

# “AULD LANG SYNE”



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“Happy New Year!” The greeting will be exchanged for the next few weeks, but did you know that the New Year celebration is the oldest of all holidays?

It was first observed in ancient Egypt about 5,000 years ago. Then, New Year’s was celebrated when the Nile flooded, near the end of September, an important event, for without it, the people could not grow crops in the arid desert.

About 4,000 years ago, in ancient Babylon, now Iraq, Babylonians celebrated New Year’s on (what is now) March 23. During the carnival, which lasted eleven days, the king was stripped of his robes and sent away, allowing the people to do whatever they pleased. “Unbridled” is a word we could use today to describe that anarchic jollity. Even today’s New Year’s Eve festivities pale in comparison!

For a long time the Romans celebrated New Year’s on the first of March, until the Emperor Julius Caesar began a new calendar, the one we use today, thus changing the date to the first of January, named after the roman god Janus. Always shown as having two faces, Janus could look back to the past and forward to the future simultaneously. There is nothing special about the date of January 1; it was arbitrarily chosen.

Actually, March makes more sense, to me, for beginning the New Year— spring, when Mother Nature is making a new beginning.

The Roman New Year festival was called “Calends.” Then, the citizens of ancient Rome decorated their homes and exchanged gifts. Slaves and their masters ate and drank together, and revelers filled the streets.

By 1600, many Western nations had adopted a revised calendar called the Gregorian calendar, restoring January 1 as New Year’s Day; and Great Britain and its colonies in America adopted it in 1752.

However, New Year’s is still not the same for everyone. In the Russian Orthodox Church, New Year’s falls on January 14. Chinese New Year’s— not always on the same date, but always in January or February— embraces

the tradition of “Love thy neighbor.” Arguing or meanness during this period would bring a bad year, full of negativity. Chinese destiny foods are oranges and tangerines, which symbolize wealth and good fortune.

The Jewish New Year, *Rosh Hashanah*, comes in September or early October. It is a High Holy Day, a time of introspection, reflection, looking back at past mistakes and planning self-betterment. Apples dipped in honey are eaten with the blessing “A good and sweet year!”

Besides the Christmas tree, the Germans gave us the image of a baby sporting a New Year’s banner, used since the fourteenth century, as a symbolic representation of the holiday. Said to bring good luck, health, and prosperity all year long, the German repast of sauerkraut and pork, as the first meal taken after the ringing in of the New Year, is the destiny dish for many folks (and not just those of German extraction) in our Penn’s Woods.

The Celtic people gave us the belief that the first visitor of the New Year— if he were a tall, dark, and handsome man— would bring particularly good luck. ’Twas the Scots, too, who gave us the traditional *Auld Lang Syne*, sung at midnight each New Year’s Eve. Almost every English-speaking country ushers in the New Year with this song, written at least partially by Robert Burns in the 1700s. First published in 1796, after Burns’ death, the old Scottish air translates the “Good Old Days.”

And speaking of *Auld Lang Syne*, hasn’t New Year’s Eve faded some, since Guy Lombardo’s death in 1977? When he died, I, for one, was shocked. Lombardo was an institution, and institutions just don’t die! I miss his blue velvet rendition of *Auld Lang Syne* played by his Royal Canadians, at the stroke of midnight New Year’s Eve, and “broadcasted from Times Square in the heart of New York City.”

One critic, early in Lombardo’s career, described his music as the “sweetest this side of heaven.” That quickly became the Canadian musician’s motto; and tunes like the saxophone-heavy but lighthearted *Boo Hoo*

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and *Ain't She Sweet?* graced the waves for over forty years. Yes, what Santa Claus is to Christmas, Guy Lombardo was to New Year's Eve— *Auld Lang Syne*, yesteryear, in the good old days.

“Ringing out the old and ringing in the new” is a common phrase associated with New Year's. Since every end is merely a new beginning, it is, indeed, a time when many of us, regardless of religion or ethnic heritage, make resolutions for self-betterment. It is a time for reflection, reevaluating life, and looking forward with hope.

Now we have an appointment with deep winter, and it is cosy, evenings, to sit before the fire, a bowl of popcorn at hand, listen to our favorite music and catch up on our reading.

When the snow drifts down, and the wind takes on a lonely cry, we tend to think about hot cocoa; thick, rich soups or stews, or a pot roast browning in diced salt pork and onions. Cornbread is another winter treat. The Indians taught the early settlers the uses of maize; but it took the inventive pioneer women to concoct Indian pudding, muffins, crackling bread, and “spider corn bread.” “Spider,” for those of you who may not know, was, like Indian pudding, a *regional* word for frying pan.

Nowadays, we make cornbread the easy way with a packaged mix and the microwave, though a sprinkle of crisp bacon bits in the mix is always a good extra. Here's a cheery bit of history for you: George Washington's favorite winter treat was hot buttered rum— made with a flaming poker! Of course, George was fond of Madeira as well.

Folks in olden times did not think (or even know) about cholesterol, but their toil, as well as their getting about, was so much more *physical*, they did not have to.

As the winds increase, this old house of ours seems to steady herself like a ship against a strong gale. “Tara” has weathered winter storms for over a hundred years now; she is not bothered about any new ones. She is snug in the twilight of the diamond-bright snow.

Did you ever notice how snow blankets sound? Deep snow seems to create tranquility. Snow is nature's purifier. It insulates plants and seeds against winter's fury and cleanses the earth. Sitting here at my desk and gazing out the window, the surrounding landscape looks like faërieland, and I am

thinking that there is much to be said for the quiet season of winter when Mother Nature, too, is resting.

Winter is for reverie. I like to imagine the original owner of my house, Solomon Whipkey, who, in October of 1862, was mustered into the Fourteenth Pennsylvania Cavalry, Company B, serving in the Civil War until it ended in 1865. I wonder what he looked like, what his wife was like, his children ... .

Time ... where does it go? The age-old question. We are all another year older, but don't you think we have learned this past year? So much has happened that it will be interesting to see how History records it all. I think we have all ascertained the importance of voting, and we have certainly seen more than one example of our democracy at work.

My husband and I never go nightclubbing New Year's Eve. We prefer to stay at home, ushering in the New Year together, or with loved ones. When that giant, silvery ball drops, and the chimes sound over the television, we always kiss and wish each other “Happy New Year!”

A tradition since 1907, that lighted universal symbol of New Year, was designed by Ireland's Waterford Crystal and weighs 1,070 pounds. The combined Waterford patterns on the ball's faceted surface represent Hope— for courage, healing and abundance. The New Year Crystal Ball is the property of the building owners of One Times Square.

I gave up making resolutions years ago, but I honestly do try, each year, to be the best I can be. I cannot conceivably influence the world's destiny, but I can, with each passing year, make my *own* life more worthwhile. The one and only thing we have absolute control over is our own thinking. We are the choices we have made.

I do not think we should dwell on past mistakes, but we can and should *learn* from them. Nor should we worry about the future. I have discovered that the happiest people are those who know how to live in the present. We cannot change the past, and we can only influence the future by what we do now.

Yes, it is time to put up that new calendar. Like Janus, I will look backward, reflecting on the past and reexamining life; but, at the same time, I shall look forward with *hope*, not just for my life, but for all of us here in Penn's beautiful Woods —and beyond.