

## HISTORY This Week EP 407: The Surprising History of Christmas Gifts

### EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

*NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.*

**Sally Helm:** HISTORY This Week. Christmas Eve, 1913. I'm Sally Helm.

The gifts are wrapped. The stockings are hung. At least...they should be. Because in this year, 1913, anyone who's still standing in line at a crowded department store... really has no excuse.

For months now, newspapers have been broadcasting a simple message: do your Christmas shopping early. Way back on *May thirtieth*, a notice ran in a paper in Salina, Kansas: It said, "Yesterday the government thermometer registered 104." And then right after that, seemingly out of nowhere: "Do your Christmas Shopping Early."

As summer turned to autumn turned to winter, the slogan started to show up everywhere. On posters in Buffalo, New York. Stuck to envelopes in Minneapolis, Minnesota. By the first week of December, papers in Fremont, Nebraska and Columbus, Georgia, and Morrisville, Vermont were printing this message in bold-faced type: "Do your Christmas Shopping Early."

All this got us wondering...how did this "early Christmas" thing start? We began our hunt for the answer in Midtown Manhattan.

**Sally Helm:** Julia Press!

**Julia Press:** Hi, Sally.

**Sally Helm:** Hello, I found you!

**Sally Helm:** On a recent afternoon, I met up with producer Julia Press. We wanted to see what signs of the early Christmas season we might find.

**Julia Press:** Yes. Are you are you in the Christmas spirit on this fine—

**Sally Helm:** November 18—

**Julia Press:** Friday, November 18?

**Sally Helm:** I mean, I can't help it. Look at these wreaths and these bows.

**Julia Press:** I know. The halls are decked, fully decked—

**Sally Helm:** The halls are seriously decked already.

**Sally Helm:** It was a week before Black Friday, so we hadn't even hit Thanksgiving yet. But still...

**Julia Press:** I'm seeing Santas.

**Sally Helm:** I see some bells.

**Julia Press:** Yep. Ribbon.

**Sally Helm:** Oh my gosh. Empire State Building in red and green!

**Julia Press:** Oh my god, the employees dressed like elves!

**Sally Helm:** Do you have any sort of stories already from this Christmas shopping season?

**Elf 1:** We've had a lot of people try to break into our workshop.

**Sally Helm:** Oh, another garland and a third garland.

**Julia Press:** I'm surprised we haven't seen life size Nutcrackers—

**Sally Helm:** There's some giant hanging baubles.

**Julia Press:** Oh look, just speak of the devil. A life size Nutcracker. [laughs]

**Sally Helm:** Near a pretty loud Christmas display, we talked to some shoppers.

**Sally Helm:** Do you come down here most Christmases?

**Sisters:** Yes and it's a zoo!

**Sally Helm:** It's a zoo! I know, already!

**Sally Helm:** Natalie and Sharon are sisters. They said they started shopping for the holidays over the summer. By the time we talked to them in mid-November, they were almost finished.

**Sally Helm:** So, you guys are already done with—

**Sisters:** Yes. Yeah.

**Sally Helm:** What? I'm so impressed.

**Sally Helm:** These sisters did just what those 1913 papers advised: they shopped early, which is great for them—they got gifts for people they love. It's also great for store owners. In the last two months of this year, American consumers are projected to spend up to \$960 billion in retail stores alone. It'll make up as much as 35 percent of the stores' annual sales.

So, you might assume the “shop early” movement was the invention of greedy department stores or slick advertising executives. It wasn't—at least not at first.

It started with a labor reformer named Florence Kelley. She wanted people to help not stores...but *store workers* crushed by the last-second rush. She told consumers, “*We can lessen the burden around Christmas by shopping early. Just by stretching the holiday shopping season out.*”

A hundred years later, that has DEFINITELY happened. But not in the way that Florence Kelley intended. The history of holiday shopping is in fact littered with good intentions gone awry...as we

wrestle with the tension at its heart: family gatherings and heartfelt giving vs. rank materialism and a stressed-out labor force. 'Tis the season.

Today: a few surprising stops in the history of Christmas shopping. How did Christmas gifts even become a thing? And what were some of the spirited attempts to make the holiday shopping season merry for all?

[AD BREAK]

**Sally Helm:** Picture: Christmas. A family inside their living room. Maybe there's a coffee table with candy canes on it, or a mantelpiece set with candles. Almost certainly the family is gathered around a tree, decorated with tinsel or ornaments or twinkly lights. In the middle of it all, there are probably some children, ripping the wrapping paper off their gifts.

This scene is newer than you might think. It had to be invented piece by piece.

Paul Ringel, a history professor at High Point University, told us: in the United States, Christmas hasn't always been that big of a deal.

**Paul Ringel:** For a really long time Americans didn't really celebrate Christmas at all. In New England in particular, you know, nobody really knows when Jesus was actually born. And we all know that Christmas is built off kind of pagan rituals of mid-winter. And the Puritans, the Calvinists, didn't think that was something that they should be celebrating.

**Sally Helm:** In Massachusetts, for about two decades during the colonial years, celebrating Christmas was actually against the law. If you were caught skipping work or feasting or parading around in public, you'd get fined— five shillings!

But as Ringel is saying, some people were celebrating anyways. There's a long history of mid-winter revelry. And in the US, even during that colonial era, people would get time off at the end of the year. So, they could blow off a little steam.

**Paul Ringel:** There was this idea that this was a kind of a social safety valve, that if you let the working classes get drunk and eat a lot and party and dance and have fun for a week, it would blow off some of that resentment and keep the social order safe.

**Sally Helm:** Beginning in the 1820s or so, northern cities began to grow. And workers would celebrate mid-winter in the crowded streets. One of the traditions, was called wassailing.

**Wassailing Carol Archival:** *Here we come a-wassailing among the leaves so green. Oh, here we come a wandering, so fair to be seen...*

**Sally Helm:** Wassailing involved knocking on the doors of the wealthy elites. In New York, the elites were known as Knickerbockers. Wassailers would ask for money or liquor in exchange for a song.

**Gloucestershire Wassail Archival:** *A bowl of strong beer, I pray you draw near, and a jolly wassail it's then you shall hear...*

**Sally Helm:** It could all get a little rowdy. And the Knickerbockers didn't love that.

**Paul Ringel:** The middle and wealthy classes start getting really nervous about all these drunk workers parading around the city and what's gonna happen and are we gonna have riots?

**Sally Helm:** And so mid 19th century elites start pushing to change the way people celebrate Christmas. Move it inside the home.

**Paul Ringel:** They pick up the Dutch tradition of making it this kind of a domestic, family celebration and say 'hey, don't go out and get drunk in the streets that last week. Go have a wonderful time with your family and have a tree and, you know, bring in some of the light that is gone.'

**Sally Helm:** That classic Christmas image is coming into focus. The tree appears inside the living room. People come in from the snowy streets to sit around it. They light candles. And soon enough, under that tree...the gifts appear.

Gifts are a big part of the new vision of Christmas. The elites are like, instead of banging on OUR doors asking for money... what if we keep gift exchanges in the family? Knickerbockers like Clement Clarke Moore start pushing this message. His famous poem, known as "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," is published in 1823.

**Paul Ringel:** Children with visions of sugar plums dancing in their heads, right? That's all part of that effort to construct this new vision of Christmas that revolves around gift giving.

**Sally Helm:** The final key part of that vision...is the children themselves.

Believe it or not, at this moment in history, giving kids gifts is a relatively new idea in the US. In fact, KIDS, as know them today, are kind of a new idea. Until the industrial revolution, most kids had to work, helping out with the family farm or the family business. They didn't have a ton of time to play with toys and nourish their imaginations. But as cities begin to grow, all of this changes. Especially in the middle and upper classes. Kids have a higher chance of surviving till adulthood. Not as many of them have to work. And with these changes:

**Paul Ringel:** They start becoming more like the children that we think of today.

**Sally Helm:** So, with this new sort of childhood, focused on children's development and entertainment, another important piece of that Christmas image is in place. And the need for Christmas shopping, for holiday gift-giving, has been born.

Ellen Litwicky is a retired history professor—she taught at the State University of New York at Fredonia—and she is an expert on the history of gifts. She told us, as Christmas presents proliferate, you also get a new question: what makes for a GOOD Christmas gift? In 1844, the famous essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson weighs in. He publishes an essay called "Gifts."

**Ellen Litwicky:** One of the things he says is that he sees rings and jewels and any baubles that you can buy as poor excuses for a gift. And that the only gift is the gift of thyself. That gifts shouldn't be store bought. So, he did not believe that anything commercial really was a good gift.

**Sally Helm:** “It is a cold, lifeless business when you go to the shops to buy me something, which does not represent your life and talent, but a goldsmith's,” Emerson writes. Instead, bring something that *you* made. Or, as he puts it, “thou must bleed for me.”

**Ellen Litwicky:** So, what he would do, he would give like poems to people for gifts, to his family members. He would write poems for them.

**Sally Helm:** *He* thinks that's a great gift. He says it himself in his essay: it's best that “the poet brings his poem; the shepherd, his lamb; the farmer, corn; the miner, a gem; the sailor, coral and shells.” But not everyone agrees.

**Ellen Litwicky:** A funny aside, his daughter left a lot of letters, and she has some funny stories about him being totally clueless about gift giving occasions.

**Sally Helm:** Apparently once, Emerson's kids bought a gift for him to present to his wife—since he wouldn't buy one himself.

**Ellen Litwicky:** And he says, ‘Oh, this is great.’ They're like, ‘uh, dad, this is what you're giving mother.’ [laughs] So he strikes me as sort of clueless, that he sort of lived on that philosophical level, sort of not solidly on the Earth.

**Sally Helm:** On the Earth... consumerism is taking off. Especially in the years after the Civil War, the marketing of consumer products is in full swing. And it crashes into these new ideas that have formed about childhood. I spoke about this with Jennifer Le Zotte, who teaches history at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. She says, around the middle of the 1800s, people start to realize: we can make money selling stuff for kids.

**Jennifer Le Zotte:** So, for example, the first patent for a baby carriage is 1848. Highchairs are an innovation of the 19th century, before the mid 19th century, you'd just plop the baby on someone's lap or put them on a stack of books on the chair. Toys designated as for children were not really a thing until pretty late—

**Sally Helm:** Wait whoa what were they designated as before? There was toys for adults?

**Jennifer Le Zotte:** There were toys and games, but they were considered to be family things.

**Sally Helm:** But people start to make stuff that's specifically *for children* to play with. Mass-produced alphabet blocks. Toy trains. These lamp-looking contraptions called zoetropes' that you'd stick a strip of paper inside and spin to make the pictures move.

**Jennifer Le Zotte:** There's some really crazy innovations like when Edison first patents the phonograph, he doesn't know what to do with it. He doesn't know what its commercial potential is,

right? So, the first thing he does is he records some poems and shoves it inside a doll, and they're terrifying. And children hate them. So, it's this really loud, clanky voice.

**Archival:** *Hickory dickory dock, the mouse ran up the clock...*

**Jennifer Le Zotte:** This was an experimental time in toy making.

**Sally Helm:** A lot of children ended up scared by some scary dolls during this time.

**Jennifer Le Zotte:** Exactly. Yeah. The dolls are really weird at this time.

**Sally Helm:** And as all these products emerge, industries spring up to convince people to buy them. The late 1800s see the birth of modern advertising. Branding. And...department stores.

Macy's opens its doors in 1858. It sells feathers and fringes, neckties and corsets. It has a special section just for gifts. And Macy's pioneers the practice of putting up colorful, light-filled window displays, to try and lure customers inside. For Christmas, by the 1890s, you might find an intricate replica of the Chicago World's Fair or moving panoramas depicting famous novels. Windows that, a New York newspaper said, "will make the children's eyes stick out with wonder and delight."

Soon, every major city has a department store. But the department store capital of the country is New York. And near New York's famous Macy's, with its famous window displays, are the city's famous garment factories. And the stock exchange.

**Jennifer Le Zotte:** So, it is the center of finance. It is the center of production, and it is the center of labor.

**Sally Helm:** And that labor is at the center of the burgeoning Christmas shopping industry. Each Christmas season, families who could afford it gave their kids stockings full of sugar plums. But...someone had to knit those stockings and make those sugar plums. Oftentimes, it was other kids.

One activist decides to look into what it's like for kids to be doing these jobs. She goes to a caramel factory, and finds over a hundred immigrant children, as she describes it, sitting "at tables covered with caramels, which the children wrapped in paper, being paid for their work at the rate of a penny a thousand." One penny per every *thousand* caramels. Hand wrapped.

That woman was an activist named Florence Kelley. In 1899, Kelley starts running an organization in New York called the National Consumers League, or the NCL. They're trying to organize political action among consumers. Specifically, women. The NCL essentially tells them: *You may not have the right to vote, but you still have power. The power to choose what to buy.*

**Jennifer Le Zotte:** If you're not going to buy products from a company that uses child labor, then maybe companies will stop using child labor.

**Sally Helm:** That power is especially potent specially around Christmas, when managers push their workers to the max. So, in 1903, Florence Kelley sits down to write an essay called “The Travesty of Christmas.” She’s not against Christmas itself. She’s against the rampant labor violations that come with the holiday.

She takes particular aim at a labor law passed in New York City a few years before. It *sounds* good: women under 21 and boys under 16 can’t be made to work more than ten hours in a day. But there is a major loophole: the rules do not apply between December 15 at 31. Kelley writes, “Just at the season... most trying for these employees, all restriction of hours of labor was removed.” Here’s Ellen Litwicki again.

**Ellen Litwicki:** One of the most egregious things was that workers in a department store had to work as much as six hours a day overtime about three weeks before Christmas. And it was unpaid.

**Sally Helm:** What??

**Ellen Litwicki:** [laughs] They didn't get paid for this over time.

**Sally Helm:** And it’s not just department store workers. Kelley tells the story of a New York delivery boy who took a nap in his wagon, after working from 7am to 2am delivering belated Christmas gifts. And he died of the cold. Kelley had an idea about how consumers could help.

**Ellen Litwicki:** Shop early, shop early, you know, shop weeks before Christmas, shop early if you're going to be shopping for Christmas.

**Sally Helm:** Shop early. That way, delivery boys aren't being worked around the clock. Factories don't have to produce so many goods at the last minute. And department stores aren't holding their workers hostage without pay.

The campaign takes off. That year, a Kentucky paper reports that the local branch of the National Consumers League had heard from merchants that some customers started Christmas shopping in NOVEMBER. Which meant the last week of the year wasn't as slammed as usual. The reform keeps spreading over time. Notices appear in newspapers as early as May and June and July. “Do your Christmas shopping early.” The idea is to take what has become a mass event – the gift-giving season – and make it more humane.

So, everything’s good now, right? Not quite. Coming up: My favorite twist. Also: I sing a song from the progressive era about the right way to give gifts.

[AD BREAK]

**Sally Helm:** By the end of the 19th century, Christmas is firmly established as a season of—occasionally excessive—gift-giving. And now, a group of reform-minded women in New York notices: it’s not just long hours that are burdening workers—there’s something else. Ellen Litwicki told us; their leader is Eleanor Robson Belmont.

**Ellen Litwicki:** She was an actress, and she married this guy August Belmont, he was a financier, but I think he was also involved in starting the Belmont Stakes horse race.

**Sally Helm:** The Belmont's summer in their Newport mansion by the sea and spend winters having their coachmen take them on horse-drawn sleigh-rides in Central Park. Belmont spends her time with people like Anne Morgan, the daughter of the banker JP Morgan. They're in the habit of discussing what working women need to improve their plight.

**Ellen Litwicki:** Better working hours, better benefits, maybe vacation, sanitary restrooms and break rooms and, you know, a lunch break.

**Sally Helm:** Belmont and Morgan are against more radical actions, like strikes. But they support improving conditions on the job. So, they and their fellow reformers create this club, where they meet with working class women and try to help them save up to go on vacation. They create their own sort of bank, because other banks won't let working class women open accounts. And at one of the meetings of this "vacation club," Belmont is talking with a group of department store workers.

**Ellen Litwicki:** The workers start complaining that at Christmas time, they're pressured to give money for gifts for their supervisors, sometimes, you know, up to \$25 and this is, you know, they made like maybe \$7 a week. And so, to Belmont this, you know, goes against one of those central, sentimental tenets of Christmas, right? You're not supposed to give your boss a gift. You're supposed to give your children gifts or your family members gifts.

**Sally Helm:** That was the whole idea behind the initial big change to Christmas back in the 1800s. Keep it in the home, and within the family. Belmont and the other society ladies are outraged. And they band together with these department store workers to start a group called...the SPUGs.

**Sally Helm:** What is a SPUG?

**Ellen Litwicki:** It stands for the Society for the Prevention of Useless Giving.

**Sally Helm:** [laughs]

**Sally Helm:** As the New York Times writes: a SPUG is "a woman who has vowed never again in all her life to give any Christmas gift that is not offered with a whole heart." And it's more than just a vow. It's a movement.

**Ellen Litwicki:** The individual can't, on her own say, 'I'm not gonna give for this gift,' but if everybody in the whole department said that they weren't gonna do it, you have more protection in numbers.

**Sally Helm:** This is at a time when newspapers covered the activities of society women as big news. So, if Eleanor Belmont and Anne Morgan have now become SPUGs...stop the presses.



**Ellen Litwicki:** There's a flurry of articles about it. Woodrow Wilson's wife and her daughter, they become sort of the leaders of SPUG in Washington. The former president Theodore Roosevelt also claimed that he joined the SPUG. So, it gets a lot of publicity, right?

**Sally Helm:** As the SPUG movement grows, it sets its sights beyond department store workers. They decide that pretty much everyone is being asked to give "useless gifts" in some way or another. Gift giving, Belmont says, has "drifted to the level of the common swap, utterly devoid of the faintest trace of sentiment or meaning."

**Ellen Litwicki:** Their concerns go back to that 19th century sentimental, you know, Emersonian ideal, that, a gift should be a portion of thyself, a gift should not be coerced or should not be routine.

**Sally Helm:** Anne Morgan laments that mandatory giving has led to "the death of worthy Christmas feeling." Another SPUG member writes lyrics to accompany a popular song. It goes like this. \*ahem\*

"Remember this December, that love weighs more than gold! Help us spread the news to young and old. Friendship bought and sold, leaves the giver cold."

Catchy! And people find the ideas convincing.

**Ellen Litwicki:** You start seeing a few articles about it that say, oh, maybe this is a good idea.

**Sally Helm:** But... not everyone agrees: the anti-SPUG backlash begins.

**Ellen Litwicki:** Then you start seeing people that start talking about them as Scrooges, you know, destroying the idea of Christmas by being against gifts and so, in response to some of this Eleanor Belmont at one meeting, said that, if they were gonna get complaints, we could change our name to the Society for the Promotion of Useful Giving.

**Sally Helm:** Okay. I see some, I sense some spin.

**Sally Helm:** It's not that we're AGAINST gifts, the SPUGs are saying. We just want people to give gifts in a heartfelt way. And make sure those gifts are useful. Not just for the sake of it.

Gift givers like this new message. But do you know who *really* likes it? Store owners.

**Ellen Litwicki:** You start seeing these advertisements, "be a SPUG," you know, we have useful gifts. You could buy furniture, you could buy—

**Sally Helm:** Wow. Advertisements from stores?

**Ellen Litwicki:** Yes, yes.

**Sally Helm:** Huh.

**Ellen Litwicky:** I mean, the real story of SPUG is how, you know, consumer capitalism can absorb any criticism.

**Sally Helm:** One Oklahoma store urges, “Be a SPUG,” alongside images of the \*practical\* gloves and socks you can buy. And businesses with things to sell co-opt the shop early campaign, too! An ad in a Kansas newspaper surrounds its “shop early” message with images of fur coats and vacuums, and descriptions of “tiny cashmere” baby clothes. A New Mexico store selling “toys for little folks” and “sparkling jewels” asks its customers menacingly... “If Christmas came tomorrow, would you be ready?”

There’s no use fighting it anymore: one of the purposes of Christmas is to boost American commerce. The federal government knows it. In 1939, President Franklin Roosevelt moves Thanksgiving a week earlier to create a longer Christmas shopping season. The goal is to help businesses who’ve suffered in the Great Depression. Leave more time for spending. This is the holiday season we know today.

Back on November 18, Julia and I spoke to a woman named Andie at a New York holiday market.

**Sally Helm:** When does it start to get crazy?

**Andie:** I would say right after Thanksgiving.

**Sally Helm:** Andie sells cakes in a jar.

**Sally Helm:** What is it like, what's the Christmas rush like?

**Andie:** It's very, very crazy, you can barely walk through the market. But yeah, it's exciting. Everyone's very in their holiday spirits.

**Sally Helm:** Is it fun? Like, does it feel festive?

**Andie:** It's so fun. Right now, I think people are just thinking about, you know, like, do I want this product for myself? I think in a couple weeks people are looking to buy for other people.

**Sally Helm:** Aw. Can you like, feel a difference when it turns into gift giving?

**Andie:** Yes. People are finally like, thinking of other people. So, gift-giving is a big thing. So, it's a lot to manage, but really fun and in the spirit of Christmas.

**Sally Helm:** There’s the old tension again. The stand-off between consumerism...and sentiment. Useless gifts, practical gifts, gifts of thyself, baubles and toys...it’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

[CREDITS]

**Sally Helm:** Thanks for listening to History This Week. For more moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.

If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, [HistoryThisWeek@History.com](mailto:HistoryThisWeek@History.com), or you can leave us a voicemail: 212-351-0410.

Thanks to our guests: Jennifer Le Zotte, professor of history and material culture at the University of North Carolina - Wilmington; Ellen Litwicki, professor emerita at the State University of New York at Fredonia; and Paul Ringel, professor of history at High Point University and author of *Commercializing Childhood*. Thanks also to Stephen Nissenbaum, author of *The Battle for Christmas*.

This episode was produced by Julia Press. It was story edited by Jim O'Grady and sound designed by Brian Flood. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Corinne Wallace and me, Sally Helm.

**Sally Helm:** *Help us spread the news... I don't know how they do that middle part! That love weighs more than gold... No that's not the right tune. Sorry, Julia, this is gonna be a funny section to cut. Oof, okay, I'm moving on.*

Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz. Don't forget to subscribe, rate, and review HISTORY This Week wherever you get your podcasts, and we'll see you next week!