

New Year's Eve History

The celebration of the new year is the oldest of all holidays. It was first observed in ancient Babylon about 4000 years ago. The Babylonian New Year began with the first New Moon after the Vernal Equinox, the first day of spring. The beginning of spring is a logical time to start a new year. It is the season of rebirth, planting, and blossoming.



The early Roman calendar designated March 1 as the new year. The calendar had just ten months, beginning with March. That the new year once began with the month of March is still reflected in some of the names of the months. September through December, our ninth through twelfth months, were originally positioned as the seventh through tenth months (septem is Latin for "seven," octo is "eight," novem is "nine," and decem is "ten.")

The Romans continued to observe the New Year in March until 153 B.C. Rome, which controlled the calendar at the time, set January 1 as the start of the year in 153 B.C. Although many Romans continued to celebrate the new year on March 1.

That changed in 46 B.C., when Julius Caesar established what has come to be known as the Julian calendar, a more accurate calendar that closely tracked the Earth's orbit of the Sun. He decreed Jan. 1 to be the start of the year. The Romans dedicated this day to Janus, the god of gates, doors, and beginnings. The month of January was named after Janus, who had two faces, one



looking forward toward the new year and the other looking backward toward the old year.

In medieval Europe the celebrations accompanying the new year were considered pagan and unchristian like, and in 567 the Council of Tours abolished January 1 as the beginning of the year. At various times and in various places throughout medieval Christian Europe, the new year was celebrated on Dec. 25, the birth of Jesus; March 1; March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation; and Easter.

As late as 1582, Great Britain and the English colonies in America still kept March for the beginning of the year. It wasn't until 1752 that Britain (and its colonies) adopted the new Gregorian calendar and January 1 as the beginning of the year.

However, not all countries celebrate New Year at the same time, or in the same way. This is because people in different parts of the world use different calendars. Some calendars are based on the movement of the moon, others are based on the position of the sun, while others are based on both the sun and the moon. All over the world, there are special beliefs about New Year.



The Jewish New Year is called Rosh Hashanah. It is a holy time when people reflect on the things done wrong in the past, with a promise to do better in the future. Religious services are held in synagogues. Children are given new clothes, and New Year loaves are baked and fruit is eaten to remind people of harvest time.

The Chinese New Year is celebrated some time between January 17 and February 19, at the time of the new moon, and it is called Yuan Tan. It is celebrated by Chinese people all over the world, and street parades are an exciting part of their New Year. At the Festival of Lanterns thousands of lanterns are used to light the way for the New Year. The Chinese people believe that there are evil spirits around at New Year, so they let off firecrackers to frighten the spirits away. Sometimes they seal their windows and doors with paper to keep the evil spirits out.



