domenica Fellin Zadra, grew up there in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Back then, there was little more than candlelight against the starry blackness.

As my *nonna* remembered it, people would hear the carolers from above as they came down the darkened streets. (Bear in mind that back then, most people lived on the second floor of their homes, with the farm animals on the first floor.)

After the carolers sang, you may have wanted to give them a “tip.” But it was so dark in the street below, if you tossed out a few coins, the singers would probably never find them. So the people developed an ingenious solution. They would place the coins in a wad of paper, set the wad on fire, and toss it out the window!

Imagine the grateful carolers watching the balls of fire dropping from above to see where the precious coins would go.

## ***A tradition passed on to us...***

We may not be able to keep Christmas exactly the way it was done in the past, or is still done in Trentino villages and towns. But we can certainly continue to get together, with the strong emphasis on the importance of family that has always defined our people in “the old country.” So, here’s looking forward to many more “Trentino Christmases,” wherever we may live, now or in the years to come!

*Bruce (Zadra) Johnson*

