

12-25-1994

# Claudius: A Christmas Story

S. Ray Granade

*Ouachita Baptist University*, [granade@obu.edu](mailto:granade@obu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/creative\\_work](https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/creative_work)



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Granade, S. Ray, "Claudius: A Christmas Story" (1994). *Creative Works*. 9.  
[https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/creative\\_work/9](https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/creative_work/9)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in Creative Works by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact [mortensona@obu.edu](mailto:mortensona@obu.edu).

## CLAUDIUS: A CHRISTMAS STORY

S. Ray Granade

12/25/1994

"Tell us the story again," one begged. The others immediately chimed assent, and the chorus of "Yes" and "Please" arose.

"Are you sure?" I responded.

When the affirmative choir swelled again, I assented to their importuning. "It all began," I started, "a very long time ago, before I or my father or his father or even his father's father were born. It begins, as all good stories do, once upon a time."

Once upon a time there was a boy named Claudius. Claudius was practically an orphan, for his mother died when he was born, and his father went to sea soon after. As a result, Claudius spent his early years in an orphanage, before being adopted by a kindly old couple who had known his parents.

The couple lived in Savannah, Georgia, and Claudius grew up there, watching ships come and go and wondering about his father. His adoptive parents were careful about Claudius's education, for they taught him to read and write and made sure that he had plenty of books and time to read them. One day they bought Claudius a globe, and he learned geography by spending hours looking at it as he read about distant places. He was never content at home, always thinking about his father's adventures and the exotic places in the far reaches of the globe.

One day, Claudius decided that he would run away and look for his father. He decided that the only way to do that was to stow away on a ship, then show up when it was too far out to sea to turn around and bring him back. So, when Claudius was twelve, he secreted himself aboard an outbound vessel, leaving behind a letter for his adoptive parents telling them of his intentions.

Three days out to sea, Claudius emerged from his hiding place. The ship's captain was enraged, and threatened Claudius with all kinds of dire punishments. The captain told Claudius, whom he called "Mullet," that he would have Mullet lashed with the cat-o'-nine-tails; or keel-hauled; or that he would have Mullet walk the plank into shark-infested waters! Claudius

thought that perhaps he had not made such a wise decision after all! Finally the captain calmed down and said to Claudius, "Mullet, if you're going to stay aboard, you'll have to work to make your way." Thus Claudius became a cabin boy, doing whatever the captain told him.

"Mullet," the captain would say, "fetch me some coffee!" Or, "Mullet, find my glasses!" Or, most often, "Mullet, get out of the way!" But the voyage was a long one, and Claudius grew rapidly. By the end of the first year, Claudius was a full head taller. "Mullet," the captain would say, "belay that line!" Or, "Mullet, help hold the wheel!" Or, most often, simply, "Mullet, lend a hand!"

By the time the ship returned to Savannah, three years later, Claudius was man-sized, though not overly-tall, with a reddish-gold beard. Most important of all, the captain no longer called him Mullet. After a year and a half at sea, the ship had been caught in a tropical storm. Lightning sizzled all around, thunder boomed, the winds tore at the reefed sails and the mountainous waves threatened to swallow the ship. The captain had been on deck with the crew, and had almost been washed overboard. Only Claudius's quick action had kept that from happening, for he had jumped to the captain with a line. In a trice he had secured the line around the captain's waist while holding on fast to the rail. After that the captain never called him Mullet again.

Claudius had also proven his intelligence as well as his bravery, agility and strength. The Captain had made a seaman of him at first, and had him climb the lines and reef sails and even stand watch. Claudius got his big chance, though, when the supercargo got sick. The captain, knowing that he could read and write, had Claudius take over. For the rest of the voyage, Claudius had charge of the ship's cargo and all its paperwork.

His new position made it easier for him to do what he had been doing every time they hailed another ship or made port--ask for news of his father. Sometimes he would hear that someone knew his father; mostly no one had heard of him. Occasionally the news was contradictory, for one person would say that his father had served on one ship while another would be sure that the ship had a different name. When Claudius returned to Savannah, he had grown a great deal and learned a great deal about many things, but nothing really about his father.

Sure that he could eventually find his father, Claudius signed up for

another voyage. Around the world he sailed, and at every port of call he asked about his father. So persistent was he that other sailors came to recognize him by his quest--and by the red watch cap he now wore almost everywhere. Harbor masters and merchants alike knew Claudius and his search. But just as Claudius became known to so many people, so news of his father became more and more scarce. Finally, one sad day, the captain of a Dutch vessel told him that his father had been swept overboard and lost at sea.

Angry and sad as well, Claudius decided to leave the sea. When next he made port in Savannah, Claudius walked down the gangplank never to return. He went to see his adoptive parents, told them his story, and cast about for something new to do.

As it happened, Claudius's adoptive father had a friend who was going west. The friend offered to take Claudius along. "I know you're a young man who likes adventure," he said. "Come west with me and you'll see sights like nothing you've ever seen before." So a heavy-hearted Claudius joined him on the westward trek, still wearing his now-faded red watch cap.

Claudius's party crossed the Mississippi River, which seemed huge to his companions but small to a man who had been to sea. The land was flatter farther than anything his companions had seen, but it was nothing to a man who had been becalmed and seen the sea look like glass, without a breeze to stir it, as far as the eye could see. They found saline springs and salt licks, but these were nothing to a man who had lived for years where all the water around was salty. They saw bears and buffalo and heard panthers scream and owls hoot in the night and rabbits scream when the owls caught them--but those sights and sounds were nothing to a man who had seen whales and schools of fish and heard the cries of gulls and porpoises.

When Claudius's companions stopped in a likely-looking spot in Arkansas, Claudius continued west. His friends urged him to stay, but he said no, he was still looking for unusual sights and would be on his way after he got them settled. The next Spring, Claudius started on his way again.

He had decided that the winters were too cold this far north, for his party had veered northwest as it crossed Mississippi, so he struck out southwestward. After several days of travel, he noticed a change in the

landscape. Trees got smaller and scarcer. The horizon seemed to recede into the distance. Suddenly it struck him that after all those years at sea, this landscape made him feel more at home than any other. He now realized that the forests in which he'd been living and through which he'd been traveling seemed to suffocate him, and that now he seemed to be able to really breathe again for the first time since coming ashore. Claudius decided that he WAS home, and that this was the place for him to settle down.

The folks around him spoke Spanish, but that was no problem for a world-traveler like himself. He had a smattering of most of the world's languages, at least enough to get by. Rubbing shoulders with such an international lot as sailors and having to converse with merchants from all lands as super had taught him much of other languages and cultures. In a way, that too helped him feel oddly at home.

The one thing which didn't feel much like home was having to ride a horse. True, the horse's movements rocked like a ship at sea, but the effect on his anatomy was not like anything he'd experienced at sea at all! While it may not have been a new sight, it certainly was a new experience!

Claudius noticed that the land where he now lived was different in another way from the land he'd left. He was accustomed to a more open society, one where a person could do or be pretty much whatever he wanted to be. If a person wanted to own land, he could either get some where he was or move to an unclaimed parcel and use it for his own. Land costs were low, and eking out a living from the land was a simple matter. Now Claudius lived in a society more like the class division he had seen at sea between officers and common seamen. The rich padrones owned most if not all the land around, and his friends worked for them. His friends had little; their leaders had much.

The disparity between the lives of his friends and their overlords began to bother Claudius more than more. Finally it became too much for him. One dark night, when the moon was down and all was quiet, Claudius broke into a nearby padrone's hacienda.

As it happened, Claudius burgled the home on Christmas eve. There he found presents, which he took along with other items. Late that night he visited his friends' houses, distributing the items he had taken from the padrone's house. His friends, knowing the source of the items, warned

Claudius. "You're a saint, Claude," they said, "but you'd better be on your way quickly. You know that the padronne will be after whoever did this, and you know that as a foreigner they'll be after you immediately. You'd better head north NOW."

Heeding his friends' advice, Claudius left that night by horseback. He went north quickly, trying to throw any pursuers off the track, or alternately to distract them. He had a few trinkets which he occasionally left in campsites before moving on; occasionally he would leave something behind accidentally. Always he moved north.

Unknown to Claudius, the padronne was certain of his thief's identity. When Claudius's friends referred to Claudius's saintly qualities, the padronne responded, "You may think he's Saint Claude, but to me he's just Old Nick! `Saint' Nick--ah, there's a good one! After him men, and I promise a reward to the one who brings him back!"

Claudius traveled as fast as he could, and soon outdistanced his pursuers. All but one of them turned back. Claudius traveled ever northward, into the teeth of ever-colder weather which brought snow and blizzards. Exhausted, Claudius slowed down; spurred on by greed, his lone pursuer did not. Northward they traveled, with the pursuer drawing ever nearer his quarry.

One night, sitting by his tiny campfire, Claudius fell asleep. The campfire flickered, then lost its fight with the cold and the damp of the snow. The snow continued to fall; Claudius did not move as the drifts gathered around him and even his former fire began to be covered by the white.

Sleeping in the snow, Claudius did not see the figure moving toward him. The figure on horseback moved slowly through the trees, gingerly approaching the sleeping man. Claudius's horse, startled, whinnied; Claudius didn't move. The figure dismounted, moved over to Claudius, and shook him roughly. Still Claudius didn't move. He seemed unable to wake up. The figure saddled and untied Claudius's horse, led it over to where Claudius lay, then hoisted Claudius across the saddle. Then the figure remounted and, holding Claudius's horse's reins, moved off into the night.

When Claudius awoke, he was lying in a warm bed in a warm room near a roaring fire over which stew bubbled merrily in a large kettle. The

smell was delicious! When he stirred, a figure sitting in a nearby chair moved as well. Slowly the figure got up and moved into the firelight. It was a woman!

"Where am I," asked Claudius. "How did I get here? And who are you?"

"You're in my house," the woman replied, "and I brought you here. I'm a widow, and folks around here generally just call me Widow Claus. My husband, Hans, froze out here."

Claudius noticed that the woman wore red, and commented on it. "It's a phobia of mine," she said. "Ever since my husband froze to death, I've worn red during cold weather. You see, he went to sleep just like you did, and no one found him 'til the spring thaw. I wear red so that if I get lost, folks can find me. Silly, but there you have it."

"I don't think it's silly," he remarked. "Sounds like a good idea to me. Think I'll wear more red than just my cap if I decide to stay up here, but it's really too cold for me. I like a warmer clime. Wouldn't even be here if there wasn't a fellow after me."

When she asked why he was being chased, he told her the whole story. "Don't know why I did that," he remarked. "Guess I feel beholden to you, in your debt since you saved my life. Figure you deserve the truth. Besides, you're right comfortable to be around and talk to. I can tell that even from this short spell. Your husband was a lucky man!"

The snow had stopped, but Claudius was too weak to move on. He remained with Mrs. Claus a few days, gathering his strength to move on. She fed him well and offered him some extra clothing, including a red blanket. "That's right nice of you," he responded, "especially since the clothes I had on are mighty thin for this weather."

Just then a knock came at the door. Mrs. Claus went and opened it, admitting a stranger supporting a man Claudius knew. "I found him wandering in the forest," the stranger said, "snowblind and nearly frozen. Your place was nearest, so I brought him here. Can you put him up for a little while? We'll be glad to help with food and any expenses.... Oh, you have company!"

"Bring him on in," Mrs. Claus snapped, "you're letting in the cold! This is Claudius, and I brought him in half-frozen himself just a few days ago."

"Reckon they know each other?" the stranger asked, and they both looked at Claudius.

"I know him," Claudius admitted. "He's been chasing me for weeks now, coming up from the south. Bring him over here and let's take care of him."

The stranger, Mrs. Claus and Claudius brought the man to the bed so recently occupied by Claudius and sat him on it. Claudius told the man where he was, then asked Mrs. Claus about snowblindness. She told him that sight would return after a time, and Claudius translated for his erstwhile pursuer. Carrying their thanks, the stranger left for home.

Within a week, the padronne's man had his eyesight back and Claudius's promise to escort him home. Mrs. Claus's persistent attempts to persuade Claudius to stay came to naught. "At least wait until the snow melts," she pleaded, but to no avail. "I've decided to go back and face the music," Claudius would reply, "and the sooner I get it over with the better."

Though the snow had not melted, the cloudless sky let the sun dazzle the landscape. Mrs. Claus gave Claudius a red coat she had fashioned for him and gave them both masks with small slits for their eyes as a guard against snowblindness. So, with winter still holding the land hostage, Claudius and the padronne's man struck out south for home.

Their trip back was much slower than the trip north had been. Claudius was not hurrying and the snow inhibited their movements too. Before long they began to leave the snow behind, though the air stayed bitter cold. Claudius was grateful for his red coat and blanket, while the padronne's man wished Mrs. Claus had been as generous with him. But she had not, and he found the long days harder and harder to survive. Claudius lent him the red blanket, which they shared at night, during the day; still the padronne's man suffered from the cold.

As they neared home, a blue norther added to their misery. Finally the padronne's man told Claudius he could go on no longer. "You can't quit now," Claudius shouted at him; "we're so close to home you just have to keep going!" "I can't keep on," the man replied as he slid off his horse; "go on without me." And as the snow began to close them in from the world around them, the man slumped to the ground.

Claudius slowly climbed down from his horse, got the masks out of his saddlebags, and put one on. The other he took over to the man, put it



on him, and dragged him to his feet. "Get on your horse," he shouted above the wind. "I'll help you up, and I'll lead the horse, but you've got to keep going!" Not waiting for a response, he pushed and pulled and pushed some more until the man was once more astride his horse, wrapped in the blanket with the snow coating him and his horse. Claudius tied him in the saddle, then got onto his own horse and started once more for home, trailing the man behind.

By the time they reached the padronne's hacienda, both were snow-covered, with only a little of the red in Claudius's cap and coat and the blanket on the padronne's man showing through the white. Even the horses were snow-covered, except for their sides and legs where the snow would not cling.

The wind howled viciously and drove the snow before them as Claudius and the man slowly rode into the courtyard. Claudius stiffly dismounted and made his way to the door. Standing in the snow, covered in snow with only some of the red from his coat and cap showing, peering through the slits in his mask, Claudius laboriously knocked on the door once, then again, and yet again. Behind him, the man (whose rope had loosened too much) slowly slid from his horse to the ground unnoticed.

The padronne opened the door himself, wondering who might be abroad on such a night. Not recognizing the man before him, the padronne called for a servant, torches, blankets, and warm food. Others were roused from their beds to help with the stranger and his horse. The second man, lying on the ground by his horse, was quickly discovered and whisked into the house with his comrade while his horse joined the other in the padronne's barn.

The padronne directed that the two men be taken immediately to the roaring fire and fed and offered warming drinks. As he finished issuing his orders, one of the men who had taken the horses to the barn returned and whispered something to the padronne.

The padronne turned toward the two men who stood, still bundled up, before the fire. Claudius stood facing the fire, slowly loosening his coat. He had removed his mask and cap, and the snow had melted off his red coat. The other man was being supported by two others, who had removed his hat and mask as well, and were in the process of unwrapping his blanket. It was toward the latter that the padronne moved and into

whose face he gazed. Then he turned to Claudius. "You're the one he was after," he stated rather than asked. "Do you know who he is?"

"Only that he's one of your men," Claudius replied. "He was found wandering in the northern forests, snowblind. The same person who saved me nursed him back to health after a neighbor brought him to her house. I promised to bring him home, to see that he made it safely. He almost didn't. I finally tied him to his horse and led the horse the last few days to get him here. Even then I wasn't sure we'd make it."

"You did this despite the fact that he was chasing you on my behalf?"

"Yes."

"Even though bringing him back would place you into my power, and therefore in danger?"

"Yes."

"Even though you didn't know him and he was nothing to you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because he needed help, and because I gave my word."

The padronne looked at Claudius for a long moment, then turned away. He called for his servants to bring dry clothing quickly, and to hurry the food and drink. Then he directed the two supporting his man to ensure that the man was warmed and fed warm soup, then bundled up by the fire. They should stay with the man, he directed, until further notice. "After all," the padronne murmured, "you know him as well as I do. You know a son's importance to his father."

"What about Claudius?" one asked. "What do we do with him?"

"Leave him to the comforts of the warmth of fire and food and drink. Offer him blankets and the run of the place, but don't let him leave. If anything happens to him, or he's hurt in any way, I hold you responsible. I won't be far." With that he left the room.

The padronne returned in a few moments with his wife hurrying behind him. She flew to her son, who in his weakened condition could hardly be roused and when he was, did not recognize her. "He'll be fine, given a little time," her husband said. "Don't fret so!"

"Tell me the story," she demanded.

"I don't know it all. When he's recovered enough," he said, nodding toward Claudius, "we'll have to ask him for particulars."

"Isn't he the one you suspected of being a thief and stealing our Christmas, the one you called 'Old Nick' himself?"

"Yes, and he may well be guilty of that crime. All I know for sure is that he saved our son without knowing who he was, and brought him home safely. For a thief, he seems a man of honor. Come, sit with me here, and watch your son. We'll await the morrow and our answers."

Through the night they sat, occasionally nodding off, or getting up to touch their son or build up the fire. During the whole time they cast occasional glances at Claudius, curled up by his red coat near the fire, wrapped in blankets and sound asleep.

Claudius slept until late the next day, arising only when lengthening shadows heralded the approach of another night but announced as well that the storm had passed. He glanced around him, taking in the man he had brought south bundled up, like himself, and lying before the fire; the man's two watchers; and the couple sitting nearby in a strange state of languid watchfulness. He stretched, wrapped the blanket around himself tighter, and stood up. As he did so, one of the watchers got up as well and came to stand beside him.

"Going somewhere?" the watcher asked.

"Not really," Claudius replied. "Thought I'd move around some and change my clothes while I was at it. I'd feel kinda odd changing right here in front of everybody."

"That's fine," the watcher replied, "but don't try to leave the house. Your clothes've been washed and ironed and are in the second room on the right down the hall."

"Thanks."

Soon Claudius returned, dressed and looking much refreshed. Since he'd not trimmed his beard since leaving, it was much longer and fuller than he normally wore it, and recent events seemed to have lightened it almost to the point of whiteness. Indeed, in the growing twilight it seemed to sparkle like the snow which had so recently covered both it and him. As he reentered the room, the padronne and his wife arose simultaneously.

"Come and sit here near us," the padronne said, "and tell us the story. Tell us what happened in detail, please. You may start wherever you wish, but please don't leave anything out. We want the whole story."

Claudius did as he was bid. He sat in the deepening shadows thrown

first by the fire, then by the candles as they were lighted. He began at the beginning, telling these people of his time in the orphanage, of his loving adoptive parents, of his travels in search of his father, of his westward travels crossing the Mississippi and sojourning in Arkansas, and of his arrival in the neighborhood. Then he confessed that it had been he who burgled their home and spread good cheer to their workers before heading north. He told them of his trek into the cold and snow, and repeated for them what Mrs. Claus had told him about his lost days almost freezing to death and then convalescing.

Finally he came to the part for which they had been patiently waiting, listening to his tale but awaiting nonetheless. He told them how the stranger had brought the padronne's man to Mrs. Claus's house, snowblind and as near death as he himself had been. How the stranger had said that no one else was nearby, and how he, Claudius, had known then that this man alone of those who had surely started out after him had remained on his trail. Mrs. Claus had saved the man, he related, and he had promised to see the man safely home. She had urged a delay, fearful that they would be caught in the snow and perish. She had given them the red coat and blanket, patterned after her own because of her own husband's death, and sent them reluctantly on their way. They had traveled together, enjoying the ride, until the norther overtook them and the cold again threatened their lives. Haltingly, Claudius told them of the last few days, what he could remember, of the desperate struggle through the hostile plains toward home. How he had pushed and pulled the padronne's man up on his horse for the last time, and how his numb fingers had struggled to knot the rope, doing so only partially successfully. And how, at last, they had come to the hacienda.

Silence shrouded the room, broken only by the occasionally crackle of the fire until a log broke with a gentle sound and sent a shower of sparks up the chimney, briefly illuminating the scene and the socks hung on the mantle to dry. Then the padronne asked his questions again: "You did this despite the fact that he was chasing you on my behalf, even though bringing him back would place you into my power, and therefore in danger, even though you didn't know him and he was nothing to you?" Again he received the same affirmatives from Claudius. And when he asked his last question, "Why?" Claudius again answered simply "Because he needed

help, and because I gave my word."

Silence returned to the room after this exchange. The padronne again broke it. "I wanted you to hear this," he told his wife. To Claudius he said "He is my son."

To this Claudius made no response, for he knew not what to say. He merely sat still, waiting for the padronne to speak again. Silence again cloaked the room, though this time it seemed that it would last forever. Again it was the padronne who, this time hesitantly, broke that silence.

"I am not accustomed to the kinds of things I have been thinking and must now say. I am an authoritative man, accustomed to giving orders and having them immediately obeyed. I am a decisive man, given to immediate action and no regrets. I am a moralistic man, given to absolute values of right and wrong with no shades of gray. I am a religious man, given to worship and strict observance of God's laws. All of that leads me to say that you are a confessed thief, and that for your crime you must pay a price. Yet I am also an honest man, given to paying my own debts and recognizing favors which require favors in return. You have, at risk to yourself, brought my son home safe and sound. You have guarded him through perils at risk to your own health and well-being. I am therefore indebted to you. I find myself in an unusual quandary which calls on the one hand for your punishment and on the other for your reward. You are a man of honor, and I ask for your suggestions."

"I have none to make," Claudius responded after a time. "In deciding to return I knew the risks and accepted the fact of punishment. The favor I did was done unwittingly. You find yourself in my debt accidentally. I see no need for reward."

"You are indeed a saint, Claude," responded the padronne. "I have offered you an escape, yet you have refused it. I have offered you personal favor and that you have refused as well. The quandary seems to have no solution. My judgment is therefore this. You will be banished from this place forever, forbidden to return save one day a year. If you return, it must be on an anniversary of your crime. If you are found in the province at any other time, you will be branded as a thief and imprisoned. This is your punishment.

"Since you refuse my reward personally, I will award it in your name to those I deem fit. My workers already think of you as a saint--a

sentiment I now share. I will foster that sentiment, and on the anniversary of your crime will distribute gifts in this province in your name. The distribution will take place as the crime was committed, with stealth and under cover of darkness. No one will know that it is I who am behind it. They will attribute it to the sainted Claude.

"I will tell the story of my son's miraculous return, conducted safely by a red-coated, white-bearded man from the north. I will say that, having finished his task, he left with only a meal and dry socks as his payment. I will say, finally, that he did not give his name, as indeed you have not since I knew and therefore did not ask it. Some will attribute this to the devil, and say that Old Nick was about; my son will doubtless tell of Mrs. Claus and his stay in her northland home. No one will attribute this to you, and your reward from its fame will thus be denied, just as you wished. Now what have you to say?"

"Sounds fair to me," Claudius replied.

"But husband," objected the wife, "surely this is not equitable. We owe this man a great debt, whether or not he acknowledges it. And if my husband follows through with this plan, where will you go?" she asked Claudius.

"North," he responded. "I set out for adventure and sights I'd never seen before. I found both, and the beauty of an uncommon woman, northward. I think that's where I'll go, and visit the Widow Claus. There's nothing to hold me here save friendship, so the verdict places no undue burden on me. There's much to take me northward, so the verdict places no undue burden on me. Indeed, it favors me greatly by giving me a push toward what I really want.

"As for the reward," he cautioned the padronne, "so long as your word is good I will be greatly pleased. But if you keep it not, the debt remains unpaid. Be it on your conscience. As proof of my satisfaction, I leave before dawn."

The wife was dismayed, for she wanted Claudius to stay long enough for her to change her husband's mind, perhaps with her son's aid. She knew that the son's gratitude would unite with the father's, and hoped that the union of the two would persuade both Claudius and the padronne to rescind their decisions. Perhaps guessing her intent, Claudius remained adamant. Claiming his meal and dry socks, he then called for his cap, coat

and horse, mounted, and was well away from the hacienda following the stars in the clear night north when first light began to chase darkness from the east.

Claudius found the Widow Claus again, and after a whirlwind courtship married her. They lived happily in the north. Occasionally they visited the padronne and his family, mostly in the early years, usually with their young children, and always on the anniversary of Claudius's crime.

True to his word, the padronne told the story and distributed gifts to worthy individuals on Christmas eve, stealthily and under cover of darkness. He commanded his son to continue the practice and to pass the covenant to his own children with the same admonition.

Contrary to the padronne's belief, the story of the red-capped, red-coated, white-bearded man who wanted only a meal and socks in return for his marvelous gift became inextricably linked with the anniversary. In remembrance of the padronne's good fortune, families laid out socks, which gradually became the favorite hiding place of the padronne's smaller gifts to his workers. The meal came to be symbolized by a light repast which was laid out adjacent to the socks. Some in the province referred to the red-coated man as Mrs. Claus's husband--Mr. or saint Claus--thanks to the son's version. Many workers called their benefactor the sainted Claude, but usually only in private out of deference to the padronne and his loss on that long-ago night. A few workers, mostly currying favor with the padronne (so they thought), remembered the padronne's angered jest and referred to the benefactor as "saint" Nick.

As is sometimes the case, the kindness and generosity agreed to by the padronne and Claudius proved contagious. To this day, in that part of the United States, children and adults alike unknowingly honor the memory of those men.

Ray Granade  
Christmas, 1991