

One Horse Open Sleigh

by Lynne Belluscio

Last week the third grades visited LeRoy House for a closer look at how people traveled in the 19th century and a tour of the transportation exhibit. As I explained to them, riding in a sleigh was like riding in a convertible with the top down - - and no heater!

After reading the folk tale, *Frozen Charlotte* - a tragic story about a young girl who is so vain that she dies on the way to the New Year's Eve dance, rather than listening to her mother and bundling up in the lap robes - - we talked about the lyrics to "Jingle Bells." (Once we get past the kids who giggle about Jingle Bells, Batman Smells) - - I tell them that the song was written in 1850 and it tells us how much fun it was to go sleighing, especially with a fast horse. People had to put bells around the horse so that you could hear them coming. The sleighs were so quiet on the snow, that all you could hear were the bells. The faster the horse, the louder the bells.

Out of curiosity I did a little research about *Jingle Bells* and discovered a very interesting story. There is no disagreement that James Lord Pierpont wrote the song although sometimes his father gets the credit. His father was a Unitarian minister in the Boston area and was a staunch abolitionist.

James was born in 1822. When he was fourteen he ran away from school and joined the Navy. Later, in 1849 he went to California during the gold rush, but returned east after a fire destroyed his business. However, that is where the historians part ways. There is a brass plaque on the side of a building in Medford, Massachusetts, which claims that James Pierpont wrote "Jingle Bells" which was first known as "One Horse Open Sleigh" in 1850 at the Simpson Tavern, as witnessed by Mrs. Otis Waterman.

Later historians point out that the Simpson Tavern, at that time was not a tavern but a house owned by Mrs. Waterman. That's all fine and good, unless you read the historic marker in

Savannah, Georgia, which claims that Pierpont wrote "Jingle Bells" in 1857, while he was the music director and organist for his brother's church in Savannah. It is known that the song was copyrighted in 1857 and published by Oliver Ditson & Co of Boston.

And then there is this strange twist. James Pierpont remained in Savannah, after his brother, who was also an abolitionist, moved back north as things began to heat up before the Civil War. James joined the Confederate Calvary and served as a clerk during the war. James even wrote two compassionate songs in support of the south - "We Conquer or Die" and "Strike for the South."

This must have rankled his father, who was a chaplain for the Union. James never went back north - even to visit his children by his first wife, who were raised by their grandparents. He and his second wife, continued to live in the south where he died in 1893. He was admitted to the Song Writer's Hall of Fame posthumously in 1898, for writing an American all-time legend, *Jingle Bells*.

One of the stories that I read stated that Pierpont wrote *Jingle Bells* while in Savannah, for a Thanksgiving church program. He was homesick for the winter weather in Boston, and it was hot and humid in Savannah. This theory was put in question because of the suggestive lyrics in the fourth verse: "Now the ground is white, Go it while you're young, Take the girls tonight, And sing this sleighing song ..." It was pointed out that in Victorian times, to suggest that men would go it while you're young and party with the ladies, was not appropriate for a church program.

Which story about *Jingle Bells*



is true, remains to be proven. However it was the first song broadcast from space, when astronauts Tom Stafford and Wally Scherra sent a Christmas message back to Earth in 1965. And it remains a Christmas favorite although, as I told the third graders, it could be sung for Thanksgiving, along with

"Over the River and Through the Woods" which was definitely a Thanksgiving song, not a Christmas song. But of course, that might require a change in our global warming weather - - and the weatherman would have to predict snow for Thanksgiving. I certainly hope not!



STELLA Collision Service, Inc.

Now Environmentally Friendly
Using Water-based Coatings

Complete Auto Body Repair • Glass Replacement
24 Hour Towing • Downdraft Paint Booth

8375 East Main Rd.
Le Roy, NY

768-7370

