

**BETTER!**

**Stephen D. Strauss**

**Literary Club**

**December, 2019**

**One of the most popular Holiday songs of all time is Santa Claus is Comin' to Town. I'm pretty certain that all of us have heard this tune and that probably many of us know the lyrics which I will recite, NOT SING, for you:**

**"You better watch out, you better not cry,**

**Better not pout, I'm telling you why:**

**Santa Claus is comin' to town,**

**He's making a list and checking it twice,**

**Gonna find out who's naughty and nice,**

**Santa Claus is comin' to town.**

**He sees you when you're sleepin'**

**He knows when you're awake,**

**He knows if you've been bad or good,**

**So be good for goodness sake.**

**Oh! You better watch out, you better not cry,**

**Better not pout, I'm telling you why:**

**Santa Claus is comin' to town."**

**Do you know that the lyrics of this hit song were composed by a local person or how or when it came to be written?**

**James Haven Gillespie, who created the lyrics for Santa Claus is Comin' to Town, was born in 1883 in Covington, Kentucky. Haven was one of nine children. The**

family was poor and lived in the basement of a building on Third Street in Covington. His father was a drinker.

Haven's early life was bleak. He later stated: "The most vivid memory of my childhood was seeing whiskey bottles all over the house."

Haven attended the Third district School in Covington but dropped out in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade because he received a silver star for a composition rather than a gold star.

In 1902, following a suggestion from his older brother William, Haven decided to become a printer but couldn't find work in Cincinnati so he moved to Chicago where he stayed with his older sister Lillian and her husband. He got a job as a printers devil, a person who runs errands and does odd jobs in a print shop. He earned \$1.50 a day for a 54 hour six day week.

Haven often commented that printers ink was in his blood and that through printing he gained a better understanding of words and the English language, thus fostering his talents for composing musical lyrics.

Haven became an apprentice printer and then a compositor journeyman. He returned to Covington in 1907 and joined the International Typographic Union #3 in Cincinnati. Haven maintained his union membership for sixty seven years, for the rest of his life, long after he became a famous songwriter.

In printshops he was known as Jimmy although his family and friends always called him by his middle name Haven.

After proposing marriage via a postcard, 21 year old Haven wed 19 year old Corene Parker in Covington. Haven had \$15 in his pocket and Corene had \$1 when they boarded a train to Chicago where Haven's job was.

In 1909 Haven began to work as a printer for the Cincinnati Times Star.

Haven had no musical training and couldn't read or write music but could pick out tunes on the piano by ear. Later Haven's brother Irwin taught him how to read and write music.

In 1911 28 year old Haven began his musical career. He published seven songs and earned small royalties of a penny and a half for each sheet music copy sold.

**It is said that Haven typeset Kroger ads so well that Barney Kroger wanted to make him Kroger's first advertising manager. However, Haven refused, wanting to remain a printer so that he could devote all of his extra time and energy to writing and promoting songs.**

**While travelling to promote his songs, Haven became an alcoholic and remained so for 50 years.**

**In 1916 Charles Phelps Taft, Editor of the Cincinnati Times Star and Literary Club member, encouraged Haven to go to Tin Pan Alley in New York to further his musical career. Haven and Corene settled in Brooklyn and Haven worked as a printer for the New York Times.**

**After a few unproductive years in New York Haven moved to Chicago where he worked as a printer for \$19.50 per week. He was broke until he received a \$12,000 royalty check for his song "The Harbor of Love". Haven then left printing and became a full time song writer.**

**In 1923 Haven composed "I'm just a Little Blue for You" and earned \$17,000 in royalties. He also wrote "You're in Kentucky Sure as You're Born", his first record that sold a million copies.**

**Haven worked with many music composers including Richard A. Whiting. He became the godfather of Richard's daughter Margaret Whiting who grew up to become a big band girl singer that some of our senior members may remember.**

**Haven Gillespie was not a one trick pony. He composed the lyrics for "That Lucky Old Sun", "You Go to My Head", "The Old Master Painter" and many, many more.**

**In September 1934 Haven was in the New York offices of the Leo Frist Publishing Company. The manager wanted Haven to create the lyrics for a childrens Christmas song. Haven resisted this offer saying there was not enough time to write and promote a song for the Christmas holidays. But it was 1934, the Great Depression. Composing gigs had become somewhat rare, even for an established lyricist like Haven.**

So, Haven accepted. On the subway ride back to his hotel he remembered that his mother used to say to him when he was a boy: "If you don't wash behind your ears Haven, Santa won't come to see you. You better be good."

Haven pulled out an envelope from his pocket and started scribbling on the back of it. In just 15 minutes the Santa Claus is Comin' to Town lyrics were finished.

Back at the hotel Haven's friend, music composer J. Fred Coots, composed the music. Coots previously created the music for "Love Letters in the Sand" and other hits. Coots had worked with Eddie Cantor "Banjo Eyes" and asked Cantor to play the song on his radio show but Cantor refused because it was a childrens song. However, Cantor's wife Ida liked Santa Claus is Comin' to Town so much that she talked Eddie into playing it. This song made its debut on Cantor's 1934 Thanksgiving show and became an overnight hit selling 25,000 sets of sheet music per day. By 1964 over 74 million records and 15 million sheet music sets had been sold.

Over the years this song was recorded by numerous singers including Bing Crosby, James Taylor, Bruce Springsteen, Perry Como, the Andrews Sisters, Frank Sinatra, the Beach Boys, Dolly Parton, Mariah Carey, etc.

In the years that followed Haven and Corene moved back and forth between Covington, Hollywood, and Las Vegas.

Haven stopped drinking in 1958, joined AA, and never had another drink for the remaining 17 years of his life.

Haven died in Las Vegas in 1975 at age 92. The City of Covington erected a memorial plaque to Haven in Gobel Park, near to where Haven lived as a boy.

When I began practicing law, Colleen was one of our secretaries who later became our office manager. Colleen, now 93 years old, grew up in Covington. She knew Haven Gillespie. She told me that whenever Haven was in town, he would hang out at a local Irish bar and sing his songs. Colleen said that Haven was very friendly and, to quote her "For all of his success Haven never forgot where he came from."

**Santa Claus is Commin' to Town has been enjoyed by tens of millions of children and adults in the 85 years since Haven composed these wonderful lyrics.**

**Countless numbers of children, including me, behaved a little better during the Holiday Season due to this song.**

**SO, I say: You BETTER Be Good!**