



The MONTEBELLO Voice

an independent gazette

upward

December 3, 2012

The World Cup

Among vertebrates – birds, fish, terrestrial – the basic ground plan includes two sets of appendage, upper and lower. English-speaking humans call them arms and legs. Most of our sports use both, but while marathoners use only the lower and boxers only the upper, these events still have their adherents.

With soccer, not so much. With only feet, how interesting can it be? It is not unusual that after 90 minutes, plus referee time, neither team has scored and the only action worth watching has been the fighting in the stands among cadres of bored-silly fans. So, what's to be done? The pitch is cleared; goalies and kickers decide which team can claim to have won.

The popularity of soccer can perhaps be explained by the egalitarian nature of the fantasizing that it permits. Most



of us don't have the body type, skill set, or strength of character that would allow us to picture ourselves as a superstar in most sports. But soccer heroes come in various shapes and sizes. That could be me out there, winning it all with my unbelievable bicycle kick!

Don't like my explanation? Ok, what's yours?— *Richard Titus* 🍪


On November 21, some Montebello residents bought pies and took them to the nearby firefighters station to show our gratitude for the service they provide to the Montebello residents. The firefighters were very grateful and happy for the pies.
— *Puchy Ryder*

*The Montebello
Voice
uncut, uncensored,
unofficial*

Cover photo by Linda Brownlee

Tis The Season!

Polymer Clay Make It! Bake It! Take It!
Tuesday Dec 6, 2-5pm
and of course : eat cookies and chocolate!
Where: The Underground CC



What is Polymer Clay?


Polymer Clay is a non-toxic synthetic clay that can be baked to strong hardness in a toaster oven. With lots of colors and a myriad of techniques, it can be used to make pretty much any type of art - whether it is wall art, jewelry, or home decor , or utility items.

The holiday season is upon us! Come make an ornament, or an LED candleholder, or make a little spinning top! The possibilities are endless!

We will make a good old sparkly mess with mica powders, and glitter of course! Make something special !

Do come - no registration needed! just bring yourself - we have clay, tools and ovens - so you can complete your project and take it with you.

Of course — we will all enjoy chocolate and cookies! An absolute must while we are claying.



See You In December!

AiM Polymer Clay Group

The MONTEBELLO Voice

an independent gazette
Alexandria, Virginia

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Alex Beiro, Jr.

September 25, 1958 – November 19, 2022

Alexander A. Beiro, Jr. passed away unexpectedly of an apparent heart attack on November 19 at his home.

The oldest of nine children, Alex was born in Pittsburgh to Alex and Jean (both deceased). He attended Bishop Ireton High School in Alexandria and went on to receive his Bachelor of Science from Old Dominion University. Alex was an entrepreneur and had careers in construction management, real estate, and wireless telecommunications. Most recently he served as the President of The Virginia Wireless Association (VAWA).

Alex was the type of person who could make a new friend in almost any situation. He had a warm, caring heart that led him to volunteer and spearhead charitable fundraising events.

Alex was also an exceptional athlete, outdoorsman, and adventurer. He was most proud of his sons, Alexander and Zachary, whom he took skiing, mountain biking, shooting, visiting histor-

ical sites and museums, and traveling throughout the United States. On his most recent treks, he drove his Toyota Prius almost 10,000 miles cross-country and to Canada.

Alex was an avid tennis player, bowler

and golfer and won numerous awards. If he wasn't winning on the court, he was patiently instructing friends and family. He also was a fan of teaching himself new skills by looking at YouTube videos about cooking, baking bread, photography, and repairing equipment.

In his unassuming manner, Alex enjoyed the visual arts of painting and photography and had a small collection of original works. He also enjoyed country music. You could say he was a self-sufficient country boy, one wearing a big smile.

Survivors include his two sons, Alexander III and Zachary, eight siblings, as well as 11 nieces and nephews, four great-nieces/nephews, aunts and numerous loving friends. Donations may be made to the Alexandria Little League www.alexandriabaseball.com, on whose team Alex played as a child and which the Beiro family has supported for over 40 years.— *text courtesy of the Beiro family* 📷



A tribute from the Virginia Wireless Association:

“Alex was well known in the wireless industry and served as the VAWA President since 2015. During his tenure on the VAWA Board of Directors, Alex made a positive impact breathing new life into the organization and ramping up our charitable contributions by establishing new charity partners. Additionally, Alex initiated the Association’s partnership with WIA, the Virginia Tech Wireless Scholarship Fund, and the Fairfax County, Virginia Sheriff’s Office Project LifeSaver Program.

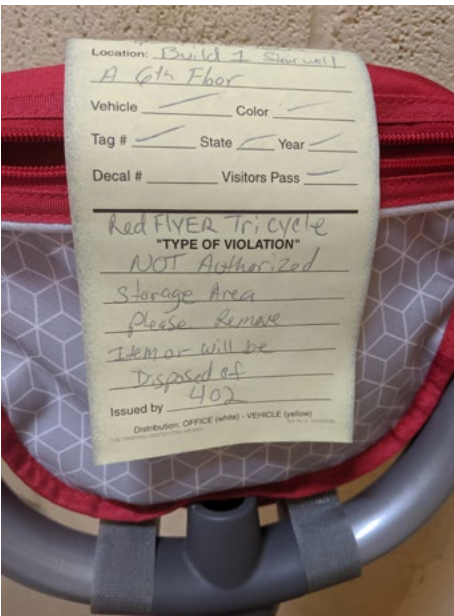
When Alex took over as President he brought an inspired, innovative approach, always pushing the Association in a positive direction. He was a dedicated leader who brought great ideas and a positive attitude. Alex was passionate about helping those in the community and the industry through his platform. His love for his sons shined through in all that he did and were the center of his universe.” 📷

Alex’s January 3, 2022 post on the Montebello Facebook page:

“I have a Four Wheel (4x4) drive truck and am available to pick up essential (prescriptions/food) items for those who don’t want to drive in the snow. Don’t worry about me, I have been a mountain skier for many decades and have driven in untold road conditions. Please privately IM me with any requests.” 📷

Alex Beiro had a great sense of humor and an eye for some of life's absurdities, such as a parking ticket on a tricycle in the stairwell. He wrote some captions to go along with the Red Flyer belonging to a 3-year-old law-breaker.

Mommy, I got a ticket!
 Ticket police nab kid's bike!
 How did we get here?
 How low can you go!
 Is arrest next?
 Mommy, where's my tricycle?
 Ticket quota met!
 Big Brother is at Montebello!
 Our condo dues pay for this?



remembering Alex

Alex and his sons, Alexander and Zachary, visited Montebello's beloved, ailing, long-time security officer Ed Hill, on January 31, 2019.



"Yesterday afternoon I took my sons to visit Officer Ed Hill at his home. My sons first met Officer Hill 11 years ago when I moved to Montebello for a second time. In 2008 my sons were 5 and 7 years old and the connection the three of them made was priceless. Always smiling with a kind word to say, I would make sure we went through the middle gate just to say a few words to him. Our hour with him was no different. He was in a great mood, talkative, and in general he never missed a beat. Joining our conversation was his wife of 60 years, one

of his sons and his daughter. On the way home my sons told me they were glad to see him again.

Officer Hill was thrilled so many Montebello residents had taken the time to write cards wishing him well and sharing past memories. His wife showed me the bag of cards. There must have been over 100 cards! His son took pictures of the four of us. He is a classic gentleman!" 📷

Alex Beiro deeply cared about Montebello's governance and never hesitated to speak truth to power, often commenting on board and management decisions via emails and at meetings. He was inclusive, opinionated, respectful, thoughtful, and fearless. When he ran for the board of directors last winter, he wanted to give voice to what he called "the silent majority" of residents. Below are excerpts from his responses to the Voice in February 2022:

"I am a huge fan of transparency and openness at Board meetings. From both a unit owner and renter standpoint. Feedback from all residents is critical to decision-making.

Every expenditure should have a costs vs. benefits analysis. I am also an advocate for any expense over \$30,000 to have a 'recurring' annual operating estimate added to any proposal. Too many times our expenses are not vetted deeply and only the most expensive are authorized. We should have at least three proposals for an expenditure.

I will personally reach out to the new general manager whether or not I am elected to the BOD. I would offer to walk with the new GM around our beautiful grounds and buildings and introduce him to my friends and neighbors. After the initial introduction I would convey my belief that the GM can contact me at any time for any reason." 📷

Speaker of the House

By Chester Taylor

The Speaker of the House of Representatives is one of the most important jobs in the legislative branch of our government. The Speaker runs the proceedings of House debate and voting, appoints committee members, refers bills to committees for development, and is second in line, after the vice president, in succession to the presidency. As we enter 2023 with all the security, economic, and environmental headwinds facing this country, it is not a time for shenanigans, gibberish, and pettiness by members of Congress. We need prudent leaders who will act in the best interests of the United States.

Kevin McCarthy, a Republican from California, is the Republican's choice (full House vote will take place in January 2023) to take over as Speaker of the House in 2023. Will he be a good leader for the House? Will he get the business of America done? Will he be good for the American people?

McCarthy says if he becomes Speaker, he wants to get control of the southern border bringing back the Trump era "remain in Mexico" policy that requires asylum seekers to wait in Mexico while their immigration cases are pending. Next, he wants to fight crime by providing grants for police recruiting and training (but he has no problem with 18-year-olds buying and carrying assault rifles post-Uvalde). Finally, he wants to make the United States more energy independent, though he is not clear on what this means nor has named any specific legislation to do so. With a very slim margin of majority of Republican votes in the House, he will have to kowtow to the extreme right hardliners. Further with the Democrats controlling the Senate, he will have difficulty in

pressing forward any legislation unchecked.

He has stated that he will be exacting revenge against the Democrats. That he would kick Eric Swalwell, Adam Schiff, and Ilhan Omar off their committees in the same way that Democrats did to Marjorie Taylor Greene and Paul Go-



cal interest to condemn the January 6 attack on the Capitol. McCarthy supported Marjorie Taylor Green, a MAGA supporter and a racist who has made anti-Semitic remarks and promotes QAnon (a far-right conspiracy organization) for a U.S. House seat in 2020 and who was later stripped of her House committee assignments for liking social media posts calling for the murder of prominent Democrats. She backed McCarthy for Speaker of the House.

McCarthy, in 2003, supported most abortion rights as long as no tax dollars were spent on it, but then in 2015 he flip-flopped to being a staunch anti-abortion-rights advocate. He doesn't accept the science on climate change and opposes global efforts to combat it. He opposes efforts to codify the legal status of DREAMers. McCarthy wants to end the Affordable Care Act. He supported the Defense of Marriage Act, which barred federal recognition of same-sex marriage and banned same-sex couples from receiving federal spousal benefits.

Kevin McCarthy has had experience in the affairs of the House. In 2019 he was elected house minority leader, but his stance on issues indicate that he has a problem with who he is. He seems a little mixed up about his priorities, flip-flops with the political winds and is on the wrong side of many issues facing America today. He panders to big money and the oil industry. He will not focus on the long-term needs of America but instead he will be obsessed in pursuing pointless investigations. Having him or another MAGA supporter in succession to the presidency is concerning. McCarthy is not a leader, but just another political hack seeking to gain an advantage for himself and his political party. 🗳️

He wants investigations of Hunter Biden and into the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. As to impeaching President Biden, he implied that it was on the table.

Kevin McCarthy has been a staunch supporter for President Donald Trump. He supported Trump's effort to overturn the 2020 presidential election, then later decided it was in his politi-

The ivy-covered walls of academia

By Bob Shea

The telephone call was short and to the point. I had been nominated by the Department of the Army and approved by the university's Board of Trustees to be the Chairman of the Military Science Department (Army ROTC) at Youngstown State University in north-eastern Ohio. My reporting date was September 1, 1978.

My peers at Fort Lee, Virginia, smiled and shook their heads, saying that an ROTC assignment was equivalent to a one-year hardship tour in Korea, only three years longer. Being a true optimist, I smiled and eventually headed for Ohio, as if I had a choice.

I arrived in Youngstown exactly 12 months after every steel mill in the city had ceased operations and laid off their skilled work forces. Demolition had just about been completed, turning what had once been vast thriving industrial sites into

acres of rubble-strewn vacant lots. Youngstown had been added to what is now known as the Rust Belt along the Ohio River and its tributaries. It was a staggering city that had taken a gut punch and was on its knees, waiting to be counted out.

In 1978, Youngstown, halfway between Cleveland and Pittsburgh, was a city of contrasts: wide leafy streets with old brick homes and abysmal schools; the location of the small corporate headquarters of two of the nation's largest mall developers and unemployment approaching 24 percent; a world class park with gardens and hiking trails

and potholed streets that could swallow a Volkswagen; vibrant ethnic neighborhoods with exotic foods at annual festivals and a drastic curtailment of basic city services; the residence of the owner of the San Francisco 49ers NFL team and overwhelmed food banks; an elite country club and ex-steel workers trying to sell boats and snowmobiles that they could no longer afford; aspiring university students whose dads now worked at McDonald's instead of earning high middle-class wages at a steel mill.

It was to be my new home for the next four years. Yes, I even voluntarily extended my assignment for an additional

ROTC was the single largest source of junior Army officers – at that time almost 10,000 new second lieutenants every year.

We had the additional mission, within a seven county area, of notifying the next-of-kin of Army personnel who had died on active duty anywhere in the world. Recruiters were prohibited from doing this to sever the link between the recruiter and soldier whom he or she might have persuaded to enlist and serve on active duty. We had no such insulation. We were between wars so most deaths were accidental or at least non-combat related.

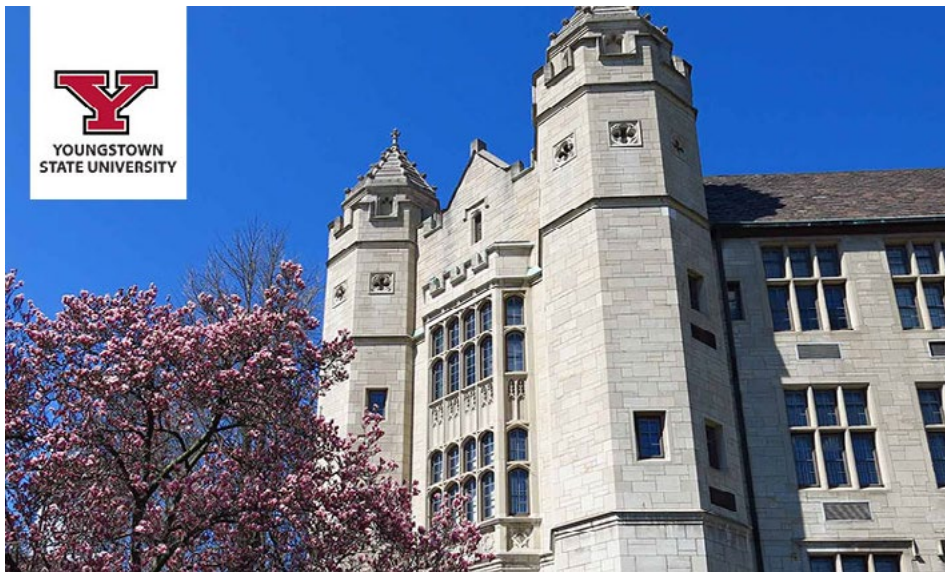
Two of us, once we were notified,

would have to go to a home in uniform during daylight hours, knock on the door, and deliver the devastating news. There were strict protocols on what we could say and do regardless of the family's reaction to tragic news from strangers.

Later, one of my officers would be designated the Survivor Assistant

Officer (SAO) to coordinate the military funeral if one was desired, assist in the myriad of paperwork, and make sure the surviving family's requests and best interests were served. It was not a pleasant task and certainly could be traumatic. It also complicated meeting our full teaching loads and serving our cadets.

Since I did not have school-age children with me, I bought a stately large two-story brick home in an established Youngstown neighborhood for \$42,500. Think of that – even in 1978, my mortgage payment was only \$238 per month. The poor quality of



year. My department staff consisted of four other commissioned officers, three non-commissioned officers, and two civilian secretaries (one federal and one a YSU employee). We had a stand-alone building and were a department within the College of Arts and Sciences.

Our mission was to educate young men and women of all majors who would be commissioned second lieutenants upon graduation, the same mission given to other ROTC detachments at that time at 178 colleges and universities across the nation. While West Point and officer candidate programs also provided young lieutenants,



Youngstown's failing schools did not dictate where I lived. With dwindling city services, my street did not get plowed even once in the four years I lived there despite constant lake effect snow and winter blizzards from Thanksgiving to Easter. One learned to slip and slide up and down the hilly street, carry a snow shovel, and pray. My cadre members with school-age children had to live in the more distant, better funded, and much more expensive suburbs.

My military boss was a long way off at Fort Knox, Kentucky while my local boss was across campus, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Like military recruiters, we were far from the normal support systems available on all military posts: no medical facility, no post exchange, no commissary. Adapting was the key to survival.

Youngstown State University also has colleges of engineering, fine arts, education, business, and criminal justice serving almost 15,000 students. It was an urban campus with no green quadrangles, located just blocks from the decaying downtown. It had one dormitory (for athletes) as the majority of students still lived at home or in apartments and commuted to campus.

It also had an open admissions process that guaranteed admission to any high school graduate within our seven-county area. The net result of the

open admissions policy was that about 50 percent of each year's freshman class dropped out due to a lack of adequate preparation for college-level work. In a word, they flunked out.

Upon arrival, I found that a university was very different from the structured world of the military. I asked for an organization chart so that I could figure out relationships between various school elements and assorted vice presidents – none existed. The civilian faculty was unionized, and when a strike was brewing, I was asked if the Military Science Department would participate on the picket lines. The easy answer “no.” All other department chairpersons were elected by department faculty members. While the Army loves and defends democracy, it did not extend to an election to establish me as the chairman of my department. Many established faculty members looked on students as an inconvenient and bothersome obstacle to writing, research, and the good life.

Having the advantage of an old stand-alone building, I turned part of it into an ROTC student center where my cadets could study, hang out, and feel as though they were part of an organization where they belonged and which valued them, especially important at an urban commuter university. It became somewhat like a military fraternity/sorority house where we

showed a commitment to our young male and female cadets. We became academic counselors, surrogate dads, advisors on male-female relationships, financial advisors, and all the things that trouble young college students. In a word, we were mentors. Nothing was off-limits. We proved to them that we were invested in them as people, and unlike most faculty members we did not limit them to a couple of hours a week of office hours.

I conscientiously violated a long established ROTC policy whereby any cadet could ask for and receive a one-on-one private closed-door meeting with me to discuss any topic on his/her mind. Previously, the detachment sergeant major had to be also present if the cadet was female. To me that was sexist as female cadets deserved my same private and focused attention that my male cadets received. Despite some raised eyebrows, the new policy worked, proving that female cadets were just as deserving as their male counterparts without sexual overtones. We trusted each other.

At least once a year, I would be called to address the Faculty Senate when proposals were advanced to drop ROTC to save limited university funds. That was also easy as I was able to point out that the only YSU costs for ROTC were the wages of one of our secretaries, building utilities, and \$500 per year in office supplies. All other salaries and costs, military and civilian, were paid by the Department of the Army. Additionally, every military science course carried course credits for which YSU charged tuition from the student enrolled. We added significant funds to the YSU coffers at minimal expense to the university. We also provided guaranteed post-graduation employment for the select graduates who were commissioned. We paid our under-contract students a monthly stipend and offered full-ride Army ROTC scholarships to some. Each year the naysayers would see the light and withdraw their ROTC

objections. Then the next year I would be back with my “dog and pony” show to address new faculty “liberal/hippy” concerns. We were a win-win for the university.

Accepting that half of each year’s freshmen would never become sophomores, recruiting and enrolling students, who were both academically and physically qualified was an on-going challenge when local residents, to include most college graduates, preferred to stay in Youngstown regardless of the lack of economic opportunity. It was a contradiction that never quite made sense, but then I was not a Youngstown native.

I soon learned how many young men and women were physically disqualified from enrolling in our program. Being overweight and suffering from hearing loss were the most common disqualifiers. Past drug use and encounters with law enforcement further narrowed the available pool.

The chance for a respected post-graduation profession, a chance to travel, and to experience the world outside Mahoning County too often fell on deaf ears. The draw of the old neighborhood, surrounded by family and friends, generations of roots, the local church, and all the familiar worked against ROTC. We did not have a Fort Youngstown where our graduates could be stationed.

The City of Houston police department arrived on campus to recruit criminal justice graduates to move to Texas with a generous salary and relocation package. They recruited not a single applicant. We called it the Youngstown Syndrome. It begged the question: why expend funds and four years of one’s life in college only to stay in the ‘hood where economic opportunities were minimal at best?

Since the students for the most part lived at home, informing the influencers of students about ROTC career and financial opportunities was one of our on-going sales pitches. Yes, we were in the selling business. Military salesmen? Consequently, I would speak

to any group that might include university parents or grandparents – civic clubs, church groups, business forums, garden clubs, and organizations of any kind. We used to joke that if six people stopped in one place, one of us would start a briefing on ROTC benefits.

After the first year when I inherited my predecessor’s program, we completely revamped our curriculum after the mandatory, complex, and lengthy reviews by the College of Arts and Sciences, the Faculty Senate, and the university curriculum committee. Our for-credit courses became even more attractive, relevant, and challenging for both my staff and cadets.

My department had a reputation as being tough, especially with our juniors and seniors, for we always included an essay on each exam and included punctuation, spelling, and grammar in the grading. In my mind, young lieutenants had to learn how to write. A college graduate who could not write simple error-free prose did not belong in *my* Army. I was not concerned about them writing War and Peace. I wanted the ability to draft a simple military letter or memo. Real life does not communicate via true and false or multiple choice documents.

For community exposure, we would participate in local parades, travel with the YSU admissions team, provide cadet color guards at YSU football games, and always be ready to fill in on local radio talk shows if they needed a last-minute guest. I also swore in our cadets, when they took their oaths to the Constitution as second lieutenants, at each university graduation with them and I in dress uniform rather than cap and gown or academic regalia.

Additionally, the local newspaper was Army-friendly and could be counted on for good PR coverage. One of my majors was very adept at writing news releases that highlighted our students’ individual accomplishments and department opportunities. We were educating students, yes, but we were also in full mode selling and recruiting.

Each April or May, I could count on

three or four telephone calls from depressed graduating seniors asking how they could qualify for a commission: “that ROTC thing.” I had to reluctantly tell them that unless they went to graduate school for two years as a full-time student as well as meeting other requirements, there was nothing I could do for them. In each case, it was depressing to recognize that somehow we had failed them, for we had not communicated our message to them earlier in their university life when they still had options. We had somewhere along the line failed as salesmen to highlight our program’s advantages to them years before they faced bleak post-graduation prospects.

Our mission was to commission 18 students each fiscal year. We were always well over that threshold. In my four years there, we added 98 outstanding young men and women to the Army’s corps of officers.

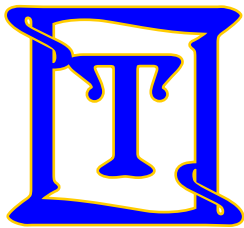
Despite the unusual environment, it was a rewarding assignment. I voluntarily extended my assignment for one additional year so that I could see my first freshmen men and women complete the program and become commissioned officers. These few left Youngstown and distinguished themselves as lieutenants in the US Army far from the Mahoning Valley. I was proud of each one of them. Bless them!

By the way, the title of this essay is misleading. YSU did not have any ivy-covered walls. Most walls were soot and cinder-stained from the years of steel mills belching smoke and pollution – all part of Youngstown’s history.



Christmas traditions

By Joe de Angelis



he true meaning of Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, which is reflected in the Nativity scene: It is not Santa Claus or a Christmas tree. Yet they have all become intertwined, and are celebrated as if they were one and the same. The Nativity is purely religious in nature and is celebrated by Christians in their churches and in their homes. Christmas, on the other hand, with Santa, his elves, reindeer, and the Christmas tree, has become a secular family holiday, observed by Christians and non-Christians alike. In order to understand this dualism that Christmas has taken we must look at some of the seminal events of Christianity.

Let's begin with the word Christmas itself, which is a construct of two separate words: Christ and Mass and has its origin in Old English, with the words "Cristes Maesse," (the Mass of Christ), which first appeared written in 1038, and later as "Cristes-messe," in 1131. The word "Christ" (Cristes) is derived from the Greek word *Khristos*, meaning "anointed" or "the anointed one" and can be used as a name or title. Mass, on the other hand is derived from the Latin phrase "*Ita, missa est*" (Go, it is the sending) which are the concluding words of the service spoken as the people left the church to celebrate at home, hence "the sending."

When December twenty-fifth was established as the Feast Day of the Nativity in A.D. 336 it was also stipulated that an official Nativity Mass be celebrated as the first Mass of the day. This requirement today is known as the

Christmas Midnight Mass, which starts at midnight on Christmas Eve to ensure that it is the first Mass of the feast of the Nativity. As time passed, the celebration of the Nativity, and the Nativity Mass, became popular as did the liturgical practices that accompanied it, and eventually *Cristes-messe* was combined into the word Christmas.

The word Christmas, of course, is English, however, other words are also used to identify with the birth of Christ.



For example, the Latin term for the celebration of the birth of Christ is "*Dies Natalis*," from which the Italian *Il natale* and the French *Noël*, are derived. The Dutch word is *Kerstmis*, while the Germans refer to Christmas as *Weihnachtsfest*. The term Yule derives from an old Nordic Winter Solstice festival of the Yule Log, which was an entire tree that was set afire and carefully tended until it burned itself out completely, which took approximately 12 days. However, the 12 days of Christmas do not emanate from the Yule Log, rather they mark the amount of time it took, from the birth of Jesus, (25 December) for the Magi (Three Wise Men) to travel to Bethlehem, the place of Christ's birth. Today the arrival of the Magi is celebrated on 6 January by Christians as the Epiphany. Epiphany commemorates the "adoration" of the Christ

Child by the Magi and their recognition of Jesus as the son of God.

Since the Nativity is the major element of the Christmas story, how did the other elements, such gift giving, festivals, caroling, and of course Santa Claus, come to be associated with the Nativity? For the answer we must go back to the fourth century A.D. and the advent of Christianity in Europe. In February of A.D. 313, the Roman emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, proclaiming Christianity an official religion of the Roman Empire. Less than 25 years later, Pope Julius I, designated the twenty-fifth of December as the date to celebrate the birth of Jesus. This new feast day of the Catholic Church was called the Feast of the Nativity, not Christmas. At first glance, December twenty-fifth seems to be an arbitrary date and unfortunately, neither the Bible nor Scriptures mention the date of Jesus' birth. The

exact month and date of Jesus' birth are unknown, and there are even passages in Scripture that suggest that Jesus may have been born in the spring. The twenty-fifth of December, however, does correspond to the date of the winter solstice on the Julian calendar, and it is exactly nine months after the Annunciation, which according to the Catholic Church, occurred on March twenty-fifth, which also happens to be the date of the spring equinox.

Focusing on the time of year, specifically, the winter solstice, we find that for centuries before the birth of Jesus, many cultures celebrated this event. The ancient Romans, for example, celebrated Saturnalia, an annual winter festival in honor of Saturn, the god of agriculture. Saturnalia was a week-long celebration that started on 19 December and cumulated on the winter solstice

which fell on December twenty-fifth of the Julian calendar. The festival concluded on the winter solstice, the day on which the Romans celebrated *Dies natalis solis invicti* (the birthday of the invincible Sun). The festival was also a time of giving and mercy as evidenced by the fact that slaves did not have to work during Saturnalia and were even allowed to participate in the festivities. Most of today's Christmas traditions, such as the exchanging of gifts, the decorating of homes with wreaths and mistletoe, the wearing of colorful clothing, and the playing of music and singing, can be traced back to the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia.

Long before the advent of Christianity, trees that remained green all year long had a special meaning, especially during the festive season surrounding the winter solstice. The history of Christmas trees, or more specifically, the use of evergreen boughs, such a pine, spruce, and fir can be dated as far back as the ancient Egyptians and Romans. Ancient pagan peoples hung evergreen boughs of pine, spruce, and fir, over their doors and windows, in the belief that the evergreens would keep away witches, ghosts, evil spirits, and illness. The Romans also regarded mistletoe as a sacred plant symbolizing "life that does not die" and used it extensively during their Saturnalia festivals. The Roman customs relating to mistletoe were later adopted by early Christians believing that couples who exchanged a kiss under mistletoe would be united by eternal love. It appears as though there was never a viable connection between the Christmas tree, mistletoe, and the Nativity, but since all were associated with the celebration of the winter solstice they all melded together over time and became part of the Christmas tradition.

It is Germany, however, that is credited with starting the tradition of the Christmas tree as we know it today. Martin Luther is credited with adding lit candles to trees decorated for the Nativity celebration. According to legend,

while walking home one winter evening, Luther was awe struck by the brilliance and number of stars twinkling amidst evergreen forest surrounding his town. Wanting to replicate the scene for his family, he placed lighted candles on the branches of the tree in his living room so his family could enjoy the wondrous sight of stars sparkling among the evergreens. By the middle of the 1700s the people of Germany began bringing trees into their homes and decorating them as part of their celebration of the Nativity.



Most Americans looked upon the Christmas tree as a pagan symbol as late as the 1840s, however, German settlements in Pennsylvania had community Christmas trees as early as 1747. Then in 1846, a sketch of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert and their children standing around a Christmas tree, appeared in the Illustrated London News. Queen Victoria was very popular with her subjects, and what was done at court immediately became fashionable, not only in Britain, but with Americans as well. The Christmas

tree quickly gained popularity and by the 1890s Christmas ornaments were arriving in America from Germany. Electricity made Christmas tree lights possible and Christmas trees had not only become ubiquitous, but they now began to appear in town squares across the country. Although still not related to the Nativity, the Christmas tree was now an American Christmas staple.

St. Francis of Assisi, who had a special devotion to the Christ Child, was the first person to display a Nativity scene. In 1223 he sought permission from Pope Honorius III to do something "for the kindling of devotion to the birth of Christ." Subsequently, having received permission from the Pope, Francis set up a Nativity scene in a cave, in the Italian mountain village of Greccio. This first Nativity scene included hay and two live animals: an ox and an ass. We don't know if people actually played Mary and Joseph at that time, but we do know that there was a carved, wooden image of the Christ child in the scene that Francis put together. When the scene was complete Francis invited all the villagers to come gaze upon the scene of the Nativity while he preached about "the babe of Bethlehem." Sometime later, Francis told a friend why he desired to create the Nativity scene: "I wanted to do something that would recall the memory of that Child who was born in Bethlehem, to see with bodily eyes the inconveniences of his infancy, how he lay in the manger, and how the ox and ass stood by."

The popularity of St. Francis' Nativity scene grew over time and within a couple of centuries, the displaying of the Nativity scenes had spread throughout Europe, and incorporated life like images or actual people in the scene. The cast of characters gradually expanded beyond Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus, to include angels, the Magi, shepherds, and their sheep and even the star of Bethlehem, all of which was

an effort to conform to the gospels of St. Luke and St. Matthew.

The one thing that the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia did not have, beside the veneration of the birth of Jesus in a Nativity scene, was Santa Claus. Santa Claus, of course, is a fictional character; a legend, but a legend based entirely on the life of Saint Nicholas (270



to 343) who was a Christian of Greek descent from the city of Patara in Asia Minor (present day Turkey). He is also known as Nicholas of Bari, and Saint Nicholas of Myra.

Nicholas was born to wealthy parents who often served the needs of the sick. As the only child, Nicholas inherited everything upon their death, but he chose a life of serving the Church and to provide for the less fortunate. St. Nicholas is the only saint known for his philanthropy, most of which was done anonymously. The most enduring story of Nicholas' generosity is that of his secretly giving bags of gold to a poor father with three daughters. The man had no money to support his daughters, let alone pay their dowry, therefore he was faced with the prospect of selling them into slavery or prostitution. Nicholas felt great compassion for the man and his daughters, and on three separate occasions gave him a bag of gold. But rather than giving the bags of gold directly to the father, Nicholas, in the dark of night, threw them towards the house where the old man lived, one of which may have gone through a window, while another may have gone up over the house and down the chimney. In either case, one of the bags of gold is said to have landed in a shoe, while another in a stocking that was hung by the fireplace to dry. The shoe and the stocking eventually became part of the Christmas tradition. The many stories of Nicholas' anonymous, nocturnal gift-giving quickly spread throughout

Christendom and his actions were emulated by many.

One may wonder how an anonymous gift giving Bishop in Asia Minor came to be so loved and emulated in Central Europe? Well, Western Europe's first exposure to the gift-giving St. Nicholas is attributed to the Byzantine Princess Theophano who married Otto II, the Holy

Roman Emperor, in 973. An admirer of St. Nicholas, the princess brought with her an icon of St. Nicholas, and she quickly spread the legends of his gift-giving and miracles.

Circa 1150, French nuns, in the regions of Alsace and Lorraine, inspired by St. Nicholas, started the tradition of bringing anonymous gifts under the cover of night to needy families and their children on the fifth of December, the eve of the anniversary of St. Nicholas' death. The next morning, those families would wake to discover food, clothing, treats and sometime modest amounts of money. When Nicholas was canonized in 1446, families also began hanging stockings on the eve of his feast day, 6 December. St. Nicholas was a very popular saint in Europe until the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, which, among other things, rejected the practice of honoring saints.

Saint Nicholas, however, remained an important figure in protestant Holland despite the Reformation. In the Netherlands, St. Nicholas took on the



season's greetings

Dutch spelling "Sinterklaas" and he was depicted as a tall, white-bearded man in red clerical robes with a bishop's staff (crozier) who arrived every December 6 on a boat to leave gifts or coal-lumps at children's homes. The ever popular candy cane is derived from the bishop's crozier, and has been a staple in America Christmases for generations. The short story "Tom Luther's Stockings," published in Ballou's Monthly Magazine in 1866 is believed to be the first known association of a candy cane with Christmas.

In Holland St. Nicholas does not have elves as helpers; instead, he has an African named Zwarte Piet (Black Peter) who assisted him with his gift-giving. Zwarte Piet is a Moorish youth with a feathered cap and gold earrings. The Moors, once the "scourge of Christian Europe," and the ultimate bogeyman of little children, are euphemized in the form of Zwarte Piet, as being subservient to a Christian Bishop, St. Nicholas. The Dutch involvement in the African slave trade may also have had something to do with this portrayal. My wife was born in Holland and has vivid memories of St. Nicholas and Zwarte Piet.

As St. Nicholas' fame and popularity spread throughout Northern Europe and Scandinavia, his legends became intertwined with Teutonic folktales of elves and sky-chariots. For example, in Norse mythology, Árvakr and Alsviðr are the flying horses which pull the sun's chariot across the sky each day. Teutonic Pagan mythology also loves the reindeer and when pagans converted to Christianity, their ancient customs became a part of Christmas celebrations. In the Arctic regions and places with snow on the ground for long periods of time, reindeer were used to pull sleighs. These concepts would eventually combined into reindeer pulling St. Nick's sleigh across the sky.

season's greetings

The legend of St. Nicholas spread from Asia Minor to Central Europe, to Scandinavia and finally to America. In fact, it was the Dutch colonists who settled in North America in 1621 and founded New Amsterdam on Manhattan Island who brought the tradition of Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet to the New World. When the Dutch departed North America in 1674 in accordance with the Treaty of Westminster, leaving Manhattan and the rest of their colony to the British, the British, in turn, continued to include Sinterklaas in their celebration of Christmas, but they eliminated Zwarte Piet. Not wanting the Dutch to be associated with their English Christmas holiday traditions, it was not long before the English pronunciation of Sinterklaas evolved into Santa Claus.

Our current depiction of Santa Claus is based on the images of cartoonist Thomas Nast (1840-1902) which first appeared in Harper's Weekly in 1863. Nast's depiction of Santa Claus is owed to the description of Santa Claus in the poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" ("Twas the Night Before Christmas"), first published anonymously on 23 December 1823, in the New York newspaper The Sentinel. The poem also linked elves with Santa Claus by referring to him as a "jolly old elf." Christmas elves are diminutive elves that live with Santa Claus at the North Pole and act as his helpers making toys and taking care of the reindeer. Thomas Nast is widely credited with immortalizing Santa Claus in America's consciousness with his cartoon of St. Nick, first portrayed in the January 1863 publication of Harper's Weekly which featured Santa Claus dressed in an American flag, and with a puppet dangling from his hand. However, Nast's portrait of Merry Old Santa in 1880 is the Santa Clause that became the American icon that we know today and which is immortalized in the American psyche.

So how did Santa come to live at the North Pole? In the mid-1800s the



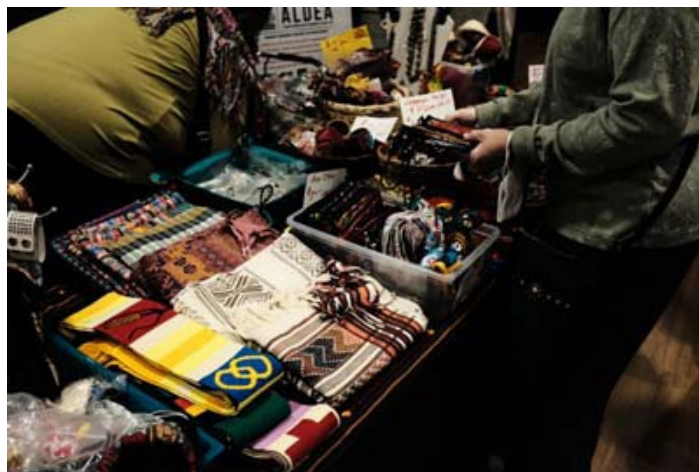
Arctic was seen as somewhat of a fantasy land, a place of mystery and snow that no one had ever seen. Additionally, there were reindeer above the Arctic Circle in close proximity to the North Pole and presumably at the North Pole. Given that much of the European folklore came from the Far North, it seemed only logical that Santa Claus should also live in the extreme north. To Nast's mind, the North Pole was the ideal place for Santa Claus to live and work and he presented the idea in one of his illustrations. The illustration was published in the 29 December 1866 issue of Harper's Weekly and featured a collection of Christmas images to include elves on the lookout for good children, Santa in a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer, account books of behavior, Santa coming down a chimney where stockings hung and a tangential scene of a small Nordic Village. The village was titled "Santa Claussville, N.P." and appeared on one of the banners at the top of the illustration. At the time it was widely construed that N.P. was short for North Pole. From then on, the North Pole became Santa Claus' home.

St. Nicholas morphed into Kris Kringle, der Weihnachtsmann, Father Christmas, Saint Nick, Babbo Natale, the Yule Tomten, Sinterklaas, and finally into the iconic figure of Santa Claus. St. Nicholas has the attributes of various European pagan traditions, espe-

cially from the English, the Dutch, and Scandinavian folklore, all of which are enshrined in our American traditions. The genesis of the Nativity, the birth of Jesus, has not changed in over 2,020 years, while the story of St. Nicholas, in just over 1,750 years, has morphed into what we call Christmas today and is no longer comparable with the origin of St. Nicholas. What's more, it has become a commercial enterprise overshadowing the true meaning of Christmas. Christmas was declared a federal holiday in the United States on 26 June 1870. Of our 11 federal holidays, Christmas is the only one that is a religious holiday, that is, it celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ. Although the Nativity scene, which is synonymous with Christmas, and has remained unchanged in both its message and adoration of the baby Jesus, it is absent from all federal, state, and local government venues during the holiday season. I hope this piece has enhanced your understanding of Christmas and why we celebrate it the way that we do. Let us all remember the true meaning of Christmas and keep Christ in Christmas.

"Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!" 📖

holiday bazaar



Photos by Joel Miller



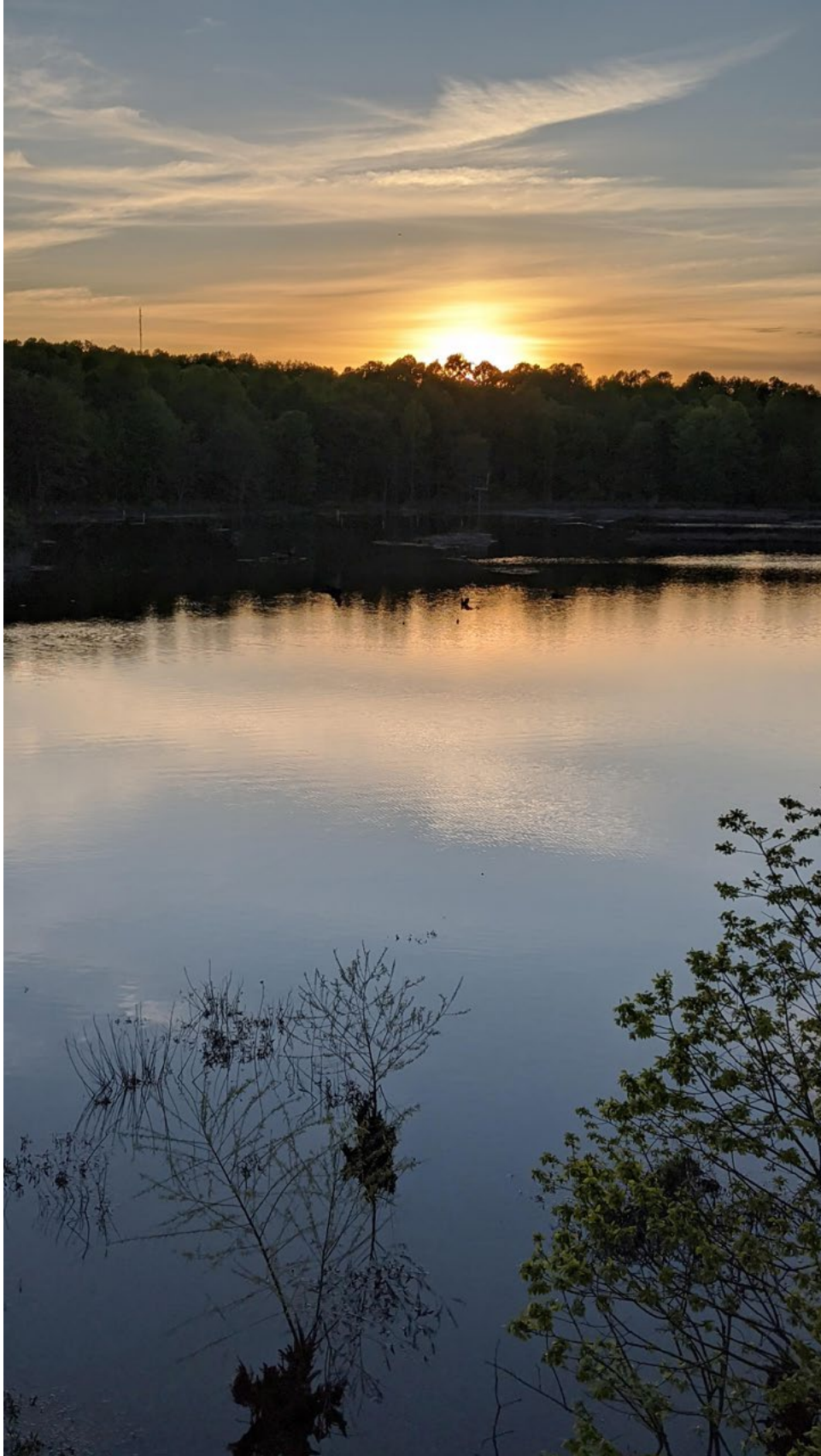


Photo by Alex Beiro