

Historical Highlights

Sand Lake Historical Society

Volume 22, No. 2

Winter 1996

Who is Santa Claus?

[In 1989, dressed as the Victorian version of Santa Claus, the late Paul Phillipson presented a Christmas program — an autobiography of old St. Nicholas. The following is excerpted from his lively talk, a first-person narrative recalling the fact, legend and mythology of the Santa Claus spirit.]

...My long red coat was inspired by the robes of the ancient Bishop of Myra, known as St. Nicholas. Born in the country of Turkey on December 6, late in the 3rd century, he was crowned Bishop when he was only 12 or 13 years of age. Nicholas died 70 years later on the same date of his birth, December 6. His kindly spirit was so strong that for generations he continued to appear and perform miracles for his followers and those who venerated him.

That spirit — the spirit of goodness, of peace, of love, mercy and forgiveness — is the spirit of Christmas, and it is the spirit of Sinterklaas as the people of the Netherlands call him. In fact, when delivering gifts in some European countries such as Holland, some parts of Germany and Eastern Europe, I still wear my Bishop's robes. I visit these countries not on Christmas, but upon the eve of St. Nicholas' birth, December 5, and I ride upon a magical white horse.

...Historians and authors have disagreed about my exact origins. Some say I am the descendant of pagan gods such as Bacchus, who rode a goat, or Odin, who flew the mid-winter sky on a white horse. Other origin stories come from Mr. L. Frank Baum (*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*), who says I was born of human parents, orphaned, and lost in the woods as a wee babe. Found and raised by a mountain lion and a band of elves and fairies, I was enchanted by a great wizard to live forever, to carry out my mission of delivering toys to children all over the world.

The decorations on my great-coat are symbolic of my international background. The fur trim and silvery Alpine buttons are symbolic of Germany and Austria, where in some parts I am known as "Pelze Nichol" (St. Nicholas in furs); in other areas as "Bells-nikel," "Weihnachtsman" and "Schimmelreiter."

German-Americans in Pennsylvania named me "Kris Kringle" (friend of the Christ child).

A pattern of ivy leaves is on my armband, and there is holly everywhere — symbolic of my British persona as "Father Christmas." Known also as "Olde Christmas" and "Captain Christmas," I would arrive in Merry Olde England on a goat accompanied by a jolly band of mummers — actors dressed as knights, Moors, angels, devils and such other comical characters as John Bull, the Lord of Misrule, Mr. Punch and Sir Loin of Beef. My visits would continue through the 12 days of Christmas, making my last visit on Twelfth Night and greeting the Three Kings on their way to Bethlehem.

In [the United States], my helpers are elves who live with me at the North Pole; in England I have my mummers; in Holland, a young Moorish child whom I freed from slavery in the 16th century, "Black Peter." Some say we live in Spain and others say I live in Heaven. In Germany, my helper is a demon "Krum-pus" who punishes bad boys and girls. In some parts of Germany, it is I who is the helper to a young girl in a white gown and wearing a crown of holly and candles, sometimes called "Saint Lucy" or "Santa Luchia" or "Krist Kindle." In Scandinavia, it is the elves, the "Tem-ten" or "Yule Nissen" who deliver the gifts; in Italy, a little old lady, "LaBufana," brings gifts to children on Twelfth Night.

Washington Irving said I emigrated from Holland in a horse-drawn flying wagon, dressed as a 17-century Dutch Berger. Today in fact, I wear the baggy pantaloons, hose and shoes of that earlier period.

In the 1822 poem *A Visit from St. Nicholas* [first published anonymously in the *Troy Sentinel* — Ed.] Dr. Clement Clark Moore's description of me as St. Nick was actually that of an elderly Dutchman, Jan,

who drove the Moore family sleigh. Jan was jolly and bewhiskered "with a broad face and a little round belly...."Dr. Moore used as well an idea he borrowed from some northern European countries where I rode on the back of a reindeer or in a reindeer-drawn sleigh.

Over the years I have been depicted as short, tall, fat, thin, somber or jolly. It does not matter how you see me with your eyes, but how you see me in your mind and heart; nor whether I'm dressed [as a Victorian Santa] or wearing the familiar "Santa" suit with snowy white fur and beard. What matters is the spirit that is Santaklaus, that it is the holiday spirit, that it is the spirit of love — bringing Jewish families together for the Feast of Lights or uniting Christians in their celebration of Christ's birth. As long as men, women and children strive for the true peace on earth, as long as humanity truly wants to do good will toward their fellow human beings, my spirit will continue to live.

May the spirit of the Holiday Season be with you and may it bring you joy.

(Paul Phillipsen died May 10, 1995.)

A copy of the complete address by Paul Phillipsen is available in the Sand Lake Historical Society book collection at the Sand Lake Town Library. The book *Who is Santa Claus? The true story behind a living legend* [by Robin Crichton and illustrated by Margaret Nisbet, 1987] is available at the Town Library. The book is suitable for both children and adults.

From the President

Dear Friends,

In the spirit of Thanksgiving and the holidays to follow, I want to acknowledge those all-important volunteer efforts in 1995.

First of all, it gives special pride and comfort to have a dedicated and capable team working on our newsletter. Support them with your reactions and responses, ideas for and contributions to *Historical Highlights*. Share your copies with others and encourage their membership in SLHS.

Our other most important outreach to you and the public is our monthly program at Town Hall. Thank you to those who make these monthly get-togethers informative and enjoyable — the planning, the publicity, the excellent presentations, the enticing table and refreshments.

We owe a special vote of appreciation to our Collections and Supervisors Study committees. They have collected, researched and documented, sorted and organized. The Collections Committee is now cataloging all items and is ready to accept further

donations and provide proper storage for them. They will welcome the ideas and talents of persons interested in displays.

Thank you to our volunteers who represented us at the Schaghticoke Fair and at meetings of historical societies and historians at RCHS, and to those who provided and manned our sales tent at *Summerfest*.

Thank you to all who have already accepted our appeal to sell or buy raffle tickets — more than half of you. We are well on our way to meeting the \$700 goal! We applaud our prize donors and raffle chairpersons.

Our Board of Trustees is called upon repeatedly to take up the slack in the absence of volunteers, and to them a special vote of thanks. Let them know that you appreciate their efforts to maintain the Historical Society by *volunteering* you help during the coming year. I'm asking Santa to leave some of the right spirit under everybody's tree. It will make you and your Board *feel great!*

Wishing you peace, good health and a joyful holiday! Dianne Freeman, President



Odds 'n' Ends

- We do not have enough persons on our list to place a group order for Shirley Dunn's book *The Mohicans and Their Land* at the special SLHS price of \$20. If interested, please call Dianne Freeman at 674-3666.
- We could make frequent use of a folding aluminum table. If you have one you no longer use, please call Rosemary Supkis at 674-5172.

Calendar Items

- Shaker Heritage Society: Christmas Shop, through December 21. 456-7840
- Rensselaer County Historical Society Christmas Shop, open Tuesday-Saturday 10:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m. through the month of December.
- Schuyler Mansion Open House, Sunday, December 10, 1:00-5:00 p.m.
- Pruyn House: holiday decorations on display Tuesday-Friday through December. 783-1435.



Help Wanted!

From *The Advertiser*, November 6, 1995: "Town Historian, Attributes: historic preservation, research, writing, public presentation, organization, advocacy. Send resume to Fred Wurtemberger, Sand Lake Town Supervisor, Box 273, Sand Lake, NY 12153."



Sand Lake Historical Society Board of Trustees 1995-96

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Suggestions for Participation

I have items that may be suitable for display

I would be able to serve as photographer videographer audio recorder at SLHS activities and meetings.

I would be willing to explore a partnership with the Averill Park High School History Club.

I would assist with field trip plans.

I will help explore available equipment to assist the hearing-impaired at our meetings.

I would be able to tape an oral interview with _____ as my subject and would like to have a workshop to learn interview skills and techniques.

I have pictures / documents / oral history to share with the School History Study Group (other project)

The following is a list of our standing committees and chairs. Would you be willing to participate on one of them?

Finance (Stan Supkis)

Acquisitions

Publications (Bob Lilly)

Membership (Barbara Mohan)

Collections Management (Ada Miller)

Publicity (Arthea Gibbs)

Ways and Means

Library (Rosemary Supkis)

Program (John Allendorph)

Name _____ Phone _____

Address _____

Bring to the December meeting or mail to SLHS, PO Box 492, West Sand Lake, NY 12196.

The fiscal year of the Society runs from June 1 to May 31. Check your mailing label; have you paid your dues for this year? If not, please check the appropriate box below and include a check payable to *Sand Lake Historical Society*.

renewal

new member!

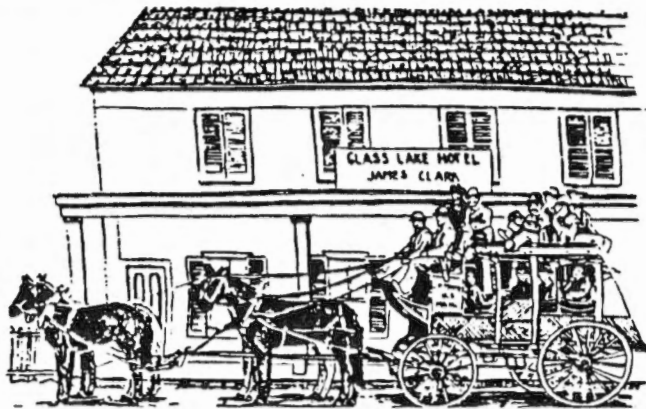


The Glass Lake House

Clayton A. Teal, the proprietor of the Glass Lake Inn, died on September 22, 1995. With his passing, memories of the Glass Lake area come to mind.

Clayton was the owner of the Glass Lake Inn since 1977, but the history of the Inn goes back to the early days of settlement. Judy Rowe tells us that the building was erected about 1848 as Mechanics Hall, a boarding house for workers at the Glass Factory. It was located in the area that is now Ackner Fuels. After the Glass Factory was destroyed by fire in 1853 and the Glass Works closed, ending an era of glassmaking, there was no need of Mechanics Hall.

Shortly after the fire, the building was cut into two sections. The larger section was rolled across the road to its present location and opened as an inn.



drawing by Muriel Danahy

William Gabler was the first proprietor, followed by a succession of owners who operated the hotel down

through the years. William Haynor and James Clark were proprietors in the 1880s.

J.W. McChesney was the owner in 1891 when a cloudburst and the resultant flooding of Teal Creek (which runs alongside the Inn) almost swept the hotel away.



drawing by Tim Flanagan

H.E. Martin later advertised *The Glass Lake House, Sunday Dinners a Specialty*. In 1933, Joseph Niebuhr rebuilt the inn and operated it until 1944.

In more recent times the building was operated by Jack Casey and later as the Stage Coach Inn by John Donohue.

The historic hotel, inn or tavern must contain many stories! Do you remember some incidents that would add to our story? Perhaps you could donate some pictures, information or items to the Historical Society's collection. 1

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Upcoming Meeting Programs

Meetings are at 8:00 p.m. at the Sand Lake Town Hall, unless otherwise noted.

DECEMBER 12 (rescheduled from November: Kenneth Staley will speak on "Okinawa: Then and Now." He will show slides and exhibit his book of drawings of the island. The book is from World War II; the slides are from a recent visit.

JANUARY 9, 1995: Philip Lord, author of a new book on a relatively little-known battle of the American Revolution, will speak on the "Battle of Bennington." The result of this engagement affected the course of the war and contributed to the defeat of Burgoyne at Saratoga. It is considered by some important enough to be called the "turning point of the Revolution."

FEBRUARY 13: Truly an American craft, cornhusk dolls were first made by Indians. Now our Society has the opportunity to present one of the country's best-known cornhusk doll artisans, Dee Kronau. We'll learn how Dee got started and hear the history of her dolls. Come experience first-hand a Native American art form.



The Lord House

A most interesting story on the restoration of an 1800 house appeared in the September 1995 issue of *The Poest Script*, newsletter of the Poestenkill Historical Society.

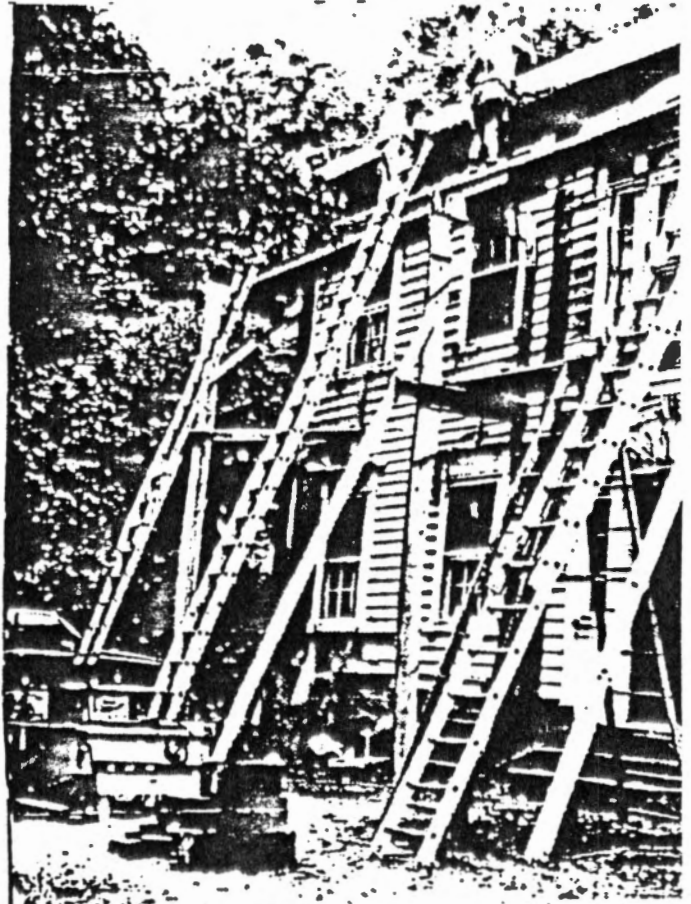
The home of Nancy and Stanley Lord was built in the late 1700s or early 1800s by Peter Link, on a farm leased from Stephen Van Rensselaer in 1787. The Lords purchased the home in 1981. At first they commuted on weekends from their home in Brooklyn, and later moved permanently to their new home. Stanley Lord gave up his teaching position at Erasmus Hall High School to move to this area and become a farmer.

The old house was in poor repair. Water leakage had caused considerable damage, rotting a substantial portion of the trim. Instead of doing yet another patch job, the Lords decided to bring the home back to its original grandeur.

Donald Carpentier, known far and wide for his knowledge of restorations, was called in as a consultant. Anderson and Young Restorations of South Bethlehem were called in to do the work. Not only are the details of the trim being reproduced to match the original, but the methods of a master craftsman of the time are being used. In place of the modern power router, hand-planing is used to duplicate the variously shaped original moldings and cornices.

The work now in progress is scheduled for completion in June 1996. The next time you drive Route 66, slow down and admire the work-in-progress; it's on the east side of the road, across from a small vegetable stand.

Also remember that, although this home is now in Poestenkill, between 1812 and 1848 the house would have been within the boundaries of the Town of Sand Lake.



From *The Poest Script*, newsletter of the Poestenkill Historical Society.



• aGatherin'

This past summer, the Sand Lake Historical Society distributed a membership flyer featuring a 1799 woodcut of Aaron Oliver, the "Post Rider." We have since received a letter from Diane DeBlois and Robert Harris asking us to point out that the woodcut has been used as the logo of their postal history business, *aGatherin'*, since 1973. It was registered as their trademark (#1,248,731) in 1983.

Many members of the Society will remember Bob Harris as one of the first presidents of the Society, and he was active in its early development.

In her letter, Diane notes that "...our goals remain similar — to promote the understanding and appreciation for history (local or otherwise). So, we don't view this use of our logo as a serious conflict of interest." We appreciate *their* understanding. — *the Editors*



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