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Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission
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“BELSNICKEL” VISITS OLD ECONOMY VILLAGE

(Ambridge) - Old Economy Village received word that Belsnickel, Santa Claus' German helper, will arrive at Old Economy Village on Saturday, November 29th at 10 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. Belsnickel will be checking his book to see who was naughty and who was nice this past year; giving a special treat to those children who have been especially good. After a visit with Belsnickel, the children will make a tree top “Belsnickel” out of felt, fur, and bells to take home. After learning about Christmas preparations made by children in the 1800s at school and at home, all will help decorate a BIG gingerbread man. A festive children's tour of the decorated Baker House will follow, with a stop in to see the spider web-draped Christmas tree, where they may hear the legend of how tinsel came to be. Each child will hang a golden star wish they have written for Belsnickel and receive a candy, or perhaps a stick from the grumpy helper himself. A mid-morning snack will be provided. This special holiday program, which is open to children 6-12 years of age, affords parents a chance to do some holiday shopping while their child is enjoying an old fashioned Christmas. Registration is \$20.00. Registration and prepayment is due by Tuesday, November 25th. Space is limited. Call (724) 266-4500, x101 for more information.

According to German folklore, Belsnickel works very hard during this time of the year traveling every night to check on the children. He has a book in which he writes the names of each child to remind himself whether they were naughty or nice. If they were naughty, he leaves them a bundle of sticks or a lump of coal. Good children receive special treats such as oranges or walnuts. Belsnickel gets very tired and often grumpy by the time morning arrives. Children should not be surprised if he is a little grouchy when they arrive to visit him. German children are eager yet apprehensive about waiting for a visit from Belsnickel; just like American children today awaiting a visit from Santa Claus.

To German children of the 19th century, the giver of Christmas gifts was not a benevolent old gentleman who dropped down a chimney to fill waiting stockings. He was instead a grumpy creature called Belsnickel. Holiday customs and lore varied from community to community and changed as people emigrated from one country to another. Belsnickel's name appeared in many variations such as Peltz Nickel, Bells Nickel, Belschnickle and Belsh Nickle.

Known to 19th century children as a servant of Saint Nicholas, "der Belsnickel" would carry a bunch of switches which were a threat to those who had been bad. He also carried goodies like nuts, cookies or candy in a burlap bag or ample pockets, as he made his rounds to check on the behavior of boys and girls. He would have a large book in which the names of the children and their good or bad deeds were kept. Only good children were to receive treats. If a child had been naughty he or she could also receive a lump of coal or a stick as a reminder to behave in future.

(more)

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Belsnickel often wore a long, black or brown coat or robe held together at the waist with a rope. On his head he might have appeared wearing a fur cap or bear skin hat decorated with bells. He may have had a band of rough characters with him dressed in fantastic costumes, some trimmed with fur. As they moved through the streets and from house to house chains and bells would rattle. The bells would announce Belsnickel's approach and that of his retinue before they had even come into view. If the children were good, they received some fruit or sweets, but if they were bad--or doubted the "reality" of Belsnickel--they got a switch! Another version depicted Belsnickel rattling his sticks over the window panes before bursting through the door.

Belsnickel appeared in one form or another over much of Europe and Asia Minor. His ancestry can possibly be traced back to the stories of Saint Nicholas. *Pelznickel* began visiting on the first Sunday in December and, at times, continued intermittently until Christmas Eve when Saint Nicholas arrived with the real Christmas gifts. The most widely accepted translation of *Pelznickel* is "furry Nicholas," referring to St. Nicholas. St. Nicholas was also referred to as Sinter Klaus who rewarded all good children. Christkindlein, or the little Christ child, eventually evolved into *Kris Kringle*. In parts of Europe such as Germany, Nicholas the gift-giver had been superseded by a representation of "Christkindlein". The Christkindlein accompanied Nicholas-like figures or he traveled with a dwarf-like helper (*Pelznickel*). The major difference between Belsnickel (as *Pelznickel* was known in the German-American dialect of Pennsylvania) and Santa Claus was that Santa was a jolly, bewhiskered adult-sized elf. Belsnickel was a friend or relative dressed in furry disguises who visited while the children were still awake. Gifts found by children the next morning were credited to Christkindlein, who had come while everyone was asleep. Over time, the non-visible Christkindlein (*Kriss Kringle*) was overshadowed by the visible Belsnickel, and both of them became confused with St. Nicholas and the emerging figure of Santa Claus. The modern Santa Claus derived from these two images: St. Nicholas the elf-like gift bringer described by Clement Moore, and a friendlier "Kriss Kringle" amalgam of the Christkindlein and *Pelznickel* figures.

For those unable to attend this program, this National Historic Landmark site is open through December 31st, 2008. Regular hours of operation are Tuesday – Saturday, 9:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.; Sunday, Noon-5:00 p.m. The museum site is closed Mondays and holidays including November 27th and 28th and December 25th, 2008. Please allow 2 hours for a visit. Call for tour times. Admission is charged: Adults (18 years and older), \$7.00; Youth (6 years - 17 years), \$5.00; Senior Citizens (60 years and older), \$6.00; Under 6, No Charge. Persons with disabilities who need special assistance or accommodation should call (724) 266-4500 in advance to discuss their needs. Pennsylvania TDD relay service is available at (800) 654-5984

Old Economy Village is one of 25 historic sites and museums on the Pennsylvania Trail of History®, administered by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. For more information or to request a free 24-page visitor guide, visit www.phmc.state.pa.us or phone toll free 1-866-PA TRAIL. For more information on Old Economy Village visit www.oldeconomyvillage.org.

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