

Yes, Virginia

THE PHILMONT SANTA CLAUS CLUB



For children, Santa Claus is a dream that must come true, and it's the job of their parents to see that it does. Children of a certain age know that their parents are behind Santa Claus, just as that little man was behind the Wizard of Oz, and they don't really care, as long as their parents come through with the goods. But what if they don't? What if they *can't*? What if even one Christmas present is lowest on the list of things to buy, much lower than diapers, gas, heating oil, *food*. For those parents, and those kids, Merry Christmas is an oxymoron.

In a place like Philmont, which is up-and-coming but not quite there

yet, there are a lot of parents and children like that. Maybe you're one of them, but you don't want anyone to know it. At the same time, you wish someone would help. In a village like Philmont, Christmas is never a lost cause, and neither are you, or your children.

The Village of Philmont is contained within the Town of Claverack, but, in many ways, it is its own town. Philmont could be seen as the stepchild of Claverack, because there is greater need, but it could also be seen as Claverack's big brother, because there is, arguably, a greater sense of community. Philmont has its own mayor, chorus, Rotary, and Santa

Claus Club, the only Santa Claus Club south of Valatie.

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus, and he lives right here. His real name is Mitchell Burch, the guy in the red suit and the fake beard riding the sleigh on a 28-foot float he built himself in the annual Philmont Christmas Parade. Yes, it's the only Christmas Parade in Claverack, and yes, you can climb up on Santa's lap and tell him what you want for Christmas. If you miss the parade, you can find him at St. Mark's Church, or Head Start, or at the Mellenville Firehouse Christmas Day Breakfast. (Mellenville, Philmont's little sister community, is the hamlet

next door, but it feels like part of the village.) "I love playing Santa," says Burch. "It gives you a feeling like you've never had in your life." Children yell and wave and shriek. "I never saw Santa when I was a kid," explains Burch, "except on TV. I want these kids to see the real thing. I want it to be like a dream for them."

But Santa's real name is also Ellen Davis, who answers every letter sent to Santa's Post Office, which magically appears the day after Thanksgiving in front of the official post office on Maple Avenue. And John Schaible, a founding member of the little band of Philmont brothers and sisters whose real work is to raise money to

Please contact the Philmont Santa Claus Club by mail or phone if you know a family or an individual who is in need this year, or if you have funds or used toys in good condition to donate.

Philmont Santa Claus Club, Box 324, Philmont NY 12565, Mitchell Burch, President, 672-4520. Past and present living members of the Club include: Lois Alspach, Bruce Babjeck, Leah Burch, Ethel Carle, Floyd and Danielle Dallas, Ellen Davis, Jeff French, Elizabeth Galipear, Patty Hamm, Mary Jean and John Hoose, Donald Johnston, Lorraine Jones, Charles June, Catherine Moore, Ellen Morrison, Dorothy Mossman, Mayor Philip Mossman, Althea Race, John and Maryann Schaible, and Tom Whitehead. And then there's Richard Morris at the

American Legion Hall, where the boxes, donated by NovaPak, are stored, and Skip Speed, who supplies the wrecker that pulls the floats in the parade, Mike Johnston, who always donates a bus, and Clancy Jennings, who always drives one.

The Philmont Firemen's Christmas Parade will be held on December 18th. Step-off time is 6 pm. Floats and marchers are always welcome. Line-up time is 5 pm at the American Legion Hall, Main Street and Railroad Avenue. The parade starts at the Hall and travels up Main Street to the Albert Tripp Nutrition Center, for hot chocolate, toasted marshmallows, oranges, bonfires, and, of course, Santa Claus.

buy Christmas presents for the children of over forty Philmont and Mellenville families who would otherwise have none. They also buy gifts for nearly twenty elderly people who are alone at Christmas, and they do it, they say, out of gratitude for all that they themselves have. "It's rewarding," says Lorraine Jones, "imagining the expression on their faces... I've seen it on my own children's faces."

The truth is, there is a fine line between givers and receivers in Philmont, but the club members seem to know exactly where it is. "I know what it's like not to have any presents under the tree," says Maryann Schaible. "People here are generous," says her husband John. The money comes from local businesses, bake sales and barbecues, and from cans placed in local stores by Donald Johnston, the self-described "can man". When asked why, he says, "We all believe in Santa Claus."

In the decade the club has been in existence, some have passed on, others have simply burnt out. "It's a lot of effort", says Burch. There has been internal strife too: ironic, perhaps, when the reason for an organization's being is to love thy neighbor. But feeling runs deep and therefore high in this group, and in the end it pulls

together to do its good work.

When the time comes, much of the wrapping and tagging of gifts is done at Philmont Terrace under the soft-spoken but determined direction of Ethel Carle, a white-haired beauty in a wheelchair, with the help of other residents and some residents of Richardson Hall as well.

But the first thing, and sometimes the hardest, is to find the youngest and oldest who need gifts most. The churches, the school, Head Start, the food pantry and the assisted living centers are usually the first to know when times are hard and people are too embarrassed to say so. "We promise to keep their names confidential; only the two members who set up the pick-up schedule know who they are. To other members, families are identified only by number, and by the number of kids and their ages," says Burch.

Parents arrive at the American Legion Hall at ten-minute intervals on the weekend before Christmas, so their kids get their presents under the tree, "like everyone else," one of the fixed rules of childhood. Giving the gifts is the best part, according to Mary Hoose. "People cry. Everyone is full of smiles and thanks." Hoose remembers the year a woman phoned after she'd brought her box home.

She thought she'd received the wrong one, because there was so much in it. She didn't think it possible that it was all for her kids.

Once there was a little boy whose family couldn't afford to buy him a present for Christmas or his birthday, so the club members chipped in to buy him a bicycle. "His mother cried," says Lorraine Jones. "She couldn't imagine that anyone would do that for them."

One woman, who received a gift basket the Christmas after her husband passed away, says "It was nice to be remembered, to know that people have compassion for other people in the town ... It makes you feel a part of the community."

"Many are overwhelmed," adds Maryann Schaible, "... so many who just don't have anything." "It makes an immeasurable difference in these children's lives," Burch says. "No matter how bad things are, to me, Santa Claus is hope. He tells us that there are people in this world who care. Don't give up."

But there are almost always a few who are embarrassed enough to refuse help, even when it's given confidentially and even if it means disappointing their children. "We don't take charity," was heard so often in movies of the thirties, forties and fifties that it

became a sign of character.

As for Virginia O'Hanlon, she became a school principal, married and had children of her own. But late in her life she lived in North Chatham and died in Valatie, home of the first Santa Claus Club in the country. Years after she wrote her letter to *The Sun*, she said, "I believed in Santa Claus, for he had never disappointed me." It was the less fortunate girls and boys, she said, who filled her with doubt. "They were the ones who said there wasn't any Santa Claus." No wonder.

It is a sometimes unfortunate consequence of our culture that all children want presents, but *wonder* is what they all *need*. For over a century, Francis Church's response to Virginia has been quoted as a reminder of the innocence of childhood and the importance of magic in a child's life. She ended her reflective interview with a plea, "Remember the children."

Last year, Philmont raised more than four thousand dollars to play Santa Claus to over a hundred Philmont and Mellenville children. It takes a village to raise a child's hopes, and never dash them.

—Enid Futterman, with reporting by Eileen Ordu

Dear Editor,

I am eight years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, "If you see it in *The Sun*, it's so." Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?

Virginia O'Hanlon

Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours, man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus! It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The external light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies. You might get your papa to hire

men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas Eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if you did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

You tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived could tear apart. Only faith, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, Virginia, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.

No Santa Claus! Thank God! he lives and lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay 10 times 10,000 years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.

Editorial, Francis P. Church, *The New York Sun*, Christmas, 1897, reprinted every Christmas until *The Sun* stopped publication, in 1949.