

A Christmas Fit for Queen Victoria

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December 14, 2014



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Chicago Tribune

News / Opinion / Commentary

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Four draft horses haul a 30-foot Christmas tree down River Street in Manistee, Mich., during the annual Victorian Sleighbell Parade. (HANDOUT)

By Joanne Cleaver

The trombone band refused to yield. It would not march behind horses.

If the parade committee wanted a brass band ringing carols into the clear night sky, then the committee must guarantee a road-apple-free street for marching, as it is impossible to simultaneously slide the trombone and quickstep around horse droppings.

Could the Victorian Sleighbell Parade committee come up with a solution in time to placate the band while ensuring that the draft horses pulling the Christmas tree down River Street would, as always, be rung in by trombones?

It was July. There was no time to lose. The committee was on it. And to my surprise, I was on the committee.

My husband and I bought a condo in Manistee, a small town southwest of Traverse City. When we're not in Chicago or visiting clients, we're there. We figured we'd better try out small-town living well in advance of retirement to see if we could stand it. Or, more to the point, if the town could stand us.

Manistee is not "the town that time forgot." Which is good because, usually, time has the right idea.

Manistee wants to be remembered. It wants to be remembered now as a place to live and visit, and it wants to be remembered as one of the ports that shipped white pine to rebuild Chicago after the Great Fire in 1871. Manistee had its own Great Fire that year, too, and rebuilt with brick and cast-iron, resulting in a historic downtown that is now on the National Register of Historic Places. A century ago, Manistee sawmills produced enough lumber to build mansions at home and across the lake too.

Victorian 1-percenters were the lumber barons. They

flaunted their wealth by building mansions swathed in imported mahogany paneling and lacy woodwork. Now a few of these mansions are frosted with Victorian swags and angels, must-sees during Old Christmas Weekend held early each December in Manistee. Visitors can poke through shops like the Happy Owl bookstore, where the staff reserves your Sunday paper for you by writing your first name on page one, and get cookies at the Daily Bakehouse, a workingman's cottage converted to sugar palace.

But all of that comes after the yearlong steeplechase of actually getting this annual show on the road. Santa will set up shop in the municipal marina building, as always. But how will Santa actually arrive? It would be a piece of poetry to have the U.S. Postal Service deliver him, given that they are new to Sleighbell, what with their pop-up post office at the craft show that takes over the high school.

But the oldest functioning post office vehicle available is a truck. Not Victorian.

Why not have Santa sail up the river and disembark onto the municipal pier?

"We looked into that one year," says one committee member. "But the Coast Guard requires him to have a life jacket and that kind of spoils the effect."

Santa will revert to the norm of arriving in a horse-

drawn carriage, which brings us back to horses.

Draft horses pull the 30-foot, decorated, pine tree down River Street, fully upright, in defiance of all common sense and several laws of physics. The trombone band refuses to follow the horses. Poop bags positioned under the horses' tails would solve the problem but must be paid for — an unappealing placement for a potential sponsor.

Or is it? It's a guaranteed attention-getter. That's what any sponsor wants, just like in the big city.

Life in northern Michigan isn't the adjustment you might assume. Living in downtown Chicago involves hundreds — thousands — of options for dry-cleaners, restaurants, doctors, entertainment. But in the end, you usually choose one dry-cleaner, a couple of favorite restaurants, one family doctor and a favorite theater. In Manistee, you still end up with one of each. You just start out with two of each.

I don't know about you, but I'm lucky if I have time for a couple of movies each month. In Chicago, we can walk to a total of 34 screens. In Manistee, we can walk to one theater with two screens. We end up seeing the same movie either way — and in Manistee, it's at the Vogue, which was just resurrected by bad-boy filmmaker and rabble-rouser Michael Moore. He and his merry band of economic development types are on a mission to revive small-town downtowns by

bringing back their theaters. It worked in Traverse City, and it's working in Manistee.

What would a Victorian weekend be without a visit from the queen herself? Somehow, the Sleighbell committee overlooked this vital character until November. This oversight was discovered only after the horse-versus-band situation was rectified by drafting a local 4-H Club to sweep the street after the horses and before the trombones.

Queen Victoria cut a wide swath in history and also in real life, as is obvious in the photos of her royal dourness. I'm not sure if it's a compliment to be nominated, but it's a chance to camp up Sleighbell with a black velvet steampunk dress and a petticoat of black glitter organza.

My crown will be arriving shortly from Ye Olde Amazon. I'm going to hold onto it for next year.

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