

THE MERRY SIDE OF CHRISTMAS

By Robert Williamson, December 2022, # 110

Christmas is a special time for fun and entertainment as illustrated by the 27th Burlington Festival of Lights in Spencer Smith Park, the annual Whistle Stop of the CP Holiday Train at Gage Park or the Potpourri of Culture with costumes and characters on display at the Hamilton Convention Centre. But for many of us it is the beautiful Christmas music and party festivities that provide a spirit of Peace on Earth and Good Will to Man, helping to ease the oppressive news that prevails in our media these days.

Hamilton Mountain has one of the oldest Community Choirs performing Christmas music in four part harmony. They are called the Kaleidoscope Singers indicative of the great variety of their music program and colorful sound. They have been performing for the last forty years at a wide selection of venues. Their last appearances were at the well-attended Stoney Creek Remembrance Day Service (shown here) and Dundas Dutch Mill Country Market and Gift Shop. Entertainment based on comedy has a long history on the Mountain. In 1894, Mr. Duncan, a grocer, took over the grocery store on the ground floor of the Barton Community Hall. It was located one block north of the present Mountain Fennell Plaza on the corner of Genesee and Upper James. He got the idea of forming a Barton Literary Society for the Mountain, using the community hall above the store. In those days there were no radios, no electricity, no water, no phones, no "a lot of things", and a literary society would provide entertainment for the long winter nights on the mountain. Sometimes the performances were so bad, they were funny and provoked a lot of laughter. Here are a few examples of the Mountain's talent. There were humorous skits about honeymoon situations, a modest lady trying to climb over a fence stile, and lots of funny songs. The homegrown ballad, "When You and I Were Young Maggie" was very popular and Alice Beckett of Beckett Drive nearly brought the house down with her recitation of the poem entitled, "The Bishop and the Cow".

However, until it burned down in 1914, the George Summers Theatre at the summit of the Wentworth Street Incline was considered the benchmark for live dramatic and comedic theatre in Canada. It attracted 73,000 patrons every season, a figure 20% higher than the city's actual population.



One form of Christmas entertainment that tends to get overlooked in the milieu of amusement is the amateur performances by members of social clubs or veteran halls, a source of pure delight. This favorite format evolved from a British Christmas pantomime, a mimicry or parody of recorded singing, creative presentation and dressing-up that became popular in prisoner of war camps during WW II. Over time it eventually evolved with advances in electrical technology, into something called Karaoke. Use your imagination to help make the following Pantomime performances memorable. They were enacted by a group of Mountain veterans during a Christmas folly to celebrate the 75th Anniversary of the Royal Canadian Navy 1910 - 1985.

An old colleague of mine who served as a Royal Navy corvette captain on the North Atlantic during WWII was at his best in pantomime and recitations. Strumming a banjo he often imitated George Formby, a popular entertainer of troops during the war. Coincidentally, Formby was the Queen Mother's favorite performer when he sang: "When I'm Cleaning Windows", giving the audience some insight to the Queen Mom's sense of humor. The fun begins with these lyrics; "I go cleaning windows to earn an honest bob. For a nosy parker it's an interesting job." *and so on* ... as the lyric become more colorful .

The navy captain's wife, an attractive blond lady was tough as nails. After the war she frequently sailed with him as a crew member on his Great Lakes Coast Guard Vessel. She accompanied him during a November gale searching for the S.S. Edmund Fitzgerald that sank on Lake Superior. Nevertheless, in the veteran's follies she made a perfect "Carol Channing" with her brazen version of "Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend".

Another old veteran associate courted his girl friend while dancing to the big band music at the Wondergrove dance pavilion on Queenston Road in 1943. I was probably one of the local kids peeking through the knot holes in the fence. A bearded sailor, he served on one of the armed "Prince" liners that masqueraded as cruisers in the 1943-45 North Atlantic. What a fun loving, romantic couple they were! Imagine them in retirement, like typical old sailors, performing a loving duet as bearded Willie Nelson and suave, Julio Iglesias singing: "To all the girls we've loved before, who travel in and out the door. We're glad they came along, we dedicate this song, to all the girls we've loved before".

A burly shipmate of mine who served as the Lieutenant Governor's Guard Commander at the opening of Copps Coliseum in 1985 became an instant hit at the follies. Wearing a flimsy dress, he imitated the lathesome Audrey Hepburn performing a memorable song from "My Fair Lady". Imagine if you can, this stout officer, pretending to sing and demonstrate these enchanting Liza Doolittle lyrics..... "Bed, bed, I couldn't go to bed. My heads too light to try to set it down. Sleep , sleep, I couldn't sleep tonight, Not for all the jewels in the crown. I could have danced all night, I could have danced ...etc". Talk about rolling in the aisles humor!

The MERRY in Christmas is where you find it, especially if you know where to look.