

Commentary...

When Belsnickle came to my house

By Marlene McCormack
Guest Columnist

It's been a long time since I invited a certain white-haired fellow over for the holidays. Oh, I'm not talking about [that] white-haired fellow, but we're getting ahead of the story here.

There was a Christmas long ago when my two grown sons, Harry and Patrick, needed a lesson in making good choices. You see, there was a time when Patrick was 3 and Harry was 5 years old — and together they could be a handful. They were excited to move to a place where it snowed all winter. During the day, my new job at the library kept me busy and, at night, it seemed I was just as busy making Christmas gifts for friends and family. Maybe that's why I didn't notice that the boys had made a new friend. His name was mischief. It fell on deaf ears when I reminded them that "Santa's elves were watching."

On this particular evening it was snowing — again. That launched the boys into their snow dance through the house, yelling, "Call 911! It's snowing!" They'd done this before, so I let them be. After a few trips through the house, they usually got bored. Tonight's trip ended in silence somewhere down the hall.

"They've tired themselves out," I thought. I didn't budge from the dining table, focused on painting the Christmas figure I held my hand.

Wait. Was that someone knocking on the front door?

"Hello, ma'am. We got a call from this location," said one of two EMTs standing in the doorway.

"Boys!" I called, "come out here — now!"

Harry and Patrick shyly emerged from my bedroom. Patrick admitted that he dialed 911 from the phone there, hanging up when he heard a voice. Both boys thought that would be the end of it.

Fearing the worst, the 911 dispatcher at the other end of the phone sent help. All she

heard was heavy breathing, then a dial tone. Now here we stood, sorting it out. I apologized to the EMTs and they, in turn, patiently educated my sons on the proper use of 911. After they left, I delivered a scolding and sent them to bed.

I sat back down at the dining table, paintbrush in one hand and my head in the other. How do I get those boys to mind?

The answer was right in front of me. The Christmas figure I was painting was named Belsnickle, a character from my childhood in Pennsylvania. And he had a history.

I've researched and written about the many, and vastly different, versions of Belsnickle. My favorite version describes him as a short, grumpy assistant to St. Nicholas. German immigrants introduced him to America in the 1800s. Also known as the Pennsylvania Dutch, these ingenious parents brought Belsnickle from Germany because he was very effective at getting children to behave for the entire Advent season.

Dressed in furs and adorned with jingle bells, Belsnickle traveled the countryside, visiting children good and bad. The good ones received candy, the bad ones received switches, or sticks, for parents to use on them (remember, this sort of discipline was condoned over a hundred years ago). Belsnickle wasn't restricted by a one-night, once-a-year trip, either. He could visit any time, day or night. If you heard jingle bells at bedtime, that may be Belsnickle outside. Confirmation came the next morning: if you found candy strewn over the kitchen floor, you received an overnight delivery from Belsnickle.

In the early 20th century, regional newspapers in Pennsylvania reported on his activities. He appeared at schools, churches and community events. In fact, a few mischievous versions of Belsnickle made the police

blotters of the day.

I grew up in a small coal-mining town in Pennsylvania, where Belsnickle visited my second-grade class. It was just before Christmas in the late 1950s. My classmates and I got very quiet when a white-bearded man strided into our classroom. His face was nearly hidden under a furry hunter's cap. Candy canes and twigs bulged from the pockets of his long, shaggy coat and jingle bells adorned his walking stick.

"Make good choices and you get candy," said this Belsnickle in a heavy, German accent.

"But if you don't, then switches you will get!" he roared.

Thank goodness, we all got candy from that Belsnickle.

Sadly, this folk legend vanished sometime during the 1960s. At that time, our attention was captured by our nation's race to get to the moon before the Soviets. Maybe that's why no one cared about a folk legend any more. Whatever the reason, Belsnickle faded away, confined to the shape of the small Christmas figure I painted.

That was, until I brought him back to life for Harry and Patrick. I enlisted the help of their aunt and uncle, who would be here for Christmas. I phoned them and explained my mischievous plan.

"Uncle John! Aunt Janie!" Harry and Patrick shouted when they arrived later that week. Aunt Janie led them into their room to play. Her distraction provided John the chance to slip outside and be the Belsnickle. I was in the kitchen, preparing the

evidence.

There was an abrupt knock-knock-knock at the front door. Then another knock-knock-knock, only louder. Bells jangled outside. My wide-eyed sons emerged from their room and I joined them at the front door, calling, "Who's making all that noise?"

"Have you made good choices?" growled someone with a heavy German accent.

"Don't open the door! Don't open it!" Harry yelled.

"Do you think it's Belsnickle?" asked Aunt Janie.

"Aaaahhhhh!" screamed Patrick.

I slowly opened the door, and stepped outside — but there was no one there.

"Oh, I thought it was Belsnickle," I said sadly.

"It sounded like him," said Uncle John, joining us at the front door — as if he had been there all along.

"Well, let's get dinner," I said, "Boys, go wash up."

The three of us watched as they nearly skidded to a stop at the doorway. Candy and jingle bells were scattered all over the kitchen floor!

"Belsnickle WAS here!" Harry screamed, "Look at all the candy!"

That night, my sons happily bid farewell to mischief. Well, at least through the end of that holiday season.

Harry and Patrick's "Belsnickling" inspired me to write a poem for them. I plan to read it to my granddaughter this Christmas. She's almost four years old and has made a new, invisible friend.

I'll bet you can guess his name.

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