



"HISTORIC" MEETING — A legend tells that the Christ Child healed the broken leg of Santa Claus one Christmas Eve. Their meeting is depicted by this statue, "The Kneeling Santa," by Rudolph Vargas.

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Makings of Christmas

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have also folded their own ingredients into the seasonal fricassée.

In the Middle East, the lunar cycle sometimes causes a Moslem holiday to coincide with Christmas week, and "Silent Night" recordings are available in the bazaars in Arabic, along with reissues of Bing Crosby's "White Christmas."

The Jewish "Festival of Lights" or Hanuk-

kah, which also falls within the same month as Christmas, was once a relatively minor festival that now ranks next in importance to the High Holy Days and Passover; according to Rabbi Judea B. Miller of Temple B'rith Kodesh in Rochester. Prior to the 19th and 20th centuries, the traditional annual occasion for the giving of gifts in the Jewish world was Purim, rather than Hanukkah.

According to the Talmud, Hanukkah has its origins in the defilement of the holy oil in the

Temple of Jerusalem by the pagan Syrian-Greeks, during the 2nd century B.C. When the Maccabees defeated the enemy forces and entered the temple, they found only a single cruse of oil. Although this cruse contained only enough oil to burn for one day, "a miracle occurred and the oil in the little cruse burned for eight days."

To commemorate the miracle, devout Jews have traditionally lighted candles for eight days during December. Yet until the 19th century, few who observed Hanukkah knew much about its true historic origins, because of a long-standing rabbinical ban on the reading of the "Apocrypha" — books previously hidden away because for many centuries they were not considered sacred, says Rabbi Miller.

When the apocryphal Books of the Maccabees were finally brought to light, it was discovered that the Maccabees had once fought and won a significant war of liberation from the religious repression of the pagan King Antiochus, who had destroyed the Torahs found in the cities of Judea and massacred mothers and children. With this revelation, Hanukkah, which now encompassed the Feast of the Maccabees, was elevated in status to become an important Jewish holiday.

It's probably no coincidence that the over-commercialization of Christmas by secularized Christians has had a sort of spillover effect on Hanukkah, at least in terms of the significance of giving and receiving presents. Our Jewish friends joke about the notion of a "Hanukkah bush," and reveal that their kids experience tough sledding around Christmastime, wondering why their Christian friends get to have Christmas trees and oodles of fulfilled wishes from Santa Claus, whose appealingly portly frame is plainly visible in every shopping mall within at least a 30-mile radius.

If materialistic overkill begins to get you down before the holiday season is even in full swing, you might consider checking in on a new holiday celebrated after the Christmas wrappings are thoroughly undone and the plum pudding is pleasant history. For the past 17 years, black Americans have observed Kwanzaa, a cultural festival held December 26 through January 1.

While Kwanzaa is not a religious holiday, it retains the spiritual essence of its African roots. Kwanzaa means "first fruits" in Swahili, the language that contributes the holiday's ritual-

tic principles and greetings of "Umoja" (unity), "Kujichagulia" (self-determination), "Ujima" (collective work and responsibility), "Ujamaa" (cooperative economics), "Nia" (purpose), "Kuumba" (creativity) and "Imani" (faith).

Kwanzaa celebrations have no prescribed format, according to Sharron Morita, whose essay on Kwanzaa has been published in a book entitled *Winter Festivals* (San Jose, Calif.: Resource Publications, Inc., 1986). The only prerequisites are "fellowship and the presence of the black community," she quotes a Kwanzaa specialist.

Handmade gifts are given to children only, and Kwanzaa gatherings frequently feature African folk dancing, songs and stories, and recitations of poetry by such eminent black American poets as Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Dudley Randall and James Weldon Johnson.

We'd all do well to return such "music of the spheres" to our Christian winter festivals, our own celebrations of the holiday season. Bob Flanagan, in another *Winter Festivals* essay, "Light Out of Darkness," postulates that we celebrate Christmas too soon, and hardly in the proper metaphysical framework.

In order to fully savor Christmas as "a time of beginnings, of the return of light, of light born of darkness," says Flanagan, we must first reach a thorough appreciation of the mid-winter darkness, the virtual spiritual eclipse that preceded Christ's coming. Just as the Hanukkah menorah is lighted one candle at a time over a span of eight days, so Christians might borrow a small measure of patience from other traditions, in order to proceed gradually to the dawning of the light of Christ's redemption.

"We need to lengthen our Christmas festival of light, and we need to do so in the style of the lighting of the Hanukkah menorah," Flanagan observes. "Secular observance of Christmas does indeed lengthen the season, but brings us to the blaze of light too soon . . ."

All of us need to "walk in the darkness," Flanagan concludes, before we can lift our voices in the glorious strains of Handel's "Messiah" on Christmas morning: "Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given."

In the full festival of light revealed on "Christmas day in the morning," what a joyful noise we might collectively create.

A new wrinkle in 'action' toys

By Linda Quinlan

W I've been wrestling, this Christmas season, with my conscience and my six year old's overwhelming desire to be "one of the guys." This unfortunately, means gung-ho soldier figures and their accompanying barrage of war-related paraphernalia, nestled beneath the Christmas tree among the hockey sticks, Pound Puppies, other stuffed animals and construction sets.

I won't equivocate. He has Transformers — and lots of them. The Decepticons are often at war with the Autobots, yet they're all fanciful figures; he knows that Transformers aren't "real," or so he tells me.

Still, "action figures" are in reality lifelike soldiers in realistic war vehicles, complete with massive guns and other apparently deadly equipment.

Where do we draw the line?

My husband says he played with cowboys and Indians, as well as those little plastic soldiers. I remember my brothers having them, too. Thank the Lord they were all spared from war. But they were also spared from the accompanying cartoons that make today's "action" toys seem all the more real.

The seeming reality of today's violent action figures is the reason Fairport resident Edward LoPrade and his wife, Judy, have made toys their ministry.

LoPrade admits to having played with soldier, knight and cowboy/Indian figures as a child. But then, he says, children relied on their imaginations — not advertising or cartoons — to decide how any given figure would think or act.

"We had to really think," LoPrade recalls. "We'd make up our own plots, and really, they weren't that violent . . . they weren't bloody massacres . . . The toys didn't teach us to 'kill, maim, destroy!'"

The LoPrades, who describe themselves as evangelical charismatics, have been active in Good Grief Ministries for several years. The ministry is an educational project aimed at teaching parents and educators about toys that indoctrinate children with the values of violence, witchcraft and wizardry, secular humanism and sexual temptation.

"Most people have no conception of what happens when a child plays with a toy . . . children project themselves into the toy," Edward LoPrade explains. And with today's trend toward violent toys, "a natural healthy thing is turned into a tool of Satan."

But with the advent of Wee Win Toys and Accessories, Inc., a Christian toy company founded in Houston, Texas, in 1984, the LoPrades — who are distributors for Wee Win's products — believe they'll beat the devil at his own game.

Wee Win's oldest product line is a group of toys called "Heroes of the Kingdom." They're "action figures," too, but with a twist: Wee Win features such immortal biblical adversaries as David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, and Jonah

and the Whale."

Edward LoPrade sees these toys as the antidote to other toys he claims are the devil's handiwork. "We're in a battle and we are taking a stand," he says, "We don't want Satan or anyone hurting our kids."

Toys fall into three categories, says LoPrade, who up until last year was an administrative planning and development consultant with the diocesan Division of Urban Services. The first category is "amoral" toys — trucks, erector sets, dolls, educational playthings, etc. — which have no moral content whatsoever. These, he says are perfectly fine and natural, but are not enough.

He describes a second category — for example, violent toys that are supposed to rely on the supernatural realm for their "powers" — as being "occultic." When children play with such toys, he claims, they are taught the values of wanton violence, witchcraft and wizardry, and secular humanism.

In order to combat the negative influence of such toys on children, they must be replaced with "wholesome, constructive Christian toys" like the Wee Win line.

On the face of it, however, the Heroes of the Kingdom action figures seem much like Masters of the Universe lost in a time warp. The only difference seems to be the biblical-period attire in which the "heroes" dressed.

The Goliath figure, paired with David in a book-and-tape package, is positively barbaric. Dressed in golden armor, he brandishes a huge sword and confronts the comparatively tiny David with a menacing grin. How is their violence any different from that of the other action toys?

LoPrade welcomes this question, answering it by saying that violence does exist in the world and must be acknowledged. The battle between David and Goliath differs from the warfare of other action figures in three ways, he says.

First of all, David draws his power in the battle from God, not from white or black magic — as He-Man and Skeletor are supposed to do. Secondly, LoPrade explains, David and Goliath went into a one-on-one battle so that full-scale warfare between the Israelite and Philistine armies could be prevented. This, he believes, teaches children that there are alternatives to war.

And finally, he notes, David goes into battle with Goliath because God tells him that he must do so to save his people, the Israelites, not because he enjoys battle. LoPrade is quick to contrast David's motivations with the "make my day" attitude promoted by some other toys.

And among the Heroes product line are other, distinctly non-violent characters — Jonah, John the Baptist, Peter, Moses and Jesus.

In addition to his action figure line, Wee Win and Good Grief Ministries have kicked off a Toy Awareness Program, designed to educate parents about "the virtues of quality, wholesome playtime with toys that are not threatening to their



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GOOD VS. EVIL? — The "Heroes of the Kingdom" Christian action figures, right, confront several of their secular counterparts.

child's innocence and behavioral development."

In response to a recent survey indicating that more than 70 percent of mothers believe cuddly, "high-touch" toys are preferable to the high-tech toys that dominate the marketplace, Wee Win decided to augment its action line with a selection of stuffed toys. Parents may now order such "Prince of Peace Pets" as "Born Again Bunny," "Truthful Teddy," "Heavenly Hound," "Guardian Angel Bear," "Beatitude Beagle" and "Sanctified Skunk."

These and the other Wee Win products are available at several Christian bookstores within the Diocese of Rochester.

Toys will always be a bone of contention between parents and children; after all, we're from different generations. As long as the lines of communications remain open, though, I think we'll remain on the right track.

Wee Win Toys may be on the right track, too.