

A Christmas Story... the Leaper and the Gestapo

By GEORGE BEAHON

This being an Olympic year and this being Christmas time made it easy for Martin Rooney to recall another Christmas, way back in 1944. Don't leave in a hurry. There is a connection.

The Martin Rooney family is very comfortably bedded down in Rochester this week, although this will be the last one here because the Rooneys are moving to Dallas next month. Back to 1944, in Stalag Luft I, where Rooney spent what he still considers a most satisfactory Christmas day.

The settings were not ideal, since this prisoner of war camp run by the Germans was bounded on three sides by forest and due north by the Baltic Sea, in which nobody was swimming. Nobody ever escaped and made it stick.

Among the 9,000 Air Corps prisoners who were contained by 2,000 guards, hundreds of police dogs and barbed wire barriers were some clever men. They saved the wisps of red celluloid from cigaret packs to make ornaments for Christmas trees. Everyone gave and received one present. Rooney spent months carving a gavel against the day his lawyer friend might be freed and returned to the U.S. to become a judge. His navigator-colleague is using that gavel today.

Midnight Mass was celebrated by an English Paulist priest captured at Dunkirk. A hand-wound Victrola

played records, most popular of which, naturally, was "Into Each Life, Some Rain Must Fall."

When Rooney's B-17 was chopped up by fighters over Munich, five bailed out before it blew up; six were killed. After his first few months in Stalag Luft I, Rooney became a member of the XYZ committee, responsible for escape attempts. Many of these were planned and tried merely to escape boredom. Some who tried were frozen, starved, shot or maimed by dogs. All of those who did make it out safely eventually were returned for long periods in solitary.

Thanks to the ingenuity of some American engineers, the dogs didn't last long. These engineers fashioned a bellows operated by a foot treadle, devising a high-pitched whistle. The supersonic sound, inaudible to human ear, drove many of the dogs mad. Surviving police dogs were removed by the baffled Gestapo guards.

With the dogs gone, escape tries became more popular. Custom called for escape plans to be submitted to XYZ, which would provide maps, food, shoes, advice and a diversionary cover.

Shortly before Christmas 1944, this tall, lean young man—his name escapes Rooney, but he could recognize it by scanning a roster of 1938 Olympic athletes—decided to cut out of Stalag Luft I. The flier—they

called him The Leaper for his collegiate and Olympic pole vaulting prowess—took off without notice. With thousands of prisoners milling around the yard, and equipped only with a home-made pole, The Leaper announced to his crew, "I'm leaving."

An Olympic vaulter clears only a slender bar. The Leaper had to clear two barbed wire fences, three feet apart at the top, ten feet high, in between guard towers 100 yards apart.

Up and over he went. Landing unnoticed, he stuck his hands into his pockets and strolled casually into the woods, no longer a prisoner. Nobody gave The Leaper much chance to stay out for long.

He had to be caught, and a few days later, half starved, shivering and slightly punchy, but curiously happy, he was brought back in. Here the Gestapo took over. How did he get out? Who helped? What guards had he bribed? How did it happen?

The Leaper told the truth, for which he was clapped into solitary. He refused to change his story. The Gestapo refused to believe it. Finally, an exasperated Gestapo leader ordered, "If that's the way you got out, show us. Or face a firing squad."

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'Soul Pole Santa'

Photo by Laurence E. Keefe

The beard, the bells and the belly were the same, but his face was black when Santa Clause came to St. Lucy's parish this year. Keith Gavin and Yvonne Sizer, students at St. Lucy's school, are shown on Santa's lap telling him what they want.

Our Barbara Becomes
Salesgirl to Explore . . .

...the Other Side Of Christmas

By BARBARA MOYNEHAN

Sporting my McCurdy's name tag and carrying my sales book, I eagerly took the down elevator to my charge for the day, the third floor toy department. The director of employee training wished me good luck and informed me I had chosen what is "traditionally the busiest Saturday" to pose as a clerk for a story on department store life at Christmastime.

Barry King's discouraging words did not faze me. What really worried me was the fact that information learned a couple of nights before in a training session for my day behind a cash register was very foggy in my memory.

Classification tally, sales index, department number, clerk number, cash send, credit masters — a veritable foreign lan-

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What Do You Think . . .

About Sending Cards?

By CHARLES RANDISI

Are you sending more Christmas cards, but enjoying it less? If you have found that this Yuletide tradition is one you can do without, and have considered cutting down your list, or eliminating it altogether, you are not alone.

On a hunch that people are tiring of mailing out their season's greetings, the Courier-Journal contacted some people to find out what they think of the practice.

The general trend was that Christmas cards are not that popular any more.

Mrs. Catherine Lindsay, who directs Volunteers in Partnership, a program for young people on probation, says, "I have never sent out Christmas cards. I do send long letters to my out-of-town friends that I do not see often."

She said that, rather than sending cards to her friends and relatives, she prefers to wish them "Merry Christmas" personally.

Father Gerald Connor, diocesan director of vocations, bought two boxes of cards several years ago, and has thus far used only half of them. "I used

to send about 500 Christmas cards every year," he says, "but about eight or nine years ago, I discovered that it was a total, complete fake. I said to myself, 'This is absurd.'"

He says that if he can't sit down and write them all personally, "I'd rather not do it."

Sister Mary George Dash, director of retirement planning for the Sisters of St. Joseph, says she limits her cards "to the lonely and alone, Sisters who have lost their families." She expects to keep the number of cards sent to "this side of 50."

Sister Patricia Flynn, RSM, of the Boys' Workshop on Joseph Avenue, says that she sends Christmas cards to her family only. She usually has no time to send to anyone else.

Mrs. Connie Della Pietra, wife of the mayor of East Rochester, has a different approach to Christmas cards. She has cut her list from 200 "down to around 40," and with the money she saves on postage and cards, she buys a Christmas meal for a needy Rochester family.

Like Mrs. Lindsay, she now sends her holiday greetings "to friends and relatives I never see."

Roger D'Aprix, who heads up the employe communications program for the Business Group at Xerox, took a break last year from sending Christmas cards. He and his wife Theresa "did not really have a very good reason, except that we were very busy last year and we had some questions about the practice."

But this year Mr. and Mrs. D'Aprix will send out a limited number of religious cards because they figure that it is "a nice way to greet friends."

Jim Foley, restaurateur and owner of Midtown Tower's Top of the Plaza Restaurant, says: "My wife still sends Christmas cards to our friends, but if it was my decision, I guess I wouldn't." He doesn't send any Christmas cards to his customers, because, he said, "I see my customers more often, and can shake their hand and wish them a 'Merry Christmas' personally."

Sending cards cannot be totally out of style, however. Father Charles Lavery, president of St. John-Fisher College, could not be reached personally, but his secretary, Mrs. John McMahon, said that this year, Father Lavery (with the help of his staff) was sending 1200 Christmas cards. That's a lot of envelopes to lick.



Barbara Moynihan on the job.

Photo by Laurence E. Keefe