

St. Martin's Day

Falling on November 11, German children celebrate St Martin's Day as the start of Carnival season. They walk around the streets, after dark, carrying lanterns, and singing special songs. A bit like trick or treating, they are rewarded for their singing and the beauty of their lanterns, with sweets and other goodies.

Who Was St. Martin?

St Martin of Tours started out as a Roman soldier. He was baptized when he was grown up and became a monk. He was a very good and kind man, and eventually became the Bishop of Tours. As well as being kind, he was quiet and simple. He didn't want to become Bishop, but he didn't have much choice. There are many legends about his life. The most famous is when he cut his cloak in half to share with a beggar during a snowstorm, to save the beggar from dying of the cold. Another legend is about his trying to hide so as not to become Bishop. The story is that he hid in a stall in a barn, hoping to escape the people who were hunting for him. They had come to take him to be appointed Bishop. A flock of geese made a lot of noise and gave away his hiding place. The goose is the animal symbol of St Martin and a favorite food on Saint Martin's Day.

Why November 11?

Like so many other Christian celebrations, St Martin's Day coincides with pagan rituals from the pre-Christian era. This falls at the same time as the early winter festivities of light and fertility celebrated by the pagans. The Christian Church, very early in its history, saw that there was a problem with holidays. Many people, even though they had become Christian and given up their pagan ways, didn't want to give up their holidays. The Church, being smart, put Christian Holidays around the same time. The people kept their holiday, they just celebrated something different.

The Festivities

In Germany, St Martin's Day is used to mark the beginning of the Carnival season. It is mainly celebrated by children. The children buy or make lanterns, and form a procession through the streets singing special lantern songs. Quite often at the end of the procession, they have a bonfire.

After the parade and bonfire, the children form smaller groups and go from door to door singing their songs. Much like trick or treating in the States, the children are given candy, money and other goodies for their efforts. Quite often the lanterns are used to store the goodies until the children reach home.

The Songs

There are many songs that the children sing; here is one, with its translation:

Ich geh' mit meiner Laterne
Und meine Laterne mit mir.
Dort oben leuchten die Sterne,
Hier unten, da leuchten wir.
(Mein Licht ist aus,
Wir gehn nach Haus,
Rabimmel, rabammel, rabum.)

I'm coming with my lantern
And my lantern with me
There, over the light are the stars,
Here, under the light are we
(My light is out,
We're going home,
rabimmel, rabammel, rabum)