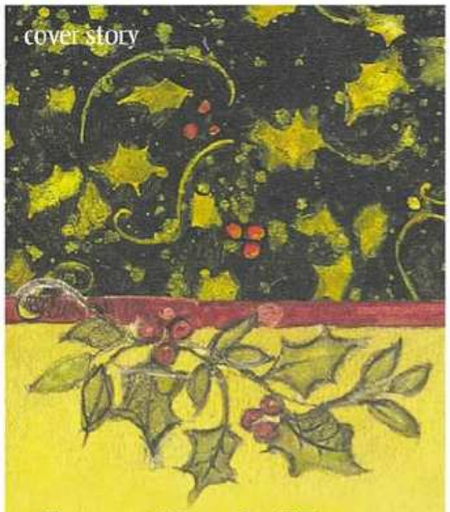

Her kin's beloved poem

Without it, we would have no "right jolly old elf," no Dancer, no Prancer, no stockings hung by the chimney with care. • It is, of course, the classic poem " 'Twas the Night Before Christmas" by Clement Moore. • Funny thing is, Moore was horrified to see his poem — intended for just his family — become part of the public domain.

Stories by **BONNIE HENRY**

Clement Moore's ' 'Twas the Night Before Christmas'

" 'Twas the Night Before Christmas," or, "Account of a Visit From St. Nicholas," by Clement Clarke Moore (1779-1863). As written by him a year before his death:

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;
The children were nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of sugarplums danced in their heads;
And Mama in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,
Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap;
When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from the bed to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.
The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow,
Gave the lustre of midday to objects below,
When, what to my wondering eyes should appear,
But a miniature sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer,
With a little old driver, so lively and quick,
I knew in a moment it must be St. Nick.
More rapid than eagles his coursers they came,
And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name:
"Now, Dasher! now, Dancer! now, Prancer and Vixen!
On, Comet! on, Cupid! on, Donder and Blitzen!
To the top of the porch! To the top of the wall!
Now dash away! dash away! dash away all!"
As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,
When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky;
So up to the house-top the coursers they flew,
With the sleigh full of toys, and St. Nicholas too.
And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof
The prancing and pawing of each little hoof —
As I drew in my head, and was turning around,
Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound.
He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack.
His eyes — how they twinkled! His dimples how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
His droll little mouth was drawn up in a bow,
And the beard of his chin was as white as the snow;
The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
And the smoke it encircled his head like a wreath;
He had a broad face and a little round belly
That shook when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly.
He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf,
And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself;
A wink of his eye and a twist of his head,
Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread;
He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,
And filled all the stockings; then turned with a jerk,
And laying his finger aside of his nose,
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose;
He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight,
"Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night."

"He was a man of letters, a writer," says Dinghy Sharp, Clement Moore's great-great granddaughter. "He did not give it any credence."

Ah, but she does. For almost a lifetime, Sharp, a former reading teacher living in Green Valley, has recited the poem to kids and adults alike.

"When I started as a teacher, there was this kindergarten teacher reciting it in a sing-songy way," says Sharp, 80. "I said, 'Wait! You can't do it that way.' I got up and just emoted all over the place."

Then, as now, she tells it exactly the way her own grandfather — Clement Moore's grandson — told it to her.

In 1936, 8-year-old Sharp and her family traveled from her hometown of Detroit to New York City to visit her grandfather for Christmas.

When they arrived at her grandfather's Manhattan high-rise, he asked her, "Can I give you a gift?" And then he lifted her on his lap and recited the poem that he, too, had heard as a child, and told her its history.

According to family lore, the patriarch Moore, a professor who taught Greek, Latin and Hebrew, arrived at his New York City home on Christmas Eve, 1822, only to be sent back out to buy the Christmas goose he'd forgotten.

On the way to market in his two-horse open sleigh, says Sharp, Moore encountered a heavy snowstorm.

"After the snow stopped, he saw the moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow," says Sharp.

Along the way, he also saw a woodcutter named Jan-Peter delivering wood to the poorer people in town without asking for payment.

"He really existed and he was really elfin," says Sharp.

Jan-Peter, she adds, would sit at a potbelly stove in the general store, telling stories to the children.

After he returned home, great-great grandfather Moore, says Sharp, finished the poem that had probably been percolating in his head for some time — a poem to lift the spirits of his six children, especially 6-year-old daughter Charity, who was ill with tuberculosis.

That Christmas, Moore recited his poem to his family. "Everyone loved it," says Sharp, including cousin Harriet Butler. "She wrote it down in what they called a woman's notebook," says Sharp.

She also sent it to the Troy Sentinel, which published it at Christmastime in 1823 without naming the author.

"Harriet was so excited to see it in print that she got in her little sleigh to show my great-great-grandfather," says Sharp. "He was so angry he told her she could not come back for Christmas."

But in 1844, the family persuaded him to let the poem, originally titled "Account of a Visit From St. Nicholas," be published under his name.

In 1863, one year before he died, Clement Moore penned the tale in a handwritten copy — one of several still in existence.

Besides that moonlit ride and Jan-Peter's generosity, Moore also drew on the writings of a close friend, Washington Irving, and his "Knickerbocker's History of New York."

"Washington Irving told all the stories of the immigrants, how they celebrated the holidays," says Sharp. "He told of Kris Kringle." Moore even borrowed from a revised "Knickerbocker" that had a jolly old elf "laying his finger beside his nose."

But it was he who came up with the eight tiny reindeer, says Sharp.

Later versions of Santa include Thomas Nast's illustration for Harper's Weekly, published in the Christmas season of 1862, as well as the roly-poly Santa created by Haddon Sundblom beginning in the 1930s for Coca-Cola ads.

"I have more than 300 Santas," says Sharp, whose collection includes one from Nigeria and one from Hawaii, with sunglasses.

A storyteller since she first heard Moore's tale, Sharp still loves sharing its wonder, especially with children.

"They always ask me two questions," she says. "They ask, 'Did Charity live?' Yes she did, until the age of 37.

"And they ask me, 'How did you learn it?'

"And I say, 'I don't know how. I just always have.' "

Bonnie Henry's column appears Sundays, Mondays and Thursdays. Reach her at 434-4774 or at bhenry@azstarnet.com, or write to 3295 W. Ina Road, Suite 125, Tucson AZ 85741.

Sharp, with back to camera, reads "A Cup of Christmas Tea" to the Philanthropic Educational Organization at La Posada during a luncheon in Green Valley.

On StarNet: Listen to Dinghy Sharp's beautifully told " 'Twas the Night Before Christmas" at **www.azstarnet.com/xcont**

DID YOU KNOW

One of the models for illustrator Haddon Sundblom's Coca-Cola Santas was Tucson resident Hap Arnold. Sundblom, who wintered at Tucson's Westward Look Resort, used Arnold as his model in the early 1950s.

PHOTOS BY JILL TORRANCE / ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Dinghy Sharp, 80, is surrounded by her collection of more than 300 Santas at her home in Green Valley.

Sharp's own story became a book

The story of how Clement Moore came to write " 'Twas the Night Before Christmas," and how one great-great granddaughter learned of it, is almost as much fun as the poem itself.

In 2002, that story, as told by Dinghy Sharp, was turned into "The Visit," a beautifully illustrated book written by Mark Kimball Moulton and illustrated by Susan Winget.

The book recounts Sharp's visit to her grandfather's house when she was 8 years old, and how she first heard the poem and learned of its history. The book ends with the classic tale itself, written in Moore's hand a year before he died.

In the late 1990s, a friend of Sharp's in Tubac told her about her friend, Winget, who had done another illustration of the poem.

"I had many of her things already," says Sharp, pointing to a set of Christmas plates by Winget that illustrate the famous poem.

Before long, the two women were meeting in North Carolina, where Winget lives.

While there, Sharp met writer Moulton as well. "I told him the story and he turned it into poetry," says Sharp.

From beginning to end, it mimics the structure and rhythms of Moore's poem. Here's a sample from the book of Sharp's first impressions of New York City, where she visited the grandfather who first recited to her " 'Twas the Night Before Christmas":

"Every storefront had ribbons or twinkling lights
That shone through the windows on fantastic sights.
There were stores filled with clothing and stores filled with toys.
We were certainly glad we'd been good girls and boys!"

"I cried when they sent me the original," says Sharp.

Alas, we feel a little misty-eyed ourselves. For the book, it seems, is no longer in print.

A LITTLE HISTORY

Though common back in the early 1800s, some of the terms and usages in Clement Moore's " 'Twas the Night Before Christmas," seem strange to our ears.

"You need to understand the history," says Dinghy Sharp, Moore's great-great-granddaughter.

- **Sugarplums.** "Sugarplums were damson plums gathered in the fall," says Sharp. "They cleaned and rolled them in sugar to keep them from fermenting. They became hard candy."
- **Coursers —** As in, "More rapid than eagles his coursers they came." Coursers, says Sharp, were teams of animals hitched together to work in tandem. Could be horses, could be reindeer.
- **Stockings —** As in, "The stockings were hung by the chimney with care." In the early 1800s, children would wash their stockings at night so they would have clean ones in the morning. In the winter, bedrooms were freezing and the stockings would never dry if hung from the bedpost, says Sharp. Instead, they were hung by the warm chimney.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SUSAN WINGET FROM "THE VISIT" / COURTESY OF DINGHY SHARP

Authorship has stood test of time

Because of its initial anonymity, doubts have long been expressed about the true authorship of " 'Twas the Night Before Christmas."

While many historians and scholars continue to give credit to Clement Moore as the author, the family of poet Henry Livingston Jr. maintains that he was the one who wrote the poem a few years earlier.

Some scholars, such as Vassar English professor Don Foster, have defended the Livingston claims, charging that Moore was too glum and his writing style too stern to write such a playful piece.

Others seem to be sticking in the same camp as Joe Nickell, a historical document consultant who in 2002 wrote an article defending Moore and giving other examples of Moore's light-hearted verse.

He also enlists chronology, pointing out that Moore loosely borrowed Washington Irving's phrase, "laying his finger beside his nose," from a revised edition of Irving's "Knickerbocker's History of New York," written in 1819.

Nickell points out that Livingston could not have borrowed from that same phrase during the 1780s-1830 period when he supposedly wrote the poem.

Nickell also asserts that Livingston, who died in 1828, never laid claim to the poem. Indeed, no manuscript copy or newspaper copy of the poem published prior to 1823 has been found, despite claims to the contrary and decades of searching by various family members.

One thing everyone can agree on, of course, is that the poem forever changed how we feel about Christmas — and old St. Nick.