**Evolving Santa**

**Cheaper, mass-produced goods and smaller, more prosperous families made it possible for American parents to live up to the image of a fat, generous Santa Claus and his big bag of toys.**

**It's one of the stories told in an exhibit put together by the Daughters of the American Revolution. "The Stuff of Children: Artifacts and Attitudes 1700-1900" opens Sunday at their national headquarters near the White House.**

**Santa's reputation for generosity goes back to the legend that St. Nicholas, a 4th century bishop in a town now in Turkey, threw bags of gold at night into the windows of a house where three sisters lacked the dowries they needed to get husbands.**

**His image today, said curator Alden O'Brien, owes more to drawings by political cartoonist Thomas Nast in the late 1800s.**

**Those generous images were a far cry from the views of children among the earliest American settlers.**

**"They were thought of as little adults, and not very good at it," O'Brien said. "They were bound to strict duties. One duty was to grow up as fast as possible."**

**Christmas gifts were unusual; people were more likely to exchange small tokens on New Year's Day.**

**Attitudes changed under the influence of 17th century English philosopher John Locke, who said children could learn by playing, and encouraged the use of toys like building blocks.**

**O'Brien says Locke's ideas about children's need to learn in freedom were of a piece with his writings on free government -- views that greatly influenced the men who wrote the U.S. Constitution.**

**That helped bring about many new ideas into education, such as flash cards, jigsaw puzzle maps and books written particularly for children. The image of a chubby and jolly Santa goes at least as far back as Clement Moore's famous poem "Twas The Night Before Christmas," written in 1822.**

**By the second half of the 1800s, the show explains, children were increasingly seen as innocent beings who had to be sheltered from adult corruption.**

**That view fostered toys and books to prolong their innocence. Family size declined, so parents had more time, emotion and money to spend on each child.**

**Factories produced greater and greater quantities of affordable goods, and gifts became more affordable to those of modest income as well as the affluent.**

***(The North Platte Telegraph, December 9, 2001)***