

## That scary Christmas Eve character? It's a belsnickel – December 31, 2023

During this Christmas season, you may have seen someone dressed in animal skins with a canvas bag over his shoulder and switches in his hand at one of Carroll County's history-related events. It was our own Rick Barrick dressed as a belsnickel.

One dictionary describes a belsnickel (many different spellings) as a "fur-clad Christmas gift-bringer figure in the folklore of the Palatinate region of southwestern Germany along the Rhine. The figure is also preserved in Pennsylvania Dutch communities." Many of Carroll's early settlers came from the Palatinate, so it is not surprising to see the belsnickel tradition alive today.

As originally practiced in our area, this Christmas Eve custom involved the visit of a single individual, male or female, dressed in rather bizarre, unkempt, often frightening attire — thoroughly disguised, perhaps with a soot-blackened face, and carrying a sack with treats, but also with a switch or whip, bells and/or chains. Often the belsnickel was a relative or friend of the families being visited who was acquainted with the behavior of the children. A rap on the window with the switch or a rattle of the bells or chains signaled the belsnickel's arrival after dark. The children were questioned about their behavior and treats or small punishments doled out by the very scary figure.

In 1930, Louis E. Shriver, a life-long resident of Union Mills, described a belsnickel in his book, "Random Shots at Old Times." "Kriss Kringles (or Bellsnickles as we sometimes called them) wore real horns, cut from the hides that were brought to the [Shriver] tannery, and were a terror of the worst kind to us children. When the switches commenced rattling against the windows on Christmas Eve, we ran to cover in the arms of our parents and generally remained there until the danger was over, unless, perchance, we could muster up enough courage to grab some of the cheap candy nearby." Louis was born in 1851, so the tradition of a belsnickel visit on Christmas Eve was alive and well at that point among families in Carroll County with Pennsylvania German heritage.

The origins of the belsnickel figure go back many centuries in Europe to celebrations surrounding the Feast of St. Nicholas on December 6<sup>th</sup>. St. Nicholas was a gift-giver who was accompanied by a helper known as a "belsnickel" or "pelznickel" who dressed in furs. It seems there have always been two sides to the St. Nicholas/Santa Claus tradition — a jolly, kind-hearted figure and a scary one.

"Belsnickling" was also practiced in this area on Christmas Eve by groups of people, frequently boys or young men, who dressed in grotesque disguises and went from house to house entertaining in hopes of receiving sweets and drinks — not dissimilar to the trick or treating associated with Halloween. While belsnickling seems to have occurred more often in urban areas, it was also practiced in rural ones. The evening might end at someone's home where disguises were thrown off and everyone enjoyed a party. Because those parties sometimes became very rowdy, the custom was banned in some communities.

While Carroll County must have seen its share of belsnickels and belsnickling in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the custom was also firmly established in York and Lancaster counties in Pennsylvania and down the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia where Pennsylvania Germans migrated. Variations of it also appeared in parts of Canada, North Carolina, and even in a small area of Louisiana where Germans settled.

Recently, some Pennsylvania microbreweries have claimed the name “Belsnickel” for their Christmas beer. Meanwhile, here in Carroll County, we are grateful to local belsnickel Rick Barrick for appearing during the holiday season at the Union Mills Homestead’s Christkindlmarkt and the Historical Society of Carroll County’s holiday open house where old traditions are being kept alive.

*Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.*

*Image 1 – Credit: Union Mills Homestead      Caption: Rick Barrick, dressed as a belsnickel, rests in the Shriver Homestead at Union Mills during its 2023 Christkindlmarkt.*

*Image 2 – Credit: Debbie Barrick      Caption: A collection of antique German belsnickels made of papier mache. They were originally filled with sweets – a less scary presentation of the belsnickel tradition.*