

Birthday History

Birthdays are original, personal, noteworthy traditions. Some people like to forget them. Others prefer smaller celebrations. But for some, the day must be a flag-waving, band-playing joyous merrymaking occasion.

We are so used to celebrating our birthday every year that it seems like it's been a tradition almost forever! But there too is a birthday history, and a place and time it all began...

When early people had no way of keeping track and marking time (except by the moon, sun or by some important event) little attention was paid to the anniversary of a person's birth. Only when ancient peoples began taking notice of the moon's cycles, changing seasons and the repeating pattern did they began to mark and note time changes. That's the start of birthday history.



Eventually, the first calendars were formulated in order to mark time changes and other special days. From this tracking system came the ability to celebrate birthdays and other significant anniversaries the same day each year.

The Greeks likely were the first to put candles on cakes. They offered moon-shaped cakes to Artemis as a form of tribute to the lunar goddess. To recreate the radiance of the moon, they put candles on the cakes for a glowing effect.

Romans were the first civilization to celebrate birthdays for regular people, but only men until around the 12th century when women's birthdays were also celebrated.



Birthday parties as a tradition are said to have evolved centuries ago in Europe, where superstitious customs believed that evil spirits were particularly attracted to people on their birthdays. Friends would be sure to visit, revel, extend good wishes, laugh a lot, and surely make a lot of noise – all to scare off any evil that may be lurking about.

The birthday history custom of lighting candles originated with people believing that the gods lived in the sky and by lighting candles and torches they were sending a signal or prayer to the gods so they could be answered. When you blow out the candles and make a wish this is another way of sending a signal and a message.



Due to the fact that early birthdays were tied to pagan gods and astrology, Christians considered birthday celebrations evil for the first few hundred years. Around the 4th century, Christians changed their minds and began to celebrate the birthday of Jesus as the holiday of Christmas.

Even though historians are certain that people have observed their birthdays for quite some time, there are very few records of such celebrations that exist. The only ones documented in birthday history are those birthdays of kings, high-ranking nobility, and other important figures. Common people never celebrated their birth. This trend has been explained by a theory that nobility were the only people wealthy enough to throw such celebrations. Some historians believe these early birthday bashes resulted in the custom of wearing birthday "crowns" as time went on.



The Germans are given credit in birthday history for starting celebrations of children's birthdays. These celebrations were called "kinderfeste" and featured birthday cake and candles.

The song "Happy Birthday to You" was based on a song composed by two sisters, Mildred and Patty Hill, in 1893. Robert Coleman changed the lyrics and published the song in 1924 with the lyrics we know today.



When birthday parties went main stream is unclear, but it likely was during the post-World War II boom years. By the 1950s they were entrenched as a right of childhood for all. Most of the traditions we are familiar with, such as games like Pin the Tail on the Donkey and three-legged races, came from this era.



Traditions from Around the World

Africa - In various African nations they hold initiation ceremonies for groups of children instead of birthdays. When children reach a certain designated age, they learn the laws, beliefs, customs, songs and dances of their tribes.

Argentina - When girls turn 15 they have a huge party and dance the waltz with their father and other boys.

Aruba - Children take a treat to school for their classmates and all teachers. Each teacher receives a treat and gives the birthday child a small gift like a pencil, an eraser or a postcard. The birthday child is also allowed to wear special clothes instead of the school uniform.

Bolivia - At the age of 16 the birthday girl wears a white dress and dances the waltz with her father and other boys.



Brazil - The birthday child receives a pull on the earlobe for each year they have been alive. The birthday person also gives the first slice of cake to his/her most special friend or relative, usually mom or dad. At the age of 15, the girl dances a waltz with starting with her father and grandfather. She dances with a total of 15 partners each symbolizing a year of her life.

Canada - In Atlantic Canada (Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Newfoundland) the birthday child is ambushed and their nose is greased for good luck. The greased nose makes the child too slippery for bad luck to catch them. This tradition is reputed to be of Scottish decent. In Quebec the birthday person receives a punch for each year they are alive and then one for good luck.

China -The birthday child pays respect to his/her parents and receives a gift of money. Friends and relatives are invited to lunch and noodles are served to wish the birthday child a long life.



Cuba - The celebrations are very similar to the United States; food, decorations, gifts, piñatas, cake, candles, "happy birthday" song and games. But a lot of people are invited including neighbors, friends, co-workers and family even if they don't have kids around the birthday child's age.

Denmark - A flag is flown outside a window to designate that someone who lives in that house is having a birthday. Presents are placed around the child's bed while they are sleeping so they will see them immediately upon awakening.

Ecuador - When a girl turns 15 there is a great celebration and the girl wears a pink dress. The father puts on the birthday girl's first pair of high heels and dances the waltz with her while 14 maids and 14 boys also dance the waltz.

England - Certain symbolic objects are mixed into the birthday cake as it being prepared. If your piece of cake has a coin in it, then you will be rich. Also, when it's your birthday your friends give you the "bumps" - they lift you in the air by your hands and feet and raise you up and down to the floor, one for each year then one for luck, two for luck and three for the old man's coconut!



Germany - A member of the birthday person's family wakes up at sunrise and lights the candles on the birthday cake. There are as many candles as the years of age of the birthday person plus one for good luck. The candles are left burning all day long. After dinner that night then everyone sings the birthday song and the birthday person blows out the candles. If all of the candles are blown out in one try then the wish of the birthday person will come true. Presents are then opened and the party starts.

Ghana - The foods eaten are brown rice and beans, black pepper, red pepper, red rice with corn beef and pounded



yam and cassava.

Guyana - Chicken, duck or lamb curry with rice are the main dishes at the birthday celebration. A family member usually bakes a fruit, black or sponge for the birthday boy/girl to cut. The person celebrating their birthday will wear

something fancy.

Holland - Special year birthdays such as 5, 10, 15, 20, 21 are called "crown" years. The birthday child receives an especially large gift on a crown year birthday. The family also decorates the birthday child's chair at the dining room table with seasonal flowers or paper streamers, paper flowers and balloons. At school the birthday child can give their classmates something to eat and the teacher makes the child a birthday hat, often made of paper streamers or paper flowers.

Hungary - When gifts are open, everyone pulls on the earlobes of the birthday person and says a little rhyme. The rhyme is translated into English as follows "God bless you, live so long so your ears reach your ankles."

India - At school the birthday child wears a colored dress and passes out chocolates to the entire class, with the help of a trusted friend.

Ireland - The birthday child is lifted upside down and "bumped" on the floor for good luck. The number of bumps given is the age of the child plus one for extra good luck.



Israel - A child sits in a chair while grown-ups raise and lower it a number of times corresponding to the child's age, plus one for good luck.

Italy - The child's ears are pulled as many times as how old they are turning.

Jamaica - There is singing and dancing to the beats of reggae music. The birthday child is floured.



Japan - The birthday child wears entirely new clothes to mark the occasion. Certain birthdays are more important than others and these are celebrated with a visit to the local shrine.

Korea - There is big family party on the first birthday. The table is set with food, and four items; a pencil, a ruler, thread, and money. The baby chooses one item to forecast their future; excellent student, good with hands, long life or riches.

Latvia - The birthday person sits in a chair and friends and family lift the chair one time for each year. The traditional birthday cake is a yellow cake called "klingeris."

Lithuania - A garland is hung around the entire door of the home of the birthday person. The birthday person sits in a decorated chair and family members lift them up to three times.

Mexico - The piñata is filled with goodies and hung from the ceiling. The birthday child is blindfolded and hits the piñata until it is cracked open. All the children share the goodies. Also, when a daughter is 15, the birthday is celebrated with a special mass in her honor. A party is then given to introduce her to everyone as a young woman. The father dances a waltz with her.

Nepal - A certain mixture of rice yogurt and color is placed on the birthday child's forehead for good luck.



New Zealand - After the birthday cake is lit, the happy birthday song is sung loudly and often out of tune and then the birthday person receives a clap for each year they have been alive and then one for good luck.

Norway - The birthday child stands out in front of their class and chooses a friend to share a little dance while the rest of the class sings a happy birthday song.

Panama - The piñata is the most important item. They are usually made to resemble a character to correspond with a theme. It is filled with candy and confetti and is either hit with a stick or there are ribbons on it to pull. When the



cake is served, the happy birthday song is often performed in two languages, Spanish and English. The cake is served with ice cream. The extended family is invited and sometimes up to 100 children are invited.

Philippines - Birthday cakes are baked in various sizes and shapes. The celebration includes noodles representing long life, balloon decorations and piñatas. Earlier in the day the family goes to hear Mass

and to thank God.

Puerto Rico - The child gets tapped on the arm for each birth year. A big party which includes a formal dinner is held.

Russia - Instead of a birthday cake, many Russian children receive a birthday pie with a birthday greeting carved into the crust.

Scotland - A pound note is given for every year old the child is plus an additional pound for good luck. A soft smack on the bottom is also given for each year.

South Africa - On the twenty-first birthday a key made of anything from paper to aluminum foil to silver to gold is presented by the parents as a sign that the child is ready to unlock the door to their future.

United States - A cake is made, and candles are put on top based on how old the person is. Then everyone sings the "happy birthday" song, and at the end of the song, the birthday child blows out the candles. If they blow them all out with one blow, their birthday wishes will come true.



Uruguay - The principal ritual of a birthday is the cake with candles and lights out, with the eternal song "Happy Birthday to you." At the end of the song, the birthday person blows out the candles and all guests applaud or cheer; some make jokes, whistle loudly, and touch the birthday person's shoulder or head. When a girl reaches the age of 15, she puts on a formal dress and dances a waltz with possible suitors.

Vietnam – Everyone's birthday is celebrated on New Year's Day, called Tet. The Vietnamese do not know or acknowledge the exact day they were born. A baby turns one on Tet no matter when he/she was born that year. Children say they were born in the year of the symbol of the lunar calendar for that year. On the first morning of Tet, adults congratulate children on becoming a year older by presenting them with red envelopes that contain "Lucky Money." These envelopes are given to the children by parents, siblings, relatives and close friends.

