

The Night Santa Came to Town

Memories of Christmases past come flooding back as we prepare for the upcoming holiday season

By Deborah Steele Hazen

The excitement had been building for days, ever since the news trickled down to the kids of the Clatskanie community. Santa Claus was coming to town! Not one of those "helper" Santas with the fake beards that we often saw in stores, and not the usual surreptitious visit by the real St. Nick, who slipped down the chimney while we were sleeping on Christmas Eve or in the wee hours of Christmas morning.

No! This time the real Santa was taking an evening off from preparations for his annual trans-global sleigh ride and gift-giving marathon to come to Clatskanie - WITH HIS REINDEER - six days before Christmas. Every kid in town and in the surrounding area was invited to come and meet the jolly old gent, tell him our wishes, receive a bag of treats, and pet the reindeer - including Rudolph!

Early in December, the business community and representatives of various organizations received word from the North Pole that Santa and his reindeer were taking an evening off from their hectic pre-Christmas schedule to make a special stop in Clatskanie. Community leaders made ready for the momentous occasion by building a covered wooden platform, strung with Christmas lights, in the middle of downtown Nehalem Street. There was a ramp to help the reindeer pull the sleigh up into the covered area.

It rained most of the day on December 19, 1956, but - as if even the Northwest Oregon climate wanted to be on the "nice" rather than "naughty" list - the rain stopped shortly before 6 p.m. and held off until after 9 - coincidentally, the hours of Santa's visit.

Bundled up in our warm winter jackets, our breath - when we weren't holding it - creating little puffs in the cold winter air, we hardly dared blink as we squinted through the darkness towards the north end of Nehalem where the sleigh was expected to appear.

They say there are no atheists in foxholes. This night, there were no Santa-skeptics below the age of 10 in the village of Clatskanie.

Accompanied by a simultaneous gasp from the crowd, the team of reindeer emerged through the darkness, pulling the sleigh with Santa. The City of Clatskanie police department was escorting them. There was no snow on the ground, so the sleigh must have been equipped with wheels to allow it to travel smoothly down the street and up the ramp onto the platform. Or, perhaps it was flying very low.

I can see in my mind's eye even today - 58 years later - the reindeer, the sleigh and Santa under the lights strung inside the shelter. I can see the foggy exhalations of the reindeer mixing with that of the hundreds of children. I can picture myself standing in line for my turn, and in the vaults of my memories I can still feel the anticipation and joy.

According to the archives of *The Clatskanie Chief*, almost 850 bags of treats were handed

out to children that evening. At the time, the population within the Clatskanie city limits was slightly less than 800. The stores stayed open throughout Santa's visit, so parents could shop while the children were enthralled with the reindeer, the sleigh and its passenger. In those days, it wasn't a problem to leave a six-year-old at night with hundreds of other excited kids, and some adult organizers, in downtown Clatskanie.

The same scene was repeated the next year, when *The Chief* reported that the list of gift requests whispered in Santa's ear ranged from dolls to a live reindeer (that might have been me) to Elvis Presley. That last Christmas wish was from one of the older girls.

While those Santa visits hold a special place in my childhood Christmas memories, they were certainly not the only celebrations of the season. Christmas musical programs and re-enactments of the Christ child's birth occupied most of the month of December in schools as well as churches. Virtually every local organization held Christmas parties. The Avalon Theatre, located in the I.O.O.F. building which is now being restored, invited children to a free holiday movie and treats, again while their parents shopped locally.

In 1956 - the same year Santa came to Clatskanie - the Rainier Lions Club sold "a new type of light globe that is different from anything that has been on the market before. It is supposed to last well, and has a soft light that illuminates more than the older types and still is easier on the eyes," according to the *Rainier Review*. Proceeds from the sale went for "a large community Christmas tree in the city square, beside the city hall," as well as decorations and treats for the children.

The long tradition of the tree-lighting at the Rainier City Hall is planned again this year on Sunday, Dec. 7, with Santa in attendance, and cookies and hot cocoa for all.

In Clatskanie during the 1950s, the Kiwanis Club and the volunteer fire department led the effort to obtain holiday street lighting. Later, the Clatskanie Chamber of Commerce took over responsibility for purchasing and restoring them. The decorations hanging above the streets in both Rainier and Clatskanie are now put up each year by the PUD crews.

By popular demand in 1956, Rainier Elementary School presented "The Star Goes Before Them" for the second consecutive Christmas season. Under-studies got their chance in the limelight when some of the students cast in leading roles came down with the measles.

Two years before, in 1954, the Clatskanie and Rainier communities experienced a cold spell with the thermometer dipping down to 10 degrees on Dec. 11. Local residents woke up to a "White Christmas" that year - the first one since 1938, according to the *Review*. However, as so often happens, when the weather warmed and the snow melted, it caused minor lowland flooding.

As this issue of *The Ruralite* went to press, residents of the communities served by the Clatskanie PUD were preparing both religious and secular events to celebrate the holidays.

Best wishes to all for a season filled with love and joy that will create fond memories to last a lifetime.

Picture caption:

Making magical memories were Clatskanie PUD board member Bob Wiggins and his grandson T.... at last year's PUD Christmas party. Photo by Randy Larson