



Merry Christmas

Dreisbach Family Association

December 2011 Newsletter

Christmas with the Dreisbachs ca. 1770

With no known records, we can only make an educated guess at how the early Dreisbach families celebrated Christmas. Some conclusions will be right, others will be wrong, but everything that follows was part of the Christmas celebrations in the German areas of Pennsylvania in the final quarter of the 1700's.



By 1770, Simon Sr's children, Jost, Adam, Simon Jr, George and John were all married, with families of their own, and lived relatively near each other in Lehigh Township, Northampton County, PA. It is nice to imagine that they celebrated Christmas together, perhaps gathering at the largest houses for Christmas dinner after worshiping in their small log church built on Jost's property, not too far from his mill.



In the weeks before Christmas, hogs were slaughtered and the meat turned into sausages, hams, bacon and pickled souse. The perishable bits were shared with the neighbors and some was given to the poor – but the best was reserved for the Christmas table. The women baked holiday foods including lebkuchen (a kind of gingerbread), pies made with dried fruits, pretzels and simple cookies. Just before Christmas the houses and stables were thoroughly cleaned in preparation for the holy day to come.

December 24th was *preparation day* - the turkey was killed and prepared for roasting, baskets of food were made up for distribution to those less fortunate and delivered by the boys in the family. When the stars of Christmas Eve were in the sky, the young children sat by the fire to hear the *Christmas* story read from the Bible. They also heard stories about the "Christ-Kindel", the Christ-Child who brought gifts to good little children.



Before going to bed, the youngest children put a bread basket filled with hay beside the front door. The hay was for the grey mule that the Christ-kindel rode as he went from farm to farm delivering his gifts. In the morning, just as they do today, the children rushed to see what Christ-kindel had left - nuts, schnitz (dried fruit), cookies, pretzels and perhaps a small, usually homemade, toy.

Their parents also had Christmas Eve traditions. On Christmas Eve, extra food was given to all the animals in the barn. The frost of Christmas morning was thought to bestow blessings and health on those who ate it. So the Dreisbach men threw a pile of hay out into the barnyard and in the morning the animals were given a bit of the moistened hay. The Dreisbach women put slices of bread outside in places where the mice and squirrels couldn't reach. On Christmas morning the first bite of food for each member of the family was a bit of frost-dampened bread to ensure a good year to come.



Christmas Day was a Holy Day and everyone, except the smallest children and the women preparing Christmas dinner, went to church. There must have been cheerful greetings of "Freelicher Grischttaag!" (Merry Christmas) as people approached the church, riding in sleighs or walking on foot. If the Dreisbachs were lucky, a traveling minister, perhaps the Reverend Egedius



Hecker, was there to preach the gospel – and to remind the congregation that Christmas should not be passed in drinking and celebrating. If no minister was present, an elder of the

congregation that met at “Jost’s Church”, most likely led the service. It would be cold in the unheated log church, but with candles and enough bodies, perhaps the temperature inside was tolerable. There probably were narrow wooden benches for seats and no doubt people stood up and stamped their feet from time to time to warm up. Most of all it was a *special* day. Christmas hymns were sung, the same ones that were sung back in Wittgenstein and after church, Christmas dinner was enjoyed by all.

Second Day Christmas!

The day following Christmas was a day to relax, party, play games, and no doubt share a few – or more than a few – drinks with friends. There was a church service in the morning, where the minister cautioned against such frivolities, probably more because it was expected than because anyone would follow this advice. No business was transacted and young people traveled in groups to various parties.



Tavern keeper Conrad Kreider, a good friend of the Dreisbachs, no doubt welcomed most of the men to his establishment. At the tavern and at home, games, sports and gambling were the order of the day. There were shooting matches, with valuable prizes, spelling bees for children, and a very popular game played with pennies and a hat. A number of pennies were placed in a tri-corner hat. The player shook the hat up and down to flip the pennies while reciting a short rhyme. After the last word, everyone peered into the hat and counted the number of pennies that showed “heads”. Each person had 3 tries, and the person with the highest total of heads was the winner – getting some pre-agreed upon prize. The person with the most “tails” got the second prize.

Back home, leftovers from the Christmas Day feast plus newly made dishes once more filled the table as revelers came home for dinner. Brandy, beer, cider and whiskey flowed and no doubt good stories and some songs did as well.

Barley Sugar Candy



A clear candy made by Regenna’s Candy Shop, Myerstown, PA.. There were many other shapes and colors and it was common in Allentown as late as the 1950’s. Do you remember it from your own childhood?

Perhaps if the Dreisbach children were lucky and somebody had made a trip to town (maybe even all the way to Germantown), they might have a special treat on Christmas morning – beautiful, colored and translucent candy in the shape of animals and other things. Made with barley sugar, this candy can be traced in Pennsylvania as far back as 1772, and was brought by German immigrants sometime before this so it is possible this candy was known to the Dreisbachs in 1770. Still made by a few confectioners, it still can be ordered from: <http://www.clearcandy.com/>



Did the Dreisbachs have Christmas trees in

1770? Possibly, but probably not. Christmas trees were known in Pennsylvania as early as 1770, but they seem to have been found only in Lutheran families. The Dreisbachs were Reformed so, while they may very well have known of this custom, they probably did not follow it. However it is very possible that they decorated the insides of their log cabins with evergreen boughs and wild red berries.





Der Belsnickel!

Not many of us have seen a Belsnickel and maybe most don't know what one is, but my mother told stories of the Belsnickel's visit when she was a child.

A short time before Christmas there would be a pounding at the front door and then the door burst open and in strode a scary figure, his face blackened by burnt cork, wearing ragged old clothing, a fur hat and a fox skin over his shoulders. In his hands he carried a burlap sack and a bundle of birch twigs.

My mother and her two younger brothers knew exactly who this fearsome creature was - der Belsnickel - and he was there to determine if they'd been good or bad. He chased them around the livingroom, brandishing his birch twigs and asking in a gruff voice, "Warscht du gut?" (Were you good?.)



Der Belsnickel, as played by Keith Brintzenhoff, who performed at our DFA 2010 Reunion. <http://www.toadcreekmusic.com/>

The children were herded into the middle of the room where the boys usually received a swat with the twigs while my mother was spared because she'd been helping with the house work. Then der Belsnickel opened his sack and filled my mother's hands with candies, nuts and a few coins, but he gave nothing to her two brothers, saying they had been bad. The boys were heartbroken, but as Der Belsnickel headed for the front door, he dropped a trail of candies, nuts and pennies and they scrambled to pick them up. Laughing, he exited to their promises of being good!

Der Belsnickel was my mother's uncle. She said that when she was young, he was a terrifying figure but as she got older, she recognized him, although her younger brothers still stood in terror of this unknown apparition.

This Belsnickel, at right, is a friendlier version of the original, no longer scary, he is becoming the benevolent Santa Claus we're familiar with. The sack he carries is now full of toys, instead of candy and nuts, and the twigs have turned into a small, less threatening, Christmas tree.



Der Belsnickel was known in Germany as "Pelznickel" (St. Nicholas in furs) and behaved much like the Pennsylvania Dutch Belsnickel. His origin is in the distant, pagan past where midwinter festivals featured forces of darkness, the Belsnickel, in opposition to forces of light. In Christian times, der Belsnickel became part of the Christmas celebration. His once great power to continue the darkness of mid-winter was downgraded to that of a semi-benevolent clown used to frighten children in the hopes of improving their behavior. Arriving with the German immigrants, der Belsnickel was an integral part of Pennsylvania Dutch Christmas traditions until the advent of friendly, rotund, Santa Claus in the early to mid 20th century.

Were the Dreisbach children visited, in 1770, by a version of der Belsnickel? Perhaps. There is no good evidence one way or the other. The Belsnickel would have been seen only in the homes of the "gay" Dutch, the Lutheran and Reformed families such as the Dreisbachs.



The Christmas Recitation

Those of you who went to Sunday School may remember standing before the congregation at Christmas time to recite a "piece" that you had struggled to memorize. Fighting stage fright – or anxious to show off – you stood there whispering, or nearly shouting, your 5, 8 or 10 lines of seasonal verse, while proud parents (usually) beamed.

The Christmas piece is a remnant of the scary Belsnickel's visit when children memorized a Bible verse or two, or a stanza of poetry, in preparation for the Belsnickel's visit.

After the Belsnickel arrived and had rounded up the children so that they were standing in front of him, he demanded “a piece” as payment for coming. The children then spoke their memorized verses for him.

Visits from the Belsnickel faded away by the 1920’s, but the children’s “Christmas piece” remained and was taken over by the Sunday School. How many of you have memories of this?



Moravian Influence on Christmas

The Moravians settled in Northampton County in 1741, a few years before the Dreisbach family arrived. The Dreisbachs were *not* Moravian; they were all staunch members of the Reformed Church, but the large and prosperous Moravian Community only a few miles away certainly had an influence on the lives of at least some



Dreisbachs, including Jost, Adam, George and John. There are records of numerous purchases that Jost Dreisbach, made at the Moravian store in Bethlehem, indicating frequent contact between the Dreisbachs and the Moravians.

At Christmas the Moravian community had impressive celebrations and beautiful Christmas decorations that enticed many non-Moravian settlers to visit. A quote from “Christmas in Pennsylvania” by A.L. Shoemaker illustrates this very well *“Bethlehem – As usual, there were numbers who flocked in from the surrounding country. There is a very noticeable improvement from year to year in the character and respectful deportment of these crowds. Well we do remember from our childhood, how the uncultivated yeomanry and their buxom dames and lasses thronged these assemblies, disturbing the sincere worshippers by their unseemly behaviour.”* ⁱ *“It was Christmas Eve; and the Bushwackers (settlers) for miles around, following a time-honored custom, were flocking en masse along the roads, and over the fields, to attend the interesting and festive ceremonies of the season.”* ⁱ It is quite possible that, at some time, at least a few Dreisbachs were among the “bushwackers” who came to see the Christmas celebrations of the Moravians.

Christmas Putz The German word “Putz” means a decoration but became associated with the Moravian creche and village scene found under the Christmas tree. Originally a way of telling the Christmas story, it was also a way of decorating for the Holy Day. In the late 1700’s and throughout the 1800’s, people came from miles around to see the Moravian putzes. Backwoods settlers, in muddy boots and wet capes, sometimes marched, uninvited, into houses to view the putz! One can imagine Dreisbachs coming to see the beautiful Moravian decorations and the putzes. Hopefully they knocked before entering! If they saw the nativity scenes in Moravian homes, perhaps some Dreisbach families, made smaller versions of the nativity putz to delight, and inform, their own young children.



The miniature landscapes telling the Christmas story became more elaborate as non-Moravian Pennsylvania Dutch took on the custom of setting up a putz. By the 1930’s and 1940’s Lionel trains, cardboard houses with glitter for snow and mirrors for frozen ponds were standard while the nativity scene was often moved elsewhere. Today the Moravian putz, which became the traditional Pennsylvania Dutch putz, has become very elaborate with moving ferris wheels and elegant, Victorian homes lit from within.

The Christmas tree, gingerbread cookies and transparent hard candies, Moravian pointed stars, the Christmas putz and many other now common Christmas traditions arose in German speaking families, across the ocean in Germany and in the German speaking areas of Pennsylvania. The Christmas celebrations of the Dreisbach family in 1770 were certainly different, and simpler, but they would be recognizable to us today.

Merry Christmas

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ⁱ *Christmas in Pennsylvania* by Alfred L Shoemaker, foreword and afterword by Don Yoder, pub. 2009 by Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, PA, originally pub. 1959 by Pennsylvania Folklife Society. Pp 149-162.