

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"Christmas Eve 1886"

Carroll County Times article for 24 December 1995

by Jay A. Graybeal

Throughout the nineteenth century, writing, reading and reciting poetry were popular pastimes. As an indication of how popular poetry was, our local newspaper editors included a poetry column in each weekly edition of their papers. Each holiday season saw the publication of poems that reflected the unique character of the particular holiday.

Original poetry also made a popular gift. One such example was written more than a century ago by Louis Edwin Shriver of Union Mills. "Christmas Eve 1886" was a gift to his nieces, Winnie and Catharine Shriver. Louis Shriver lived in the Shriver House, now today as the Union Mills Homestead and his nieces lived in another part of the house. The poem was found by the little girls Christmas morning and cherished as a special gift from Santa Claus:

Christmas Eve 1886

To Winnie and Catharine:

My dear little girls, in the middle of last night
While both of you were sleeping tight,
As I have always done in years gone by
I harnessed up my reindeer brisk and spry
To make my journey throughout all the land
And bless the children on every hand.
I called Mrs. Santa Claus up out of bed
And told her to help me to load up the sled
Which we soon had filled with candies and toys
And other good things for girls and boys.
When everything was ready I made a big jump
And landed in the sleigh with a very heavy thump;
Then bidding Mrs. Santa a jolly good night
Away I flew and was soon out of sight.
We made such a noise when we passed the North Pole
That a big grizzly bear bounced out of his hole.
Without stopping I threw him a big slice of meat
And said, "Give your cubs a good Christmas treat";
It pleased him so that he laughed out loud,
He danced a jig and even bowed.
My reindeer team with its many nimble feet
Was the best in the country and couldn't be beat,
And who couldn't be proud with such a tally-ho
As they galloped and danced o'er the bright sparkling snow.
The man in the moon looked down with a smile
When he saw how quickly we skipped o'er a mile.
I smoked my pipe as I rode along
And sang with the bells a good Christmas song.
And so we went on crossing big hills
Till at last we came to good ole' Union Mills.

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The children there I am always glad to see
Because I love them and they love me.
The first place I stopped was up on the hill,
For there I had three little stockings to fill.
When the stockings were filled, I took a sly peep
At the three little ones tucked in their beds fast asleep,
And brushing the frost from my old white beard
I gave each one a kiss that you might have heard.
By this time the reindeer made such a prattle
That I said to my self it's time to skedattle;
So pulling the fire-board out on the floor
I popped up the chimney and was off once more.
The slate roof you know is very smooth and steep
And we all tumbled down in a great big heap;
And wasn't that indeed a very sorry plight
For poor old Santa on a bright Christmas night;
But the children one and all must have their gifts
In spite of upsets of big snow drifts,
And as I slowly crawled out from under the sleigh,
I remembered that where'er there's a will there's a way;
I thru off my overcoat which was heavy and thick
And had the sleigh set up again double-quick;
I then went to each reindeer and patted his head
And said "My good fellows I am glad you're not dead".
The candies and toys were pretty well mixed,
But by working very hard I got everything fixed.
We hurried down the hill and out thru the gate
For the upset had made us about one hour late.
Those reindeer ran, yeah, I might say flew
And I was soon in the room of your good Uncle Lou.
In coming down the chimney which looked pretty black
I had a tight squeeze with my big, heavy pack,
But I pushed and I pulled till at last I got down
And the first thing I did was to take a look 'round.
Harry and your uncle slept soundly without fear
And little did they dream that old Santa was so near;
The stove made the room so warm and so bright
That to stay a little while I thought would be right.
I took off my great coat and laid it on the chair
And moved about the room with the greatest of care;
I sat by the stove and there began to think
And I wondered if I couldn't find something good to drink;
I hunted all around and I hunted very sly
For I tell you what it is I was getting pretty dry;
I opened very slowly the old kitchen door
And I saw three cider barrels placed on the floor,
Very handy, indeed, was a glass tumbler, too

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Which told a bad tale on your old Uncle Lou.
I drank a glass empty some three times or more,
which I thought was enough or I might get tore;
I came back again feeling boozy you may bet,
But to fill up your stockings I did not forget.
As I filled them I thought what could please the girls better
Than to receive from Santa Claus a good long letter,
So I went to the chimney and unstrapped my pack
And took out a nice sheet of large fools-cap,
I sat by the table where pen and ink were handy
And was soon writing away like a regular jim-dandy.
As I wrote, one of the chaps in the bed gave a snore
That the people might have heard way down in Baltimore;
But I didn't care, I went right ahead
And was bothered very little by the snores from the bed.
Hark/listen, what is that/Carumba/can it be?
Why as sure as I live 'tis the clock striking three
So no time could be lost, my leave I must take
Or I will not get home till way after daybreak.
Then bless you my dear children - be good all the year,
And when Christmas comes again Santa Claus will be here.

Affectionately,
S. Claus

Louis Shriver referred to several family members and homes in his poem. Santa's first stop, "the home on the hill," was the B.F. Shriver residence, known as Avalon. The home had recently been completed and was distinguished by the steep slate roof which led Louis Shriver to write that Santa took a tumble. The three little girls mentioned were sisters Mary Madeline, Helen and Jennette Shriver. The home where Santa paused to write the poem for Winnie and Catherine was the Union Mills Homestead. Reading Mr. Shriver's poem became a family tradition well into this century. The Historical Society would like to thank Mrs. James M. Shriver, Sr. for sharing this poem and Mrs. Helen Riley for providing the family history.

The Board and staff of the Historical Society wish you a happy holiday season.

Photo Caption: Union Mills, circa 1906, as it might have appeared when Santa Claus visited the Shriver Homestead in 1886 and left a special poem for two little girls. Historical Society of Carroll County collection, gift of Mrs. Oden Bowersox.