
OPINION COLUMN

He was made to play the role of Santa Claus

KATE GRIGG - Special to The Packet & Times
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Dave Burtch, who played the role of Santa for 45 years, will celebrate the season by singing with the Westmount United Church choir on Christmas Eve at 7 p.m. KATE GRIGG - Special to The Packet & Times

Plevna was small, about the size of Price's Corners. When it snowed in Plevna, the quiet countryside Dave Burtch liked to explore became quieter still, a peaceful white kingdom.

It was snowing the first Christmas Eve Dave and his family spent at Plevna, falling gently and slowly enough to hypnotize a person. As if Plevna were one of those pretty snowglobes someone had picked up and shaken.

They weren't expecting the knock they heard at the door, but there stood Santa, looking as magical as the falling snow and saying, "Ho, ho, ho" as he handed out apples and oranges and candy. "Go to bed," Santa told Dave and his siblings. "I'll be back later."

There was time for everything in Plevna, double visits from Santa, time to get to know people, time for kids to get into mischief. One Halloween, Dave and six other boys crept stealthily over to Farmer Allen's. They crept along the ditch quiet as troops on a military operation, entered the dark farmyard and set to work with ropes and ladders. Breathless, hearts pounding, Farmer Allen's haywagon silhouetted against the night sky, they returned to the ditch. Only, now, instead of seven, they were eight in number. A stranger had infiltrated their midst. As the boys stared in confusion, the dark stranger suddenly spoke. "Just be back here in the morning," Farmer Allen said, "to get the haywagon off the barn roof."

Things could surprise you like that, even in a place as small as Plevna. That second Christmas, when Dave was 12, his parents kept him home from school one day, a circumstance that made Dave wonder, especially when the school principal came to the house and entered his father's office. A few minutes later, Dave was asked to join them. Would he like to play Santa this Christmas, they wanted to know. He was the biggest kid in school and so happy all the time. And it wasn't as if playing Santa was unheard of in the Burch family; Dave's father and grandfather had played Santa before him. Being the son of a preacher, Dave could bring something extra to the role, an understanding of the spiritual side of the season, that it was about more than presents and mistletoe.

They didn't realize they were offering Dave the role of a lifetime, a role he would play for 45 years (1962 to 2007). That although he would take on other roles (Dave is at home in costume or uniform, appearing in character), spend several years as a peacekeeper in the army, a decade as a professional wrestler (billed as Assassin No. 2 and The Incredible Tank), it was the role of Santa he was made for.

With a real white beard, a handsome face ruddy with cold, a perfect portliness, a thrilling baritone voice, Dave was a Christmas card illustration come to life, his remarkable resemblance to the ideal Santa underscored by a genuine belief in the spirit of Christmas.

The lessons of his father's sermons, singing in the church choir five times on Sundays as Dave travelled with his father to the five congregations in their rural parish formed the foundation that made Dave convincing as Santa. Whether he arrived in a horse-drawn sleigh, a cutter pulled by reindeer, via parachute or magician, in a police cruiser, a firetruck or limousine, Dave was more than a red suit and a pair of black boots.

And although he no longer dons a Santa suit (failing health forced him to give up the role six years ago), Dave still spreads the Christmas message of love and peace, not just at Christmas, but as best he can every day of the year. He is still the preacher's son, still a boy who can forget himself in song, lose every woe and gain every joy in a melody raised in praise on a holy night.

This Christmas Eve, Dave will sing with the choir at Westmount United Church. And those who listen carefully will hear between the notes the snow falling gently in Plevna, and the sound of Santa knocking at the door.

Westmount United Church welcomes all to enjoy a Christmas Cantata at this Sunday's service at 10:30 a.m., and a special night of music on Christmas Eve at 7 p.m. featuring the congregation choir, the Awesome Revelation Band and a Christmas carol singalong.

Kate Grigg is an artist and writer who grew up in Orillia and tells stories of local people in her weekly column in The Packet & Times. If you have a story idea you think she may be interested in, email kategrigg@gmail.com.
