

READING**THOMAS NAST: THE POWER OF ONE PERSON'S WOOD ENGRAVINGS**

CHAPTER 22

Thomas Nast is a perfect example of the importance of knowing our heritage and just how many legacies one person can leave behind. Thomas Nast, through his wood engravings, helped to shape customs not only in America but also throughout the world.

Thomas Nast was born on September 27, 1840, in Landau, Germany. Following the tradition of thousands that immigrated to America, young Nast, his sister, and his mother came to the United States in 1846 while his father followed four years later.

Following their arrival in New York, Mrs. Nast enrolled her two children in public schools. While his sister was able to make the changes, Thomas found it difficult to adjust. In addition to not being able to speak English, he disliked school work. This continued for many years. Young Thomas as in danger of flunking out.

A neighbor made candles and crayons for a living. He would give Thomas reject crayons. While young Thomas would spend hours drawing, he could not stand to do a minute of school work. Finally, when Nast was 12, the school master talked to his parents into pulling Thomas out of regular school and enrolling him into an art school. Three years later, at the age of 15, he had to quit art school due to financial problems. He sought employment.

It was difficult enough for a 15-year-old to get a job but it was more difficult since Thomas could not read or write. Since he was short and fat, manual labor was also out. The only skill he had to offer was his ability to draw what he saw. In those days there was a rigid apprenticeship established to obtain a job as an illustrator. One just didn't get hired for that sort of job without being an apprentice first—except for Thomas Nast, however.

By sheer guts, Nast walked into the offices of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* and asked for a job as an illustrator. When he was turned down this didn't stop him. He was determined to get hired so he became persistent.

Finally, tiring of not being able to get past the

receptionist, one day he waited for the right moment and slipped past her and marched into the publisher's office and requested a job as an illustrator. Frank Leslie viewed the young man's request as absurd. It just wasn't done that way. In jest, Leslie gave Nast an "assignment." It was to go down to the Christopher Street Ferry house in lower Manhattan during the rush hour and draw a picture of the crowd boarding the ferry. Hardly a news-worthy event.

To the publisher's surprise, Nast returned the next morning with the completed drawing. Leslie was so impressed that he hired Thomas Nast on the spot! (Although, that particular drawing was never published.)

It was while working at Frank Leslie's that Thomas Nast learned the art of wood engraving. From 1855 to 1858, Thomas Nast worked for Frank Leslie's.

In 1858 Leslie's was in a financial pinch and several staff members were laid off—Nast included. For a year Nast found employment in an art studio. In 1859 he tried his hand at a political cartoon. He rendered a drawing depicting the police scandal that was going on in the New York City police department. Nast showed this drawing to the publisher of *Harper's Weekly* where it was accepted and published.

Nast worked at *Harper's Weekly* for only about one year before the *New York Illustrated News* offered to hire him at twice the salary he had been making at *Harper's*. They wanted him to illustrate current events in Europe. Suddenly, Nast was noticed! Faced with a salary that was hefty and an opportunity to travel the world, Nast hurriedly left *Harper's Weekly*. He now had the best of both worlds—until it came to being paid that is. For a short time he got paid on a regular basis but soon was paid in script (an IOU). He never did collect any more actual money owed him by the *New York Illustrated News*. Stranded in London, Nast worked for the *London Illustrated News* to raise money to get back to New York.

When the Civil War broke out in America in 1861, Nast wanted to enlist but was assured by his

friends that he could do more by covering the war as an illustrator. Nast, although still ashamed of leaving *Harper's* in a hurry just two years earlier, returned to them to seek employment. Harper's rehired him. For the duration of the war, Nast spent his time illustrating many battles and scenes from the war. Nast did 55 signed engravings for *Harper's Weekly* between 1862 and 1865.

Thomas Nast is best known for his Christmas drawings. His first appeared in *Harper's Weekly* for Christmas of 1862. His Christmas drawings mark the first appearance of Santa Claus as we know him today. Prior to this, Santa had passed through a series of stages beginning with a more religious-type figure.

The inspiration for how Nast's Santa should look came from Clement Moore's poem *'Twas a Night Before Christmas*. Still lacking reading skills, he had his wife read to him while he prepared his drawings and engravings.

The next 24 years saw Nast produce 76 Christmas engravings that were signed and published. Nast used Moore's poem to put it all together in visual form; a sleigh, reindeer, jolly old elves, stockings hung by the chimney, and so forth.

In addition, Nast used his own imagination to expand upon the theme. He was the first to establish that Santa's home was in the North Pole. In this way, Santa didn't belong to any one country—he became a citizen of the world. The concepts of Santa having a workshop and elves to help him were also Nast's idea. Prior to his engravings, all children received gifts from Santa. Nast conceived the idea that bad children didn't get gifts from Santa. The custom of sending Santa a letter is also due to Thomas Nast. Although the custom of kissing under mistletoe was known in Europe prior to Nast's engravings, it was through his engravings in America that the custom caught on there.

Thomas Nast brought Christmas to a large audience through his engravings. The result of the impact that these drawings had on American's is astronomical. In Europe, Christmas was observed for centuries on December 6. By the late 1800's when Nast's Santa Claus gained popularity, Christmas Day was legally established as December 25 in all states and territories in the United States. In addition, an extended school vacation during this period became a custom.

From this seed, Christmas began the move to commercial and economic interests. Stores began

including drawings of Santa (though not necessarily done by Nast) in their ads and tying it in with Christmas sales and promotions. Soon to follow was the custom of sending Christmas cards. Without Nast and his Christmas drawings he brought to the masses, it is hard to tell what Christmas and the customs that go with it would be like today.

Thomas Nast's influence on American's didn't stop with his Christmas drawings. His engravings chronicled the American scene from the Civil War period to the turn of the century. They highlighted every major national event and issue, the political process, elections, and scandal in the government. The American scene was ripe in subject matter for Nast. The country was fast becoming an industrial nation; railroads were spreading, factories were being built, and cities were fast becoming crowded with immigrants that supplied cheap labor. Scandal was everywhere. Elections were being rigged. One of his most famous political cartoon attacks was aimed at Boss Tweed.

Boss Tweed was actually William Marcy Tweed. Tweed and his ring ruled New York's Tammany Hall for years and managed to divert hundreds of millions of dollars from the city to their pockets. The series of cartoons exposing the Tweed ring was Nast's initial campaign against corruption in government. Nast played hard ball and wasn't afraid to make direct accusations. The public outcry became unbearable, Mr. Tweed is quoted as telling Nast at one point that "Let's stop those damned pictures. I don't care so much what the papers write about me—my constituents can't read, but damn it, they can see pictures." A little over a year of his campaign against Tweed is all it took to put a stop to Tweed, get him arrested, and put behind bars.

The little-known side of Thomas Nast is that he could not read or write. This left him with a major handicap. This didn't stop him however. His constant thirst for knowledge found a means to learn. Initially, he had his wife read to him while he did his drawings and engravings. As his income increased, he hired scholars to read to him from science, physics, history, Shakespeare, Dickens, Mark Twain, and so forth. It is from these readings that he gained his knowledge—and inspiration—for many of his engravings.

Thomas Nast moved on to become a strong influence in politics through his cartoons and engravings. Columbia, the symbol of America, was created by Nast. In addition, he created the concept of the Republican elephant and Democratic

donkey. He also had a hand in how Uncle Sam looks today.

In addition to establishing many of America's political symbols, Nast also publicly supported—and opposed—certain candidates for the office of president of the United States. In the campaign of 1872 Nast's cartoons in *Harper's Weekly* helped to bring about the defeat of Horace Greeley. Greeley had been nominated to run against Ulysses Simpson Grant. The election of 1876 saw Nast support Rutherford B. Hayes. With each successive presidential campaign, Nast picked a candidate to support and produced cartoons and engravings in support of the candidate's political platform. In seven presidential elections he never picked a loser.

As if Nast wasn't busy enough, in addition to working for *Harper's Weekly*, he also started his own publication entitled "Nast Illustrated Almanac." He also illustrated over 70 books, including an early copy of *Robinson Crusoe*. In his later years he toured gave lectures, and did oil paintings.

By 1880 Thomas Nast was described as a wealthy man. His income for 1880 was only slightly less than the president of the United States. He owned some property in Harlem, New York, which was valued at \$90,000. He also owned \$60,000 in government securities. His home in Morristown, New Jersey, was valued at \$100,000 and was paid for. At his career height

(mid-1870's) *Harper's Weekly* paid him a base salary of \$20,000 a year plus \$150 for each engraving they published. A large share of his income came from lectures. He was one of the first to illustrate his talks by drawing rapidly on a large sheet of paper as he spoke. This was, perhaps, one of the earliest attempts at "chalk talks."

Harper's Weekly never did put restrictions on Nast's works. It was obvious that their circulation increased as a result of Nast, so they didn't want to edit or censor his material—he had that much power.

Following the death of Fletcher Harper, however, the new editor named George W. Curtis adopted a more conservative policy. There were many disagreements between Curtis and Nast on particular drawings. As a result, his engravings began appearing less often and never on the cover. This change in editorial policy, combined with the invention of a new reproduction process for illustrations, brought forth Nast's last two engravings published in the Christmas issue of *Harper's Weekly* in 1886.

After leaving *Harper's*, Nast spent more time doing oil paintings. He did many paintings of engravings he had done earlier in his career. In 1890 he published his own newspaper under the title *Nast's Weekly*. In 1902 he accepted the post as an ambassador to Ecuador. Six months later he died of Yellow Fever.