

# PANNEBAKKER FAMILY NEWS



NEWSLETTER OF THE PANNEBAKKER FAMILY ASSOCIATION

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## A Chimney's Poignant Surprise: Letters Santa Missed, Long Ago

By COREY KILGANNON

Last year, Peter Mattaliano, 66, an acting coach and screenwriter, put up Christmas decorations in his Hell's Kitchen apartment and laid out presents for the children: Mary and Alfred. These are not Mr. Mattaliano's children, and they are no longer living. But a century ago they lived in what is now Mr. Mattaliano's home.

He has honored Mary and Alfred every December for the past 15 years, ever since he learned of their existence when he renovated his fireplace. It had been sealed with brick for more than 60 years.

"My brother does construction, and I had him open up the fireplace," he said. "We were joking that we might find Al Capone's money. Then my brother yelled to me and said, 'You're not going to believe this.'" In the rubble and dust, Mr. Mattaliano's brother found a delicate piece of paper with faint children's scrawl bearing a request to Santa from a century earlier. "I want a drum and a hook and ladder," read the letter, adding that the fire truck should be one with an "extentionisting" ladder. It was dated 1905 and signed "Alfred McGann," who included the building's address.

There was another item in the rubble: a small envelope addressed to Santa in "Raindeerland." Inside was a second letter, this one dated 1907 and written by Alfred's older sister, Mary, who had drawn a reindeer stamp as postage.

"The letters were written in this room, and for 100 years, they were just sitting there, waiting," said Mr. Mattaliano. He learned through online genealogical research that the siblings were the children of Patrick and Esther McGann, Irish immigrants who married in 1896. Mary was born in 1897 and Alfred in 1900.

The family lived at 447 West 50th Street, where Mr. Mattaliano now lives in a fourth-floor apartment filled with books on acting and mementos from his days as a fast-pitch knuckleballer.

Patrick McGann died in 1904, so by the time the children wrote the letters left in the chimney, they were being raised by Ms. McGann, a dressmaker. Mary's letter is as poignant as Alfred's is endearing.

"Dear Santa Claus: I am very glad that you are coming around tonight," it reads, the paper partly charred. "My little brother would like you to bring him a wagon which I know you cannot afford. I will ask you to bring him whatever you think best. Please bring me something nice what you think best."

She signed it Mary McGann and added, "P.S. Please do not forget the poor."

Mr. Mattaliano, who has read the letter countless times, still shakes his head at the implied poverty, the stoicism and the selflessness of the last line, all from a girl who requests a wagon for her brother first and nothing specific for herself.

### Snowball

~ Shel Silverstein

I made myself a snowball,  
As perfect as could be,  
I thought I'd keep it as a pet,  
And let it sleep with me.  
I made it some pajamas,  
And a pillow for its head,  
Then last night it ran away,  
But first - it wet the bed!

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“This is a family that couldn’t afford a wagon, and she’s writing, ‘Don’t forget the poor,’ ” he said. “That just shot an arrow through me. What did she think poor was?” Then there was the fact that the letters had survived at all, perhaps avoiding incineration by being tucked on a ledge or in a crevice in the chimney.

“I have no idea how that paper made it,” he said.

The letters have become “my most treasured possessions,” said Mr. Mattaliano, who had them framed and displays them year-round above the mantel of the fireplace where they had been discovered. On Friday, they were joined by ornaments and mementos, along with a dump truck, a miniature wagon and a doll. “I wanted them to have a Christmas present, even if it was 100 years too late,” he said.

The story is well known among his friends, neighbors, acting students and the regulars at a longstanding Friday night poker game. “I’m the new guy in the group, and I’ve been there since the late ’80s,” said Mr. Mattaliano, whose roster of actors he has coached includes Jill Clayburgh and Matthew Morrison.

For Mr. Mattaliano, the letters summoned a link to his years growing up in an apartment in Jersey City. He would leave letters to Santa under the tree on Christmas Eve.

When Mr. Mattaliano was 12, his father, who was 47, died of cancer just before Christmas, leaving his mother, Margaret Costello, to raise him and his three younger brothers on her own.

“So we had a few rough years,” he said. “For the next couple years, our Christmases were a little lean.”

Mr. Mattaliano, who has lived in Hell’s Kitchen for 36 years, saw the children’s letters as a testament to the immigrant struggle in New York.

“I’m sharing their space,” he said. Their spirits remain in the apartment, he believes, forever young, in something of a Hell’s Kitchen snow globe.

He has written a movie script based on the letters, titled “Present From the Past.” It is fictionalized, but includes the letters quoted word for word and the children depicted as spirits in the apartment.

Mr. Mattaliano said he had attracted the interest of investors and hoped to start working on the film by the spring, using Broadway actors and shooting in Hell’s Kitchen and indoors on a set that replicates his apartment. But even after he had written the script, he knew almost nothing about Alfred or Mary. He wanted to know more, and he wanted to give the letters to their family. He began looking on genealogy websites and found census data that had basic information about the family. With the help of a reporter and a researcher from The New York Times, he found out more, including the father’s death.

By 1920, Mary, Alfred and their mother had moved up to West 76th Street. As young adults, Mary worked as a stenographer and Alfred as a printer. By 1930, Mary had married the similarly named George McGahan and moved to the Bronx, and later to Queens. Her brother also married.

But, so far, Mr. Mattaliano has not found any living blood relative. Neither sibling appeared to have children and both apparently died in Queens; Mary in 1979, at 82, three years after her husband. She is buried in Flushing. Alfred’s burial location is unclear, perhaps because his birth name was John Alfonse McGann. He seems to have died childless in 1965 in Queens. His wife, Mae, died in 1991.

Mr. Mattaliano met with Bruce Abrams, a volunteer at the Division of Old Records in the Surrogate’s Court in Lower Manhattan, and saw proof of the 1904 death of the children’s father.

“So their mother became the breadwinner — that’s why they couldn’t afford a wagon,” he said. “She was a widow at 35 with two kids.”

On a recent weekday, Mr. Mattaliano took the No. 7 train to Flushing, carrying a small, potted tree for Ms. McGahan’s grave site. He walked into the office at Mount St. Mary’s Cemetery and was told her grave location: Division 11, Row F, Grave 108. The modest headstone bore the name McGahan, but only her husband’s name, George, not Mary’s. Mr. Mattaliano said he would look into having Ms. McGahan’s name added to the gravestone. He put his hand on the grave and murmured little Mary’s Christmas reminder to Santa: “Please do not forget the poor.”

“You know, I might have to come out here every Christmas,” he said as he turned to leave, and then added over his shoulder, “I’ll be back.”

## Message From The President

December.....Christmas.....Family.....Tradition.....

Where....When...How....and each family's story.....your story.

The first Christmas tree in America: where did it happen, when did it happen? Does it have religious connotations?

One theory is that trimmed Christmas trees were used during the American Revolution by Hessian prisoners. Pennsylvania wins the distinction of being the first state to decorate with a Christmas tree because of it's German immigrants and Moravian customs.

Many of the most interesting traditions are unique to our Pennsylvania German heritage. Candles have always been a part of Christmas celebrations. In the Old World Germany, Martin Luther is credited as being the first person to put candles on a tree, "to represent the glory and beauty of the stars above Bethlehem." It is interesting to note the old tradition in Europe of "illumination," whereby the birthday of a prince was celebrated by putting candles in the windows.

Nativity scenes are popular at Christmas, and the "Putz" is the Pennsylvania Dutch interpretation of the creche. Related to the old medieval mystery plays, the putz may have originated to help children better appreciate the Christmas story. The word "putz" is from the German "putzen" for "to decorate, especially to adorn a church."

Our modern Santa Claus, of course, evolved over many centuries to what he is today. December 6th was St. Nicholas Day in Catholic countries of Europe, and the Rhineland area became the center of a St. Nicholas cult. With the Reformation these saints days disappeared, and Protestants changed the focus to Christmas Eve and the arrival of Beltznickel...{Belsnickel}.

He was a figure to be feared, wearing a hat, wig, and long heavy coat. In addition to his bag of goodies, he would also carry a switch to "punish" naughty children. When Beltznickel's whip rattled the windows, the children were frightened and he was a creature to be feared.

The Old World Germans decorated their tree with stars, angels, toys, gilded nuts, and candies wrapped in bright papers.

It is clear we owe a great deal to the Pennsylvania Germans who brought their customs to the New World. In understanding this heritage, perhaps we can better appreciate the meanings and history behind the symbols and modern images so prevalent today.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to all.

Ron Pennypacker  
God Bless America

## Greetings from Krampus

Have you been good this year? If not, being overlooked by the great benevolent Santa in the sky should perhaps be the least of your worries... let us introduce you to Krampus. Popular in German-speaking Alpine folklore, the figure of Krampus is a



devil-like horned creature who punishes badly-behaved children during the Christmas season. As one can see from the scenes played out on the "Krampuskarten" featured below, a rather sinister form of the normal Christmas card,



this punishment usually took the form of kidnapping, with Krampus often depicted whisking naughty children away to hell or

some other similarly distressing location. Such cards have been exchanged in Europe since the 1800s and were particularly popular in the early part of the 20th century, often accompanied with the phrase *Grüß vom Krampus* (Greetings from the Krampus). The origin of Krampus is not entirely clear. Some folklorists postulate a pre-Christian origin for the figure, with the *ruten*, the bundle of branches he is shown holding (when not wielding chains), having significance in pre-Christian pagan initiation rites. In addition to the exchange of cards the tradition finds expression in *Krampusnacht*, the night preceding the Feast of St Nicholas on the 6th December, where the hairy devil appears on the streets frightening children and dispensing coal and the *ruten* bundles to homes and businesses.



## **The Envelopes** **Bruce Pennypacker**

The following entries are the accounts of our search for the men and women who were serving in the Armed Forces during the general election of 1944. These brave people took the time to mail in their votes, and I'm certain that they had "encouragement" from their superiors. The envelopes for those ballots have survived, and it has been our task to return them to the families of these soldiers and sailors.

**JOSEPH ANTHONY KUHN** b. 15 Jul 1923, d. 25 Feb 2000. Lt. 401<sup>st</sup> FTR. SQ 370<sup>th</sup> FTR. GR.  
Address on the envelope from 1944 is 351 Walnut St. Royersford.

This has been a difficult search; several leads and dead ends. As of now, I haven't been able to make contact with any family members.

This is the information I found in Joseph's obituary:

Air Force Colonel, 76

He was born July 15, 1923, in Roxborough, Pa. He was a fighter pilot in the Army Air Forces during World War II, flying 79 missions in the European Theater. He was later stationed at Lowry Air Force Base as an Air Rescue pilot. He also flew during the Korean and Vietnam wars. He retired after 31 years. On Nov. 24, 1951, he married Nancy Coleman in Wiesbaden, West Germany. He later worked for Northrop Aircraft in Tehran, Iran, and for Lockheed Aircraft in Burbank, Calif. He was a co-founder of the P-38 National Association, its first president and editor of its newsletter, "Lightning Strikes," for 10 years. He was also a member of the Air Rescue Association, Daedalians, the AF Association, Knights of Columbus and Retired Officers Association.

The obituary lists 5 sons, 2 daughters and a brother by name, and says there are 17 grandchildren. I am trying to locate a relative.

Finally got a call from Joseph's oldest son. He seemed thrilled to hear about the envelope. He told me that I, "had made his day, made his month, made his year". Joseph's wife is still living and is the family genealogist. She will, undoubtedly, be anxious to see the envelope.

Joseph's son told me that he never lived in Royersford but still has relatives and friends of the family living there. He said Joseph's father was a plumber in Royersford. I remember the plumbing business. Another interesting fact is that my grandfather lived at 343 Walnut Street, just down the street from the Kuhn's. Undoubtedly, they knew each other well.

## *Pannebakker Family Association Web Site*

If you would like a user name and password, you must contact Bruce Pennypacker at, [throwcoach@gmail.com](mailto:throwcoach@gmail.com) and the necessary information will be sent to you.

Below is the URL for the web site:

<http://www.pannebakkerfamilyassociation.com>

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# *Pannebakker Family Association*



The Pannebakker Family Association is an outgrowth of the family reunion held at Pennypacker Mills, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania on July 2-4, 1999. The reunion celebrated the 300th year wedding anniversary of Hendrick Pannebecker and Eve Umstat, in Germantown, Pennsylvania in the year 1699. In the words of the Steering Committee of the reunion, "We hope that the 1999 Pfannebecker-Umstat Reunion will lead to the growth of a family association, which will provide a forum for conversation, collection and preservation of information, and a sense of lasting community among the heirs of this rich cultural heritage."