

# AMERICAN CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

The United States is a young country. Its written history is only a few hundred years old. It is sometimes, in fact, called the “New World.” Over the last four hundred years millions of people have come to start a new life in this “New World.”

Americans are not afraid of new ideas. They built the first skyscrapers and they put the first man on the moon. They like to be modern. They like exciting, modern cities, new houses, and new cars.

At the same time, Americans love old things. They like to visit historic houses and museums. They build old pioneer towns and remember the days of the “Wild West.” Americans are interested in old traditions, but they are good at making new traditions too.

The people of the United States are a mixture of many different nationalities. In one city you can find people whose parents, grandparents or great-grandparents came from China, Africa, South America, Southeast Asia, and every European country. These different people brought to their new land a wonderful mixture of customs and traditions. The Germans brought Christmas trees. The Irish brought St. Patrick’s Day celebrations. The Scots brought Halloween.

Americans still celebrate the festivals of the Old World. Sometimes, in fact, the old celebrations are more important in the U.S. than in the countries they came from. American children have more fun at Halloween than Scottish children do in Scotland.

There are new American festivals and traditions as well as the old ones. Only Americans celebrate Thanksgiving, Memorial Day, and the Fourth of July. Rodeos and high school homecomings only happen in the U.S.

What do Americans do at these special times? Why do they do it? This book will help you to find the answers.

## A YEAR IN THE USA

The idea of success is important to Americans. They believe that if they work hard they can have what they want and be what they want. This is part of what they call “the American Dream.”

Perhaps this is why Americans are so hard-working. They do not take many vacations. There are only five national holidays that are celebrated in every state. These are New Year’s Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day. On these days, government offices, post offices, and banks are closed.

There are other important public holidays, but they are not celebrated everywhere. Seven states,

for example, do not celebrate Columbus Day. And some special days are not public holidays at all.

### **January 1st — New Year's Day**

On this day, families and friends meet for a meal. A common custom is to make promises for the New Year. People say, “I will work harder,” or “I won’t smoke this year.” But they often forget these promises on January 2nd!

On New Year's Day there are big football games and colorful parades. Not everyone can go to see them, so many people watch them on television. There is usually a parade in the morning, and the game is played in the afternoon. The best college teams play in “The Rose Bowl” in California, “The Cotton Bowl” in Texas, and “The Orange Bowl” in Florida. But how can Americans watch so many different parades and football games on the same day? In the U.S. there are four different time zones, so it is possible to spend the whole day watching parades, football games, and New Year celebrations.

### **Third Monday of January — Martin Luther King's Birthday**

Martin Luther King was an important black leader who wanted equal rights for black people. He was murdered in 1968. Because of his work, Congress made his birthday a public holiday in 1986.

### **February 14th — (St.) Valentine's Day**

Nobody knows very much about St. Valentine. One story is that he was murdered by Roman soldiers in the third century A.D. because he was a Christian. He gave a poor girl some money before he died, and so other Christians called him the saint of love. On this day, children write their names on cards with hearts on them, and give them to their classmates. Teenagers and adults give cards, presents, and flowers to their boyfriends, girlfriends, husbands, and wives. Some people don’t sign their cards because they want their name to be a secret.

### **Third Monday of February— Presidents' Day**

On this day students read about George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and other American presidents. George Washington was the first President of the U.S.A. He was also a brave soldier and a very honest man. When he was a small boy, he cut down a tree in his father's garden. His father asked: “Who cut down the cherry tree?” He knew his father would be angry, but George bravely said, “Father, I cannot tell a lie. I cut down the tree.”

### **February 29th**

Every four years February has an extra day. Tradition says that on this day girls can ask boys to go to the movies or out to dinner. A girl can even ask a boy to marry her! Life is changing nowadays, however. Girls often invite boys to parties or dinners any day of the year. So this tradition may be dying.

### **March 17th—St. Patrick's Day**

St. Patrick was an Irish saint, and St. Patrick's Day is very popular in cities where there are many Irish Americans. Green is the Irish color and some bars sell green beer. People often wear something green on this day. If you aren't wearing green, be careful—someone may pinch you!

### **April 1st—April Fools' Day**

A friend says, “Oh no! I saw did you get that big red mark on your face?” You look in the mirror. There is no mark! Then your friend says, “April fool!” Nobody is sure when or why this tradition began. One story is that it began in France in the sixteenth century. In 1564, the king of France changed the first day of the new year from April 1st to January 1st. Some people did not accept this, and on April 1st people made fun of them. Nowadays people play tricks on each other, so you have to watch and listen very carefully on this day.

Christian holiday which celebrates the day when Jesus came back from the dead. On Easter Sunday people give colored and chocolate eggs to each other and send cards. Some cities have Easter parades with games and sports and a big Easter egg hunt.

### **Easter**

The Easter weekend is in late March or early April, but the exact date changes each year.

### **Last Monday of May—Memorial Day**

This special day is for people to remember those who died in wars. Many people remember their dead friends and relatives on this day too

### **Mother's Day and Father's Day**

One Sunday in May is Mother's Day, and one Sunday in June is Father's Day. Children usually spend the day with their parents. They give them cards, flowers, or presents. Many businesses give presents to parents on these days.

### **June 14th—Flag Day**

In 1777 the “Stars and Stripes” became the official flag of the U.S.A. Flag Day was first celebrated in 1877 on the flag's hundredth birthday. Many people display a flag on this day, but it is not a major holiday and businesses stay open.

### **July 4th—Independence Day**

On this day in 1776, the United States declared her independence from England. It was the beginning of a new nation. On the Fourth of July families and friends celebrate, and every town and city has parades, games, and sports with prizes. There are picnics and barbecues, and in the evening there are big firework displays.

### **First Monday of September— Labor Day**

This is a day of rest for the workers. It is celebrated by labor union parades. It also marks the end of summer and the beginning of the school year.

## **Second Monday of October— Columbus Day**

*In fourteen hundred and ninety-two Columbus sailed the ocean blue...*

This is a song that many children learn about Christopher Columbus and his journey to America. On Columbus Day people display a flag to honor the man who discovered their country.

## **October 31st—Halloween**

In the evening you may hear a knock on your door. Outside there are children dressed as ghosts and witches, holding a bag. They shout, “Trick or treat!” Give them a piece of candy or they may put soap on your window. A popular tradition is to cut the shape of a face in a pumpkin, put a light inside it, then put it in the window.

## **November 11th—Veterans' Day**

This is a special day to remember all the people who fought in the wars— the living as well as the dead. There are memorial services, special dinners and speeches.

## **Fourth Thursday of November— Thanksgiving**

In 1621 William Bradford, the Governor of Massachusetts, decided to have a thanksgiving dinner for all the people. He wanted to thank God for many things. It was a difficult year, but the people still had food to eat. He wanted a way to share this good fortune with the American Indians who helped them. That meal lasted three days. Today the traditional Thanksgiving meal is similar to the first. Usually there is a turkey, sweet potatoes, corn, and pumpkin pie. Thanksgiving is a special day for families to get together.

## **December 25th—Christmas Day**

This is the biggest holiday of the year and the one many people— especially children—enjoy the most. Soon after Thanksgiving people start sending Christmas cards and decorate their houses. Almost every home has a Christmas tree. German soldiers started this tradition in the U.S. during the Revolutionary War of 1776. The evening before Christmas Day is called Christmas Eve. On Christmas Eve many people go to church and sing Christmas carols, and the President gives his Christmas message on TV. Parents tell children that Santa Claus will come to their house in the night and leave presents for them.

On Christmas Day people open their presents and then they prepare a traditional dinner of turkey or ham with vegetables, salads, and desserts. There are also special cookies, candies, nuts, and fruits. Christmas dinner is eaten late in the afternoon. During the day many families watch special Christmas TV and children play with their new toys. Some people go ice-skating or drive around town to look at the decorations.

On New Year's Eve people celebrate the end of the old year and the beginning of the new one. Many people go to private parties, but some go to large public celebrations. Thousands of people gather in Times Square in New York, for example. At midnight exactly, everyone sings the old Scottish song "Auld Lang Syne."

## **FESTIVALS AND FAIRS**

Do you prefer jazz music or Bach? Shakespeare or Tennessee Williams? Each year in the U.S. there are festivals to celebrate almost anything you can think of. Some festivals are only for a day, while others last for a few months. Some are serious, and some are fun and noisy. Some attract thousands of people, and some just a few.

Festivals that many people enjoy are the state fairs. These are usually at the end of summer. Farmers enter their animals in competitions and hope to win a ribbon: blue or purple (first), red (second), or white (third). There are also prizes for the biggest and best crops and for homemade food, clothes, toys, etc. There are rodeos and square dances, and often famous entertainers.

Each part of the U.S. has its own special festivals. When people from Europe, Asia, and Latin America came to live in different parts of the U.S., they brought their celebrations with them. For example, there are Oktoberfests (German), Nordland festivals (Norwegian), Tulip Time (Dutch), Chinese New Year, and cherry blossom festivals (Japanese). These celebrations have their own special food, drink, and entertainment.

One of the best known festivals in the world is "Mardi Gras." It takes place early in the year in New Orleans, Louisiana. For two weeks there are big parades, parties, and dances. When the parades pass by, everyone shouts, "Throw me something, Mister!" and they fight to catch the small presents thrown to them. Mardi Gras brings many musicians from all over the world to New Orleans, the home of jazz music.

Not all festivals are as famous as Mardi Gras. How would you like to go to the National Hollering Festival, or the Missouri World Championship Goose Callin' Contest? How about the Iowa Hobo Convention? Whatever your interest, there is probably a festival for you somewhere in the U.S.

## **THE WILD WEST**

The story of the "Wild West" began in the eighteenth century, when people started to go west to look for new land. In the nineteenth century, many went west to look for gold. They built new towns in the mountains and in the desert. Some people were lucky, but many were not. When they couldn't find gold the towns became empty. Now some of these "ghost towns" are popular tourist attractions.

Life in the Wild West was dangerous. The Native Americans in the west did not welcome the white people who took their land. Sometimes they attacked them. There were bears and other dangerous wild animals, and it was necessary to carry a gun. Today many Americans still keep a gun in their house, and all American police officers carry guns.

Another tradition that comes from the wild west is “cowboy” clothing. In the days of the wild west each piece of clothing was important. Cowboys wore scarves and hats, boots, jeans, and “chaps.” The scarf and hat protected them from the dust and the sun. The boots made riding more comfortable and protected the cowboy from the mud, the long grass, and the snakes. The chaps protected his legs and clothes. Jeans, or “Levis,” were invented in the middle of the nineteenth century by a San Francisco tailor, Levi Strauss. He made them for miners, who needed strong pants. Soon cowboys started wearing them too. Today jeans are worn in all parts of the world as well as in the U.S.

In the nineteenth century thousands of cowboys worked on big ranches in the west. Often they spent weeks away from the ranch house, “rounding up” cattle and taking them to the markets or railway yards. At the end of a round-up they held competitions to see who was best at roping a cow, riding a wild horse or bull, or shooting. These competitions were called rodeos. Rodeos became more popular toward the end of the century. They are still popular today—there are around five hundred rodeos each year in the U.S. Modern rodeos have brass bands, singing cowboys, and clowns. The largest rodeo is Cheyenne Frontier Days in Wyoming, and it lasts for one week.

## **NATIVE AMERICANS**

Originally the Native Americans came from Asia. Over 20,000 years ago, they traveled along land between Siberia and Alaska. Before the Europeans came to America there were over 300 different groups or tribes. Some tribes lived in small earth houses and grew their own food. Some ate only the grasses, nuts, and fruit they could find.

Other tribes were fishermen and lived in wooden houses. Most Native American tribes were very peaceful. They wanted to live happily with nature and each other. They thought spirits lived in natural things such as rocks, trees, or water. They believed these spirits could bring success in hunting, farming, fighting, or marriage. They held special ceremonies with dancing and music for these events.

Native American songs and poetry are an important part of their tradition. Because most tribes did not have a written language or history, it was a way of keeping their stories and culture alive. Another tradition among some Native Americans was the peace pipe.

When they smoked this pipe with a stranger it meant friendship and peace.

Once there were Native American tribes in all parts of the U.S., and Native Americans hunted and fished wherever they chose. Now most Native Americans live in the empty lands west of the Mississippi River. Many live on “reservations”: land that the government recognizes is theirs. Because they do not want their old traditions to die, Native Americans hold festivals called “pow-wows” in different parts of the U.S. They perform their dances and show their art and music. They also use these ceremonies to help their children understand their culture and history. Two very large festivals are the Bald Eagle Gathering in Glacier National Park, Montana, in late October, and the United Tribes Pow Wow, which takes place each September in North Dakota.

SEAGULL who flaps his wings over my head

in the blue air. you GULL up there dive down

come here take me with you in the air!

Wings flash by my mind's eye and I'm up there sailing in the cool air. a-a-a-a-a-ah, in the air.

Sea Gull, a Native American poem

## PATRIOTIC SYMBOLS

The American flag is often called the “Stars and Stripes.” It has thirteen stripes and fifty stars, one for each state. There are many rules for the flag: for example, you should display it only during the day, and you should fold it in a special way.

In some schools there is a flag in each classroom, and children stand in front of the flag every day and say the “Pledge of Allegiance”:

*/ pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America And to the Republic for which it stands*

*One nation, under God, indivisible,*

*with liberty and justice for all.*

One of the most famous symbols of the U.S. is the Statue of Liberty. France gave the statue to the U.S. in 1884 as a symbol of friendship and freedom. It is in New York Harbor, and it was the first sight many immigrants saw when they arrived in the U.S.

The eagle became the official national symbol of the U.S. in 1782. It carries an olive branch (a sign of peace) and arrows (signs of strength). You can see the eagle on the back of a dollar bill.

“Uncle Sam” is a cartoon symbol of the U.S. government. He has appeared in magazines, newspapers, and on posters for the last 150 years. During the War of 1812 against England a man named Samuel Wilson sold meat to the U.S. government for its soldiers. Everyone called him Uncle Sam. The first letters of Uncle Sam, “U.S.,” were the same as the first letters of the United States. After the war, cartoons of Uncle Sam as the U.S. government first began to appear.

The U.S. has an official song, “The Star-Spangled Banner.” It is sung at many sporting events and public celebrations. It was written by Francis Scott Key. He was on a British ship which was attacking Fort McHenry outside Baltimore. The attack started on September 13th. 1814 and continued all that day and night. Suddenly, early in the morning of September 14th, they saw the American flag flying from the fort. Key was so excited he began to write down his feelings in a poem. At first “The Star-Spangled Banner” was sung to an old English drinking song. Later, music was written by John Stafford Smith. In March 1931 Congress officially approved the song as the national anthem.

Every state in the U.S. has its own flag, its own symbol and its own song too. These are not as

well known as the national ones, but they are used in all state ceremonial events.

## SCHOOL CEREMONIES

“Homecoming” is held every fall by many high schools and colleges, especially in small towns. It is a week-long celebration for all the old graduates (“alumni”) and present students of that high school or college.

On the first night there is a school show with funny plays and music. Then the homecoming queen is crowned. She is chosen by the students of the school. Over the next few days the homecoming queen rides in the parade and opens the sports event—usually a football game. There are parties, dances, and dinners for the old and new students and their friends and parents.

In the spring most high schools have a special dance called a “prom.” Proms are usually for juniors and seniors, the third and fourth-year students in high school. They are very formal occasions. The boys and girls go to the dance in couples. Girls wear beautiful ball dresses and boys wear suits or tuxedos. There is usually a live band.

At the end of the school year there is an important ceremony called graduation for all the students who are leaving the school. Students send special invitations to their friends and relatives asking them to come to the ceremony. At the ceremony each student wears a cap and gown. The students enter the hall while the school band plays. Afterwards there are speeches and the students are given their diplomas and prizes.

At graduation time photographs are taken of the students who are graduating. These photographs are called “senior pictures,” and they are given to classmates and friends. Some students also buy a “class ring” with the school symbol and colors on it.

## SPORTS

*Take me out to the ball game,*

*Take me out with the crowd.*

*Buy me some peanuts and crackerjack,*

*I don't care if I never get back.*

*I'll root and root for the home team, If they don't win it's a shame For it's one... two... three strikes —you're out,*

*At the old ball game.*

Americans love sports of all kinds. Many people play sports in their free time, and many go to games or watch them on TV. American sports fans are friendly but very, very noisy. At games they shout



and cheer for their favorite team.

One of the most popular sports is football. About 37 million people watch football each weekend during the fall and winter. Baseball is also very popular. It is played in the spring and summer. Basketball is played in the winter and spring. Basketball started in the U.S. in the late nineteenth century. People wanted to play sports in winter, but it was too cold outside. Basketball was a game they could play inside.

At big games in the U.S. there is a lot of entertainment before and during the game. There are parades, bands, and cheerleaders. The cheerleaders dress in their team's colors, and they lead the crowd in cheers. You have to be in good shape to be a cheerleader, and you have to practice for many hours.

Professional games are fun, but so are the thousands of smaller, local games. Each school or high school has its own teams, and its own cheerleaders. The students and their families and friends come to watch games against teams from other schools nearby. Sometimes these games are just as exciting as the big games.

Thousands of boys from 8-12 belong to "Little League" teams and play baseball on weekends. Many families and groups of friends get together on weekends too and play softball in parks, often with a picnic or a barbecue. But if you don't belong to a team, there are plenty of other sports you can do, and in the U.S. there is plenty of space to do them. You can go to the mountains for skiing or hiking, or you can go to the ocean for surfing or scuba-diving. But if that's too much trouble you can always stay home and watch the big ball game on TV.

## ENTERTAINMENT

If Americans want to go out for the evening, where do they go, and what do they do? It's easy if they're in New York. The theaters on Broadway have some of the biggest, brightest, and best shows in the world. However, you don't *have* to be in New York to see a Broadway show. Many of the shows go on tour to theaters across the country. In many theaters in the U.S., you can sit at tables and eat dinner, then watch the show. This is called "dinner theater."

It's cheaper, of course, to go to the movies. Even small towns have at least one movie theater showing the latest movies. In bigger cities there are theaters showing older movies and foreign movies too.

Hollywood was once the movie capital of the world. Movies were first made in Hollywood just before the First World War. In the early days most movies were made at the Hollywood studios. There were entire "Wild West" streets for making Western movies, for example. Many movie companies are still in Hollywood, but their movies are now filmed all over the world.

In Hollywood Walt Disney created the first talking cartoon film with Mickey Mouse in 1928. It was called *Steamboat Willie*. Later he created other famous characters such as Donald Duck. One of Disney's dreams was to make parks with all his characters. Disneyland in California opened in 1955, and Disney World in Florida opened in 1971.

If you don't want to see a play or a movie, you can always go listen to music. Americans have given many forms of music to the world. Jazz, blues, soul, and rock come from music that black people brought with them from Africa. You will also hear country and western music throughout the U.S., especially in the South. This comes from traditional folk music. The “Grand Ole Opry” in Nashville, Tennessee is the center for this music.

Another way to spend an evening is dancing. Disco dancing and ballroom dancing are the most popular, but “square dancing” is the most traditional American dance. Square dancing comes from English folk dancing. Four couples form a square and a “caller” shouts out what movement to make, so every dance will be different.

## **FOOD AND DRINK**

What is “American” food? The answer is that it is part Italian, part British, part German, part Mexican, part Chinese... When people from other countries came to live in the U.S., they brought different cooking traditions. Some of them opened restaurants and food stores, and today Americans enjoy food from all over the world.

Over the years, some foreign dishes changed a little. “Tex-Mex” food is popular in Texas and other states in the Southwest. But it is not quite the same as the Mexican food you will find in Mexico. Doughnuts were originally from Holland. But doughnuts with a hole in the middle are American. In 1847 a young boy complained to his mother that her doughnuts were never cooked in the middle. He cut out the centers and his mother cooked them—and they were delicious!

Maybe the U.S. is most famous for “fast foods.” The first fast food restaurants served hamburgers, but now they serve other kinds of food as well. Many fast food restaurants have a drive-in section. Here you can order and pick up your food without even getting out of your car! Inside there is often a “salad bar,” where you can help yourself to as much salad as you want.

Americans eat out a lot, and when they go to a restaurant, they don't expect to be hungry afterwards.

Most restaurants will put a lot of food on your plate—sometimes it can be too much. But if you can't finish it all, don't worry: the waiter will bring you a “doggy bag” and you can take it home with you.

Busy people don't have a lot of time to cook at home, and so snack and convenience foods are becoming more popular. Most Americans now have a light breakfast instead of the traditional eggs, bacon, toast, hashbrown potatoes, orange juice, and coffee. But on weekends there is more time, and a large late breakfast or early lunch (“brunch”) is often eaten with family or friends. And if guests come to lunch or dinner, the hosts will make something special. It might be Mexican enchiladas, Japanese sushi, or Italian lasagna— or it might be good old American steak.

## **EVERYDAY LIFE**

When Americans are introduced for the first time, they usually shake hands. When they meet friends

or relatives they haven't seen for a while, they sometimes kiss them on the cheek. It is common for two women or a man and a woman to kiss in this way, but men almost *never* kiss each other on the cheek.

America is a friendly country. In small towns people say "hello" to friends and strangers on the street.

Even in cities, strangers may start up a conversation. Waiters in restaurants will often introduce themselves by name, and talk with customers as they serve them. When the customers leave, they will tell them to "take care" or "have a nice day." Sometimes foreigners feel Americans are *too* friendly. People you have only just met may ask you personal questions or tell you all about themselves.

Many people take a bottle of wine or some flowers when they are invited to dinner at someone's home. At a "pot luck" dinner, all the guests bring something to eat. You should ask your hosts what kind of food they would like you to bring. Usually it is a salad, vegetable, or a dessert. When you are invited to dinner, it is usual to arrive ten or fifteen minutes late. This gives the hosts time to finish their preparations.

Americans love to get together and to have parties. Traditional party occasions are a birthday, moving to a new house, a wedding, New Year's Eve, and the Fourth of

July. "Bridal showers" are for women who are getting married, and "baby showers" are for women who have just had a baby. All the guests bring a useful present for the new home or the new baby.

In the U.S. there aren't too many "rules" for different social occasions. Americans like to relax and enjoy themselves, and most social occasions are informal. So maybe the best advice is to relax, smile, and enjoy yourself too!