

Who's that wild man with Santa?

by Sabine Eiche

Richmond News, December 19, 2013, p. 19

Good storytelling depends on tension to captivate the audience. This was as true at the beginning of time as it is today. Ancient legends, like modern tales, rely on the play of conflicting elements to keep the storyline taut.

Viewed in this light, our present-day Santa Claus is a bit of a dull fellow. Conflict and tension are the last things we associate with him. He ho-ho-ho's and jingles his bells with irrepressible jollity, intent primarily on making us loosen our purse strings (in other words, spend money). Sometimes I wish I'd come across a grumpy Santa – the anti-Santa – just to liven things up.

Originally Santa's storyline wasn't as slack as it is today. Before the Americans transformed him into the plump and merry dispenser of gifts and good cheer, he was slim and stern Saint Nicholas, who vetted children to separate the naughty from the well-behaved. In numerous European countries, a sinister-looking attendant (a survivor from pagan times) assisted Saint Nicholas in this alarming ritual. Sometimes he even replaced him.

Saint Nicholas' Christmas helper (or stand-in) came in different guises and had different names, depending on the place and period. European immigrants brought these characters to North America with the rest of their Christmas customs, and while they haven't disappeared completely from our present-day celebrations, they have been sidelined by the boisterous Santa.

The Dutch had Zwarte Piet (Black Peter), a black and devilish wild man, who threatened to stuff unruly children into his sack and not release them until the following Christmas. His counterpart in Germany was Knecht Ruprecht

(Ruprecht was also a name for the devil), a terrifying, hairy figure, with horns and a long red tongue.

Knecht Ruprecht is sometimes identified with Pelznichol (Nicholas in Furs), who became Belsnickel in North America. In Austria the Christmas wild man was called Krampus. He was Hanstrap in Alsace, and wore bearskins, a long beard and blackened his face. Switzerland's wild man was Schmutzli; Sweden had Julbok (Yule Goat), a wild man dressed in goatskins.

Not all of Saint Nicholas' helpers or stand-ins were male. Around the 16th century, the bearer of gifts in German-speaking countries was the Christkindl, usually portrayed by a young girl in white robes, who was often accompanied by one of the wild men to frighten the bad children. When the Europeans brought the Christkindl to North America, the name was turned into Kris Kringle.

Italy's gift-giver at Christmas time is a broom-riding witch called La Befana, whose official home is in the small town of Urbania, in the Marches. Her name derives from "epifania," Feast of the Epiphany (January 6, the twelfth day of Christmas), when she delivers her presents – sweet treats and toys for the good, onions, garlic or coal for the bad.

Once upon a time, the belief that badness is punished and goodness rewarded had the power to move mountains. In Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, a hearty dose of fear transforms Ebenezer Scrooge from a despicable miser into a compassionate man. What is it about that tale that still grips us, 169 Christmases later? Is it just good storytelling – or is it something more?