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Grumpy Santa holds court at Old Economy Village

By Kyle Lawson klawson@timesonline.com Dec 11, 2015



Sally Maxson/The Times

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Belsnickle, a figure of German Christmas folklore, checks his list to see if the kindergartners from St. Alexis Catholic School in McCandless Township have been naughty or nice during a field trip Thursday to Old Economy Village in Ambridge. His cat, at right, lends a hand.

AMBRIDGE -- Santa's grumpy, fur-clad assistant will begrudgingly accept visitors this weekend at his seasonal abode in Old Economy Village.

Belsnickle, a figure of 19th-century German folklore, doesn't typically keep daylight hours but has agreed to make an exception for the museum's annual Christmas celebration.

"He's the keeper of the naughty and the nice books, so he's spying on kids in the evening and gets to bed really late," museum educator Dave Miller said.

As legend has it, Belsnickle visits children in the weeks leading up to Christmas and raps on their windows with a stick. He leaves a piece of coal for those who have misbehaved, or sometimes a treat if they sing to him.

Children on field trips who visit him at Old Economy Village bring ornaments to decorate his tree, shout questions at him and, if they're lucky, get a peek at his naughty list.

"I tell the kids, 'You've got two weeks to get your act together,'" said Rudy Rudowski, one of the volunteers who play Belsnickle. "All of a sudden, the kids are looking at each other going, 'uh-oh.'"

The story would have been passed down in Old Economy by German Harmonists, who separated from the Lutheran Church in the early 19th century and eventually settled in the area. While there aren't references of Belsnickle in the archives at Old Economy Village, it's likely the townspeople practiced the tradition as was the case with most German immigrants, Miller said.

A version of the story in an 1827 Philadelphia newspaper article reads, "The grimy Belsnickle traveled down chimneys in the night carrying a bell, a whip and goodies for the stockings prepared below."

By the 20th century, the story had faded as "The Night Before Christmas" introduced what has become the Americanized Santa Claus. And if not for local historians, the story may have been lost forever.

"Some people know who Belsnickle is, and some people don't," Miller said. "It's a fun thing for the museum that's a little bit different."

Christmas at the Village

Christmas at the Village will be held Saturday and Sunday at Old Economy Village in Ambridge. Guests are invited to tour the candlelit village, watch musical performances and purchase handcrafted gift items.

For details, see www.oldeconomyvillage.org or call 724-266-4500.



