



**Left: Brick School, 1953, Anomalee**  
*Photo Credit Athens & Area Heritage Society*

**Above: Addison Public School, 2016**  
*Photo Credit Heritage Place Museum, Lyn, On*

# "DYNAMITE FOR SANTA"

## in the One-Room School

## Christmas Concert and Other

## Christmas School Memories

By Diann Turner

**M**y attempt to encapsulate things reminiscent about a one-room school education in our region was easily compensated with abundant stories from former students and teachers. Their memories of the schools' Christmas concerts easily morphed into my conclusion that this had to be the most quintessential part of the one-room school experience. Coupled with my own memories from Glen Elbe School on Highway 42, east of Athens, Christmas concerts were undoubtedly the perfect evocation of a moment in time!

I'll begin with an early December, 1961 day in the school yard of Addison Public school on the Addison-Greenbush Road. Smoke from the school's wood box stove drifted across the landscape as large, weightless snowflakes tumbled to the ground and quickly dissolved. Excited, squealing children gathered eagerly to

catch them before they landed. Teacher, Mrs. Ina Blanchard, was inside writing out Christmas songs on the blackboard and she knew her class was wild with anticipation; Christmas preparations had begun! A variety of plays, skits and songs would have to be copied into students' scribbles from the teacher's impeccable cursive writing on the blackboard. Lyrics would be memorized and repeated a hundred times with the weekly music teacher, Mr. Kayak. "Santa Claus is Coming to Town", "Up On The Housetop" and "Here Comes Santa Claus" were favorites, but Mrs. Blanchard insisted they always end with "Away In A Manger" or "Silent Night." This ensured the program reflected the Bethlehem account of Christmas. "The Night Before Christmas" would be recited by one particularly confident student. A scraggly Christmas tree (Pre-Charlie Brown Christmas-1965) would be dragged in and students would craft

simple decorations from construction paper, popcorn, and perhaps, a few scrawny pine cones from a yard tree. There would be no dazzling lights.

The best year of all, reminisced one student, was the year she and two other eighth grade students were told to write a play. "We came up with the title 'Dynamite for Santa,' she told me. "We kept the whole thing a big secret and the younger students knew nothing about it." (I have no idea how they pulled this off in a room that accommodated eight grades.) "A chimney was built, costumes were sewn, a couple of cement blocks and lumber brought in to construct the stage, and an old sheet was hastily strung for a curtain." When the magical night came, the place was packed with students, parents and the community's curious. The younger students flawlessly delivered songs and recitations, but the

melodrama accelerated as the play began. The plot thickened as the drama proceeded and near the end, "there was a sudden ear-splitting bang and we blew Santa up!" said my story teller. "The chimney collapsed in a heap and roaring laughter and clapping filled the room." This concert gained such notoriety the Addison United Church invited the school children to repeat it at their hall a few nights closer to Christmas. The old wood stove was stoked to its maximum and all ages would find themselves warming to it as the children filled their ears with the sounds of the season. They didn't realize they were making history!

A few miles southeast, at Glen Elbe School, teacher Mary Topping had her students tapping their toes to similar music and when the music teacher, Mr. Addison, arrived things revved up another notch! I don't recall that we performed in front of anyone other than fellow students. However, I do remember the excitement as our teacher pumped away at the organ and our voices flew to the ceiling, while chains of paper rings fell on our heads as the Elmer's glue dried out in the heat. I can still see one smiling girl enthusiastically ringing sleigh bells as we belted out "Silver Bells." Norma Flood, Wilbert Whaley and Gerald Redford all rode to Glen Elbe School in an old army truck that had removable wooden sides. Come December, they had to have bundled

up for the ride!

In Junetown Public School, nestled in the woods near the end of Junetown Road, students were equally counting down the days, heartily singing- "It's Christmas, it's Christmas, it's finally Christmas, and soon it is going to be Christmas Day!" One gentleman recalls having Mrs. Jean Gainford-Burnham for a teacher in December of 1962. It just so happened her husband, Doug Gainford, was wing-man on the snow plough that cleared the road in front of the school. Mrs. Gainford hatched a brilliant scheme and talked her husband into stuffing himself into a Santa suit one morning before heading out for his work day on the plough. The operator agreed with the idea and readily stopped in front of the school. Mr. Gainford sauntered in, unannounced, and delighted the students with a hearty "Ho Ho Ho" as he tramped down the aisle and made everything merry and bright! Some said he even jumped from desk to desk! There wasn't much of monetary value in his sack: a one cent paper bag with perhaps an orange and a few hard candies for each student.

Barb Nichols wrote a lovely memoir of her Christmas concerts at Plum Hollow Public School, north west of Athens. "Early in November, all of the English lessons were dedicated to practicing for our Christmas concert. This was an excellent exercise

to insert drama, public speaking, music and pantomimes into the curriculum. Furthermore, it was the best way to conduct lessons when it was getting too dark in the classroom to see the board as well. School did not dismiss until four o'clock, EST. The parents, grandparents and the rest of the community largely attended school Christmas concerts. Television was not in wide use then, so everyone enjoyed seeing the children perform their plays, recitations and Christmas carols. We held the concert in the school, hanging curtains at the sides of the raised platform in front of the blackboard for change rooms and to store the props. Yes, it was crowded but they managed well! The school was full to the "rafters" and everyone had a good time. When the children acted out the "Old Ford Car" and the shadow play "Cat Pie" during one concert, the audience declared it was the best they had ever seen." (Story courtesy of Athens & Area Heritage Society)

It didn't take money, store bought items, over-extended credit, or the glitz and glamour of today's Christmases. Technology and inflated expectation were absent.

Simpler, idyllic times left lasting memories and influence was handed down in those one-room school houses that could never be paralleled today. I personally experienced it, and my story tellers confirm it! **LH**

#### **Porcelain Doll Toy**

**Photo Credit Diann Turner, AAHS Museum**



#### **Wiltsetown School, 1953, Wiltsetown**

**Photo Credit Athens & Area Heritage Society**

