
Holiday Cards: Santa's Elves Vs. Humbugs

By ENID NEMY

BREATHES there a soul who hasn't at one time or another thought — for just a second or two — how nice it would be not to have to deal with Christmas cards? But fleeting thoughts and occasional action hardly count. Despite the increasing costs of cards and postage, holiday greetings still flood post offices every year. Untold hours are spent choosing, signing and addressing them, and a lot of midnight oil is burned by men and women creating original and highly personalized greetings.

A completely unscientific survey seems to indicate that an increasing number of people each year make the momentous decision to stop sending cards, but the number is still minimal. Nevertheless, the men and women who have decided to flout tradition take some pride in their decision and almost never back down — there's the odd twinge of guilt, but that seems to be about it.

"I love the idea of Christmas in the sense of family and friends, but it's lost its sincerity," said Merle Debuskey, a Christmas-card rebel and theatrical press agent in Manhattan. "It's become a merchandising scheme. I try to maintain contact with the people I'm interested in, throughout the year."

Robert Shanks, a television producer and writer in Manhattan, said: "I stopped about 15 years ago because I hated the hypocrisy of it. It's one of those pro-forma things that people do. I might drop a line to older family members, but not a card."

But for everyone who says "Enough, no more," there are others who have either just started sending cards or each year add to the number they send. Statistics released by the Greeting Card Association in Washington show little change in the number of Christmas cards sold annually in this country over the last five years. The figure hovers between 2.1 billion and 2.3 billion. There are no figures available for other types of holiday cards.

There are also tens of thousands of noncommercial cards printed — photographs of families, pets, houses and trips, and letters outlining the year's activities. Some people

Post offices
see no letup
in the flood
of cards.

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send Christmas cassettes or videos, with a message or featuring a seasonal song or poem.

Cards printed on recycled paper and those that benefit a specific organization are becoming more popular every year.

"We always use some charity card," said Mary Loving, a partner in Loving & Weintraub, a Manhattan public relations firm that has used cards that benefit Unicef, Gay Men's Health Crisis and the Pediatric Aids Foundation, among other groups. The cards go to those on the firm's business list and, in most cases, to people on employees' personal lists.

In the category of humorous cards, it would probably be hard to outdo the annual greeting sent to some 1,700 family members, friends, and business and charity-committee colleagues by Bonnie and John Swearingen of Chicago. Mr. Swearingen is the former chairman of Standard Oil of Indiana. One year, the couple appeared on cards dressed as Scarlett and Rhett O'Swearingen. Cards in other years have shown Mrs. Swearingen riding an elephant in a snow scene (which involved a good deal of photographic legerdemain) and poised in a hot-air balloon. This year, the two of them, she in feathered headdress and he with beaded forehead band, are Chief Puff Puff and Princess Moonbeam.

Their cards, imprinted with their names, are generally addressed by a secretary and not individually signed. Still, Mrs. Swearingen said, they are very personal because she spends considerable time choosing the photograph and writing the greeting.

Letitia Baldrige, the etiquette expert and author of "Letitia Baldrige's Complete Guide to the New Manners for the 90's," generally disapproves of cards with only a printed signature.

"If the names are printed," she said, "a line should be drawn through and the cards signed by hand — but there really should be something written as well, even if it's only 'Cheers' or 'Merry, Merry.'"

For her own cards, Ms. Baldrige always buys two sets. "One set is religious, with a Madonna," she said. "The other, for my Jewish friends, is totally nonreligious."

Ruth Warrick, an actress on the ABC soap opera "All My Children," believes in even more variety.

"I try to make distinctions," she said. "Spiritual, but not overly religious for some, and nonreligious for others. I also like to send funny cards to some people." She added that she sends between 200 and 300 cards each year and signs each one.

The correct etiquette for card signatures? For couples, it depends on who is doing the signing, Ms. Baldrige said. If it's a married woman, or if the card is going to someone who is primarily the woman's friend, she should write her name first — Mary and John Smith. If he's signing, or if the card is going to a friend of his, it

would be John and Mary Smith. An unmarried couple who live together would follow the same rules — Mary Smith and John Jones, or John Jones and Mary Smith.

The holiday letter — an outline, often typed and photocopied, of what has happened to an individual or family members during the year — is often ridiculed. But there is little doubt that it is almost always read and often enjoyed.

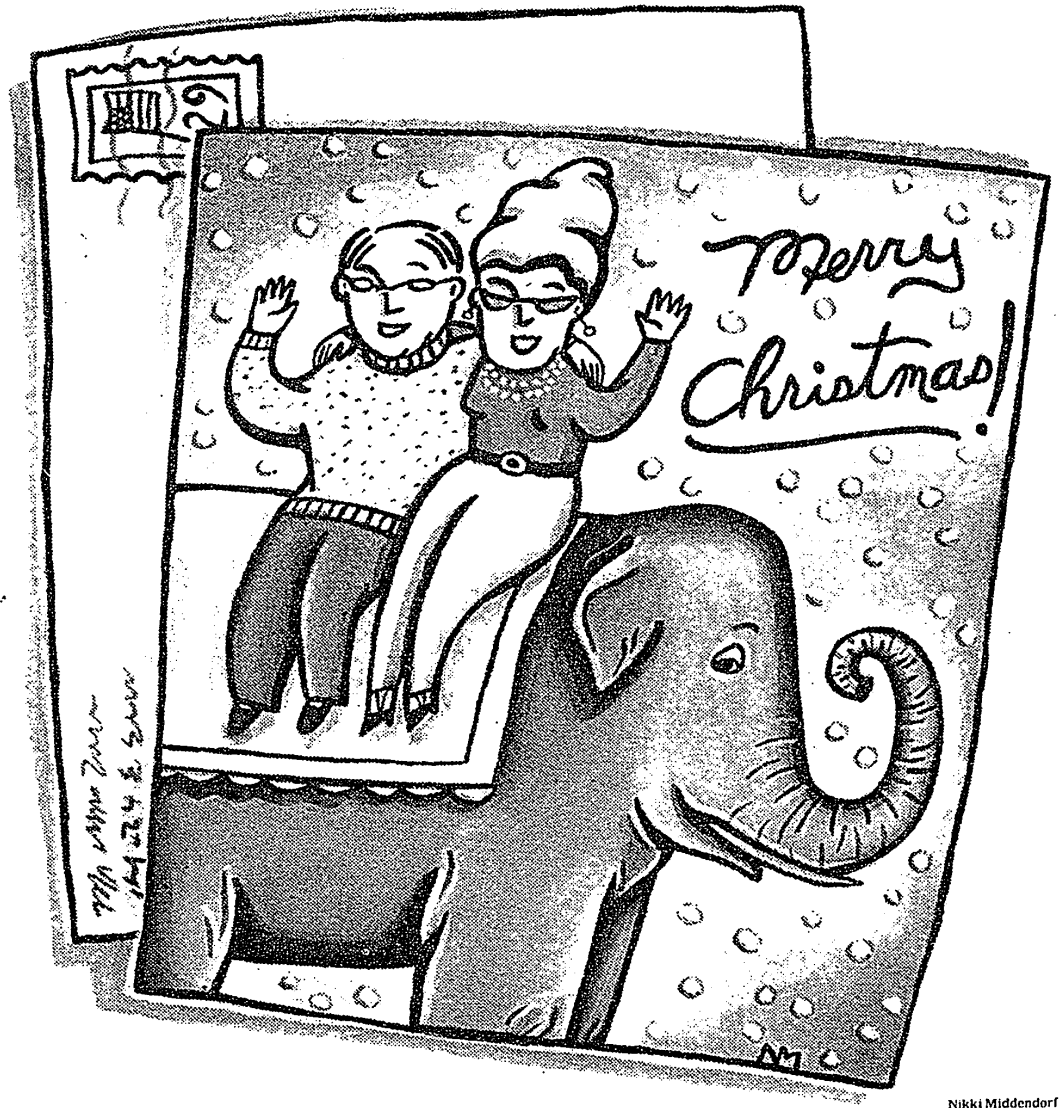
Barbara and Donald Tober of Manhattan have been sending a letter for some years. "We try to paint a verbal picture of what has happened to us, where we went, chatty and pleasant and not too much on the down side," said Ms. Tober, the editor of *Bride's* and *Your New Home* magazine. The letter, enclosed in a card, is sent to about 150 friends, but the couple (Mr. Tober is the chairman of the Sugar

Foods Corporation) also send about 200 nonreligious personal cards with their names printed, but often personalized with a short message.

One of the most elaborate letters is sent by Elsie Bennett, a music teacher in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. The eight-page one she sent in 1990 consisted of a page of news and seven pages of photographs of Ms. Bennett taken with various celebrities she had met during the year at parties, backstage at the theater, at film-making classes and elsewhere. In addition to such personalities as Victor Borge and Stockard Channing, the subjects of the photographs included family members and her supermarket cashier showing off his new haircut. Putting the greeting together is so time consuming that Ms. Bennett said she's thinking of sending her 1992 letter sometime after New Year.

It's doubtful that anyone can surpass in innovation the greetings sent by Lawrence Savell, a senior associate in the Manhattan law firm of Chadbourn & Parke. Five years ago, Mr. Savell had an audiocassette made that featured him playing the guitar and singing his own composition called "I Dreamed I Saw Santa Workin' in the Library" (law library, that is). The next year he increased the number of original compositions to two, one of them called "It's Going to Be a Billable Christmas." He then moved on to a video, and this year it's a musical video called "In a Holiday." The videos, which cost about \$1,000, go to 250 to 300 friends, family members, colleagues and "people I meet on planes."

"They're not overly professional," he said, "but they're pretty impressive for a lawyer."



Nikki Middendorf