

"Reverend Miles Reifsnyder's Plays"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Frequent readers of this column may recall that Pennsylvania German culture had a strong influence on early county history. Our Pennsylvania German heritage is especially rich in the northern half of the county and can be seen in architecture, town plans and the customs of descendants.

A local minister, Rev. Miles S. Reifsnyder of Baust Church, became interested in this culture and used the medium of community theater in the mid-1930s to entertain local residents. He wrote "The Up Sign" in 1935 performed by the newly formed Westminster Players at the Taneytown Fair. A second play, "Three and Thirty Angels" was performed by the same group in April 1936 at the Warehouse Theater on John St., in Westminster. A contemporary newspaper article described the three-act comedy which was directed by Miss Dorothy Elderdice:

THE LIGHTER side of witchcraft, as practiced in the vicinity of Lebanon, Pa., was dealt with in an original comedy by the Rev. M. S. Reifsnyder, rector of Baust Reformed Church, near here, presented tonight at the picturesque Warehouse Theater by the Westminster Players.

The production came as a climax to the fourth annual meeting of the Maryland Conference of Dramatic Organizations held here today. Fourteen dramatic groups represented by forty-five delegates participated in the program.

Dr. Reifsnyder's play, called 'Three and Thirty Angels,' was written as a result of his own experiences and contacts with believers in witchcraft. He spent his boyhood on just such a farm as that in the play's second act, and he himself spoke only Pennsylvania Dutch dialect until he was 11 years old.

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Bringing to bear on his past life a flare for dramatic writing, Dr. Reifsnyder has produced a convincingly natural contribution to contemporary folk lore. His characters as well as his story have a ring of sincerity, and he has handled the local dialect in a way that brings out its quaintness without the sacrifice of clearness.

The play is rich in comedy, but underlying it is a serious criticism of the witch doctors' quackery. The plot deals with two neighbors who are engaged in a bitter dispute over a boundary line. Believing that his neighbor has stolen limestone, Farmer Gicker hires a witch doctor to put the 'curse of the weight' and the 'curse of the stars' on Farmer Moyer.

According to the lexicon of witchcraft, Farmer Moyer must carry the limestone on his shoulders forever and sit motionless until he has counted all the stars in the sky.

BECAUSE the victim believes in hexerel, the curse takes effect with results as painful to him as they are droll to the audience. the hex doctor there upon tries to collect a second fee by removing the curse, but is foiled by representatives of the younger generation, who do not believe in witches.

The play was staged according to the best little theater traditions and acted realistically by a cast which included Leroy Eckert, Joe Leahy, William Kesmodel, Elizabeth Bemiller, Evelyn Maus, Vernon Martin, Norman Graham and Roland Stonesifer."

Rev. Reifsnyder's plays exposed local residents to Pennsylvania German culture, however, many in the audience were likely familiar with some customs, they being descendants of early German settlers. Others, no doubt, gained some understanding of this cultural group that had such an important role in the early settlement of what would become Carroll County. The Westminster Players continued to produce quality local theater, including a number of plays written by local residents.

Photo caption: A scene from "The Up Sign" by Rev. Miles S. Reifsnyder was performed by the Westminster Players in 1935. The cast included Evelyn Maus, Elizabeth Bemiller, Joe Leahy, Bill Kesmodel, Bill Ackley (with beard) and Woodrow Taylor. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.