

A Christmas story related by Robert Biddle, School Principal, retired.

When you are the principal of a one room school in rural Ontario, your responsibility and instincts were often tested. My instincts told me not to agree to changing the annual Christmas concert to a nativity play and Christmas Pageant.

But I did.

It was to be the last Christmas Pageant we ever did.

For instance, there was a girl, in this, my first country school, she was called Jennifer Page. She could talk...God how she could talk...incessant. She could talk your head off, and with a lisp yet. When the kid ran out of talk she would make it up.

"Jennifer will you be quiet."

"Scir, I wasn't talking scir."

"Heaven help us if you ever do then."

Every school has a Jennifer, so I was told. I think she grew up and probably married. I hope he was deaf...if he wasn't he is now.

Well Jennifer, she got to be Mary, 'heavy with child' in the Nativity play.

Whoopity Braddock got to play Joseph.

Anyway, that's how it started.

With the help of Miss Cooper, a part-time teacher, she and those miserable kids had sorted out who plays who and written the script.

The story line and the characters was to follow the original I was told. The kids having to improvise and get their own costumes.

As I say, Whoopity Braddock was to play Joseph and it was necessary for him to find his own costume for the part. Whoopity's mother, a sensible woman, wouldn't give him a sheet or bed cover to dress up as Joseph. He could use an old towel or the remains of a horse blanket.

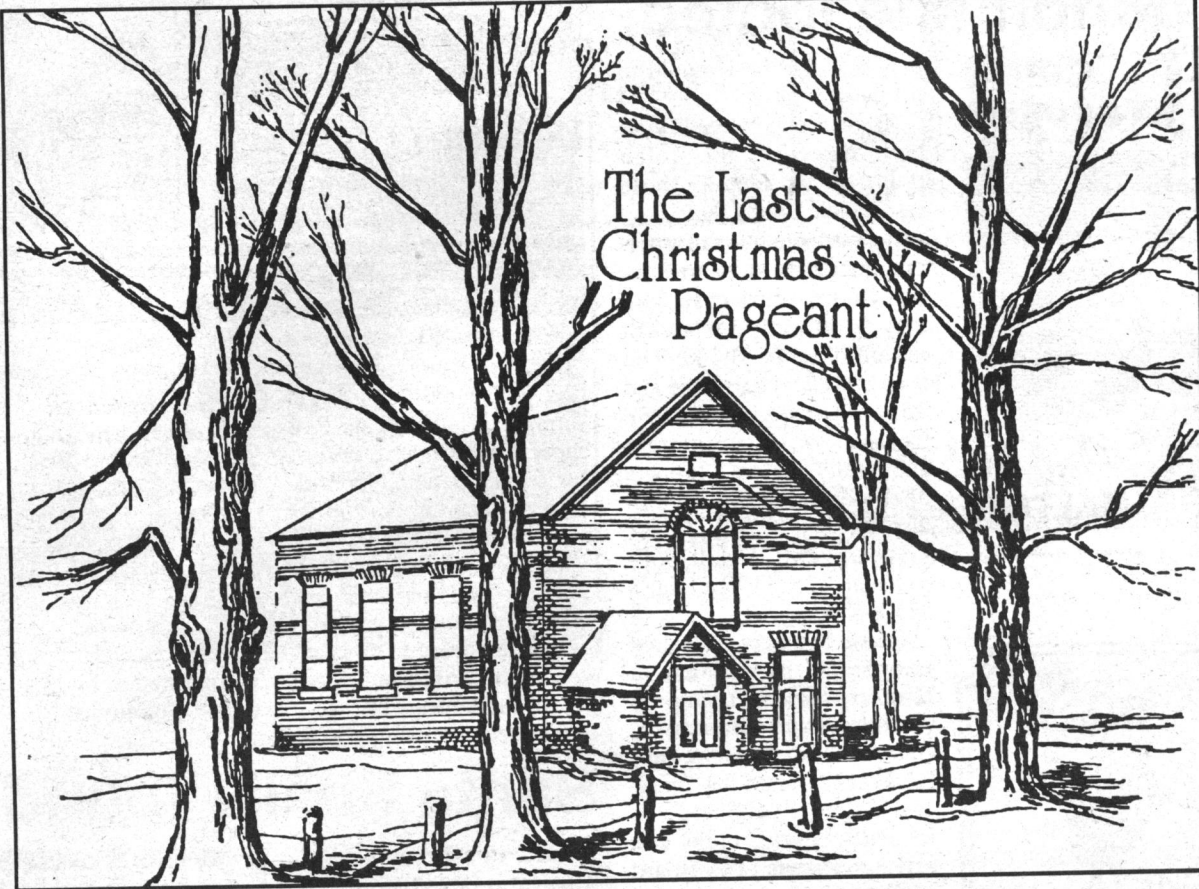
Andrew Stewart's mother, on the other hand, let him have a bed cover, with stripes on, and a colorful bath robe...so he got to be Joseph because he had the costume and Whoopity got relegated to take Andrew's part as the innkeeper.

Not the most famous casting change in the world...but just as shattering. Whoopity didn't like it and said so, but Miss Cooper said the change was final and Whoopity lost his star billing.

For what seemed an eternity, the school was filled with angels - a true acting experience on the part of those miserable kids - then shepherds and Romans and three Kings - but no stage.

Anyway, Miss Cooper knew some amateur theatre people who loaned us two curtains which we hung on a wire across the school room. We opened them by pulling on a cord, but, to my lasting regret, we never found out how to close them.

The Christmas Pageant and nativity play went on the evening before we broke for Christmas. All the parents



came-aunts, uncles, older brothers and sisters and cousins. The place was packed. We organized some hot chocolate, someone found some cider, and there were cookies and cake for after. The atmosphere heightened by the smell of damp clothes, hot bodies, condensation and frosted windows.

The play was on.

As only one curtain opened, there was a delay while we had to reach up with a stick to open the other.

The historic pageant blundered on as Arabs walked on to pay their taxes - in dollars yet - and a monotone developed especially for aspiring Thespians.

"I have come to pay my taxes."

"Your taxes are five dollars."

"I don't have five dollars."

"Then we will take five sheep."

"Then I won't have anything."

"You should have thought of that before you became a taxpayer."

The three Kings came on following a star - we had cut one out of cardboard and covered it with silver paper - the idea was to pull it across the stage hung on a piece of string. Like as in following a star. Trouble was, it turned sideways so nobody could see it.

And there were our three kings. Two of the bigger boys and little Freddy McDougle. Freddy took one look at the crowd and froze.

"I have gold," says the first king.

"I have frankenstein," says the second king, looking heavenward for inspiration, then to Freddy.

Little Freddy looked at the packed room and wet himself...royally, I might add.

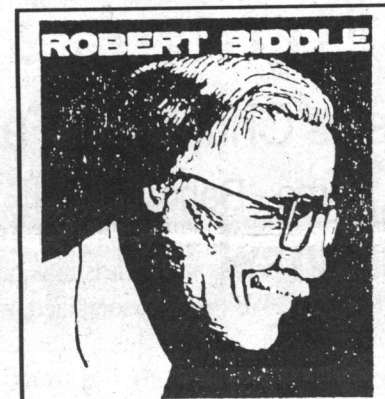
How I wished we knew how to close those curtains.

Then Joseph and Mary arrive.

Andrew, with his bed cover tied with a cord around his head and the bottom of the bathrobe adjusted with safety pins, and Jennifer, a long skirt

with a shawl and someone's wedding veil, with a cushion shoved up her skirt and tied with a rope around her waist. Disaster was pending as she lisped, "I am the virgin Mary, and I am heavy with child."

There was only an imaginary door at the Inn and I had the distinct feeling Christianity was being set back a few hundred years and we were watching vaudeville as Andrew with knuckles raised said, "Knock, knock."



Condensed from: *A Man Without Class or Principle*. By Robert Biddle. ROBERT BIDDLE is a retired School Principle, (those miserable kids forced me into early retirement) a character full of years and stories about his one room school and country life. The school has long since gone and the system changed. Time is taking its toll but not before old man Biddle related this episode when Bethlehem and the Nativity came to school.

"Who's there?" pipes up Whoopity. Towel over his arm.

"Joseph."

"Joseph who?"

"Joseph of Nazareth with my wife Mary," says Andrew.

"The virgin," lisps Jennifer, "heavy with child."

"Yes," continues Andrew, "she is heavy with child, do you have any room at the Inn?"

Innkeeper Whoopity opens the

door and says, "Mary can come in, but you can piss off - I wanted that part."

I hope God was watching our last Christmas pageant.

Every father was rolling in the aisles - every mother in panic. Whoopity's mother cried. I think she was prepared to sacrifice her only begotten son there and then on the stage.

Miss Cooper was very white.

We should have figured out how to close those curtains.

Meanwhile, having stated his position honestly, Whoopity slammed the door. Sometimes being honest can be a fault. Who knows, the real Joseph would have been happy enough to go to Bethlehem in a horse blanket, and we were at fault.

With the reaction from the audience, those miserable kids obviously thought the play was a fantastic success as they stood with wide grins on their faces.

The result was inspirational to Jennifer, who couldn't keep her mouth shut and, relying on what facts she had gleaned about the mode of transport from the original story, walked to the door of the Inn and said, "I think we must find some place to go. Come on Joseph, get your ass out of here and let's go to the stable."

Miss Cooper went to the washroom.

I had run out of ideas for closing the curtains and was frantically searching for a way to serialize this performance when Jennifer, giving birth to a doll, found she could not untie the rope holding the cushion on her belly. So she shoved it around to her back and while all the angels sang *Away In A Manger*, she stood looking like the hunchback of Notre Dame.

It was the last Christmas Pageant we ever did.

Whoopity did not show up at school the next morning. It was the

last day before we broke for Christmas holidays, so we closed at noon and sent the children home.

When everyone had gone home and I had checked the stove and locked up, I did not go home. Instead, I walked up the Fifth Line to the farm where Whoppity lives.

His mother told me he was doing extra chores in the barn. I asked if it was all right, I would like to talk to him. As it was me, she thought it would be proper. I walked through the snow to the barn, opened the door and called his name.

"Robert!"

"I don't want to talk to you, go away, I don't want to talk to anyone."

The troubled voice came from the back of the barn. I walked in, not sure what I was going to say or do. The inside of the barn was dimly lit, heavy with the smell of cattle.

I saw Whoopity with a pitchfork, mucking out the cow stall. As I walked towards him I could see the tear-stained face and could hear sobs that were racking the child's body. He buried his face in his hands. I took the pitchfork.

"This was a job I always got," I ventured. "Mucking out. Never cared for it too much. Everyone else takes credit when it's done."

"My mother gave me proper hell last night."

"Mothers are like that, you know."

The dirty but proud little face turned and the eyes met mine.

"Do you think people will forget about last night, sir?"

This was a time for honesty.

"No, I don't think so. Oh, I'm sure they will forgive you, but I don't think they will ever forget you."

"Is that good?" he asked.

"It's not the best thing that's going to happen to you, and not the worst. We are not going to get everything we want in this world. It is important to try to get along with others, though. That way, if we fail, we should learn something, ready for the next try. And there will be another time. But what I came here for was to tell you I have a Christmas present for you at the house and wondered if you would like to walk over and get it?"

We went to see his mother, and as it was me and Christmas, she thought it would be proper for him to accept.

I waited while he washed his hands and face at the big kitchen sink and his mother helped him into his long overcoat, gave him a scarf and woolen cap that he pulled over his head.

"He's a good boy, really." Mrs. Braddock said.

"I know," I replied as we walked off together.

Soon he was swinging his arms and there was a jauntiness in his step as he kept pace with me. I seemed to think it was the right thing to do and it was a good idea.

Then I began wondering what in the hell I was going to give him for a present when I got home.

Seasons Greetings from the merchants and staff of the Georgetown Marketplace!



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