

The Brownies

Well, it's that holiday season again and time to bring out the old hand me down traditions that come with it. No matter your religious persuasion or lack thereof, there are plenty of traditions to go around. Christmas trees, stockings by the fire, lighting symbolic candles on sacred nights, small gifts given over days, or one big gift on one day, a special mass, or a special service --- they all have very precious meaning to the individuals involved. Santa Claus, St. Nick, Father Christmas, your pick - they all herald a season of joy, happiness, peace, remembrance, and fun.

Which brings me to the subject of tonight's paper – family traditions, more specifically my family's tradition. Perhaps the title The Brownies has piqued the interest of a few of you who especially enjoyed the 60's and 70's. No, I am not referring to psychedelic sugar plums and marijuana brownies. Or of our more mature members with ties to Cleveland and the currently haphazard Cleveland Browns. This of course would be before the Grinch....Art Modell, stole the team and Christmas, and moved them to Baltimore. Before Mr.Modell secretly started ordering moving vans, he had begun to quietly and fatally remove the earliest symbol of the team – the elf or for Clevelanders, the Brownie who, as the mascot, adorned the team's uniforms and stationery¹. And, heads up you St. Louis people; believe it or not, this was not the first time that this indignity had fallen upon the poor Brownie. In 1953, the greedy and evil American League baseball owners forced the St. Louis Browns dynamic and somewhat crazy owner, Bill Veeck of midget fame, to sell the team to Baltimore interests, thus leaving their mascot, you guessed it, the Brownie or Elf to languish on the Mississippi never to be seen again, in exchange for a brightly colored bird². Fortunately, in the last few years or

so the replacement owner of the Cleveland Browns has given new life to the Brownie, and if you look very closely on their helmets where the face mask is attached above the eyes you will see two very tiny Brownies, and I mean tiny, on each side of that plastic attachment. In addition, in 2004 the Brownie began reappearing on team souvenirs – caps, seat cushions, etc – sold by the Browns. No such luck for his St. Louis cousin.

So what is a Brownie? It is not the small assertive young lady in the brown uniform who is trying to sell you cookies. The definition, as given on Longlongtimeago.com³, is that a Brownie is a small, hardworking elf-like creature that lives in houses and barns. He is said to come out at night, and finish the housework that has been left undone. My wife and I must not live in a neighborhood with any Brownies! But here's the payback. In return, a Brownie will allegedly accept gifts of food – cream, bread, or milk, but some gifts offend him. In the Grimm fairy tale “The Elves and the Shoemaker” small shoes and clothing were left out for them, and, ungrateful I suppose, they put them on and vanished forever, probably going to Baltimore. The Brownie is rarely seen and can occasionally be mischievous – rearranging furniture or generally tearing the house to hell. They are a legendary creature popular in the cultural folklore of Scotland and England. A similar wee little people, with different names, are common in the folklore stories of Scandinavia, Germany, the Slavic countries and of course Ireland⁴.

Lord Baden-Powell so liked the concept of wee little people doing good deeds that he adopted the term Brownie for his junior girl guides in 1918³. That was before the cookies. The plot now thickens and brings us back to the Christmas season. In 1893, Palmer Cox, a Canadian poet and illustrator published a book containing his poem “The Brownies in the Toy Shop”, and thus the association with Santa Claus probably began.

From the 1880's on, his many books about the Brownies were so popular that the first hand held camera produced by Eastman Kodak was named The Brownie⁵.

My family is Irish. Both my mother and my father, and their mothers and fathers were Irish. My father's mother came from Ireland and his father and my mother's parents were first generation in this country. Wee little people, Leprechauns, and Banshees⁶ – the wailing, screeching female spirit who foretells death - were a part of my childhood. As children we believed. I can recall my grandfather's funeral in 1951. It was held in his living room as so many funerals of that time. The pack of young children were getting very restless, when one of the older mourners named Delia Donlon, rather fresh from the old sod, told our parents that she would take all the children to the cellar and tell us stories about the little people. In her best Irish brogue she regaled us with tales of the little people and their antics, but then she got to the Banshee. The faces of 15 or so small children turned white and our mouths hung open. I have never been so scared in all my life, and damn near peed in my pants. This was not Darby O'Gill and the little people. Fairy tales are great aren't they?

And that brings us back to Christmas traditions in my family. My dear sainted mother, who died at age 95 this past January, loved Christmas and all its trappings. She looked forward to telling us about Santa Claus' Brownies and how they would come at night to peek in our windows seeing if we were being good. When thinking about this paper some weeks ago, I wondered why would this fervently Irish, holier than the Pope, woman use the English/Scottish term Brownie rather than something more green. The answer was **Radio**. Beginning in 1947 and going through 1952, a WCPO Radio disc jockey by the name of Bill Dawes (remember Make Believe Ballroom) had a Christmas

show from 4:30 to 5 PM⁷ where he pretended to be Santa Claus with two little helpers he called Brownies – Tweedeldee and Tweedeldum. With the sound effects of a whirling, swirling snow storm outside, and with booming HO-HO-HO's he would read letters sent in by children and then ask the Brownies whether this child or that had been good or bad, or whether they deserved a toy, new underwear, whatever. The Brownies would respond in high pitched gobbledygook that you could faintly understand. I spoke with Bill Myers, former WLW TV personality and historian, who remembered the show well and even, remembered hearing his own letter read on the program. He suspects that the Brownies voices were actually pre-recorded at thirty three and a third RPMs and then played back at 78⁸.

Every afternoon my sister and I would sit in front of our small radio and listen intently to Santa and his helpers. One day, Santa announced that little Jack McDonough wanted a red fire truck and his sister Mary wanted a dolly. We just about passed out. How did he know that! By god this guy must be for real. Many, many years later we learned that Mom had written Bill a letter; she was a great letter writer, giving him the scoop. He actually called her the day of the show and told her to have us in front of the radio that night, because he was going to mention us. Rosemary Kelly, WCPO and WLW television personality, remembers Bill Dawes as “one of the kindest men I have ever known”⁹.

Thus in post war Middle America, before the cold of the Korean War, a small family tradition was born that has multiplied like rabbits. When the first snow fall between Thanksgiving and Christmas coated our window sills, my sister and I would be tucked in for the night with Dad telling us one of his crazy cowboy stories, when we

would suddenly hear sleigh bells ringing outside and close by. Screaming with delight we would bound out of bed and down the hall to find Mom coming out of the bathroom. Excitedly we would tell her about the bells, which of course, she hadn't heard. "Must be the Brownies paying us a visit to see if you are in bed and behaving". Back we ran and jumped under the covers. The next morning, Mom would yell "come quick and look at this". In the snow on the window sills were tiny foot prints confirming our nocturnal visitors. When I was about eight, searching my mother's vanity for possible treasures, I found a small piece of wood carved into the shape of a pointed shoe with a heel. There was a three inch finishing nail secured to the top side. I was not immediately sure what it was, but then again I was afraid that I might, so I quickly put it back and didn't tell my sister. Years later, my mother admitted that she used to hang out the small bathroom window ringing the sleigh bells, sometimes in blistering cold. On snowy mornings she would be up before us, and carefully place tiny foot prints on the sill with her little home made "shoe".

For many of us, actually realizing that there was no Santa Claus was a big step into the adult world, but it was a gradual process. First, there might be the whispers of playmates at recess, but of course those were discounted since we **really knew** there was a Santa Claus. Finally, the day came when Mom or Dad admitted that it was all smoke and mirrors. For me, it just meant that I became the Brownies chief helper and Mom could make them come to life for my youngest brothers and sister. Many cold December nights found me hanging out my second floor bedroom window, over a unforgiving driveway, in my bomber jacket, gloves and watch cap trying to swing a Brownie, a Kilroy the Cop puppet, on a long string, dressed in Mom's handmade elf outfit, to get the

damn thing 15 ft to the south and 12 feet down past my younger brother and sister's bedroom window. Success was measured in the decibel level of the screams heard below. Occasionally there would be a loud bang as a 25 mile an hour iceberg wind blew Kilroy into the window. Mom always thought I did that on purpose.

Some years later, my youngest sister and 2nd youngest brother, were climbing through my parents closet when they found a box. Opening it they found poor Kilroy dressed in his finest, and Jane said to Jim, "look it's a dead Brownie" and quickly put it back. My three daughters participated in the only Brownie sighting that caused physical injury. This occurred during a Holiday visit to Mom in Maryland in 1992. Dad had been transferred to DC in 1962. It was now the multiple grandchildren who were participating in the Brownie sightings. A festive pre-Christmas dinner was planned, and Mom asked my youngest brother, who still lived at home if he would do the Brownie thing for the assembled kids. He reluctantly agreed, since he was going out that night, but said he would come home early to stage the event. Mom promised to leave the Brownie, tied to a 4 ft stick, on top of the garbage cans at the side of the house. The house was now a tri-level with the dining room and kitchen on the ground floor. Some how Mom didn't trust Tim to come home, so before dinner she asked my ever dependable brother-in-law Bruce, if he would do the honors. As luck would have it, snow fell most of the day accentuating the upcoming holiday. During dessert, Uncle Bruce did his thing, dancing the Brownie along the window sills like a Disney movie. Screams of excitement filled the air. My brother Jim and Sister Jane's kids were still young enough to enjoy the show and the excitement of their cousins. However, within minutes of their disappearance they suddenly appeared again, this time at the hands of the early returning, prodigal brother

Tim. It's amazing that he and Bruce didn't collide in the dark. My daughters were ecstatic; they were going to catch a brownie and started to charge out the kitchen door. Tim saw them coming and panicked, not wanting to be caught red handed, dashed across the snow to the side of the house. Rounding the corner, he slipped crashing his knee into a slate walk. With Medal of Honor perseverance, he crawled around the corner and was not discovered. In all these years and sightings only one youngster has declined the honor of a Brownie visit. My nephew Timmy was apparently terrified at his first sighting and screamed "down Brown" so often and so fervently that visits to that branch of the family are on hold.

My youngest brother Tim believes we grew up in a Norman Rockwell type household. If so, my parents were very good Impressionists, painting with a broad brush and creating memories that have lasted a life time. I hope all of you have similar precious memories of traditions surrounding the Season.

So what is the future of the Brownie? My hope is that the children of my Mother's ten grandchildren and five great-grandchildren would delight in the anticipation and the magic of wee little visitors in the night heralding the joy of all that's yet to come, sharing in the happy memories that the rest of us keep safe.

Merry Christmas!

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