

Christmas In Amana - As Good As It Gets

My goal every Christmas season is to have at least one day that I find myself with family and friends, saying “This is as good as it gets.”

I got lucky somewhat early this year – last Saturday. I had agreed to play some brass quintet music (along with some friends from the Eastern Iowa Brass Band) for Amana’s annual “Prelude to Christmas.”

We performed in the Festhalle barn in Main Amana, where the Tannenbaum Forest was on display – decorated Christmas trees along with nativities, Santa and live toy soldiers. The proceeds from admissions went to the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

You may remember that it snowed all afternoon last Saturday, and the effect in this turn-of-the-century style German village was just magical. The new visitor’s center in Main Amana – built around a century-old grain bin – has a third-floor observation tower that gives panoramic views of the entire town.

The Festhalle turned out to be unheated – the building was preserved as it stood, missing slats and all. Sub-freezing temperatures tend to have an adverse effect on cornet valves and trombone slides, so we employed a hair dryer at intervals to keep things moving.

We had some time to kill between our 3 p.m. and 5 p.m. performances, so Dan – our flugelhorn player – invited us over to the house of his father-in-law, Harvey, for chili and beer. All that Dan had told us about Harvey is that he had retired after running a restaurant for over 30 years and that he keeps a tapped keg in his basement. Say no more.

Harvey lived just down the street, so off we went. He turned out to be a seventies-looking stocky German with ruddy cheeks and a pronounced accent. “Geez, he looks familiar,” I said to myself.

I asked him how long ago he came to this country, and I was surprised when he said he was born here. Then he told me his parents were born

here as well, and that German was the primary language in his household until he was about 18 years old.

After we all had a couple of beers while sitting at the kitchen table, Harvey jumped up and said, "Would you like to hear some music?" Without waiting for an answer, he ran into the next room and he started to play his piano while singing loudly. He was really good – the chords were so complex it sounded like he had extra fingers.

I don't remember what the first song was that he played, but we all knew the words so we started singing loudly ourselves. Since we were too lazy to get out of our chairs in the kitchen, our singing drowned out the piano music filtering in from the living room. Every few measures or so we had to stop singing for a few moments to figure out if we had gotten ahead of or behind Harvey's playing, laugh at ourselves and adjust.

After a few more songs, Harvey came back in and refilled our glasses. He claimed the last song he had played was entitled, "*Hark the herald angels shout, glory to the new-born Kraut.*" We had to physically restrain him from going back to the piano to play "*Nothing could be finer than to be in my recliner with my Schnauuuuuser.*"

I noticed a bill from the Amana Society on the kitchen counter and asked him what he gets billed for. "Everything," he said. He launched into a colorful story about a lawsuit he had lost against the Society, because he had put siding on his house that was not an approved color.

Evidently the Society is a little fussy about what goes on within their borders. "You need a permit to pass gas in church," said Harvey.

Another beer later, Harvey's accent seemed to be getting thicker, and everything he said was absolutely hilarious. He had an endless supply of bad jokes, many of them unsuitable for a family newspaper.

I was sitting there feeling pretty good about life in general when I suddenly had a flash of intoxicated clarity. Harvey's face, his keyboard playing, his singing...

I asked him, “Did you ever wear lederhosen, play the accordion and sing while strolling among the tables at the Ronneberg restaurant?”

“Only when I needed the table space,” he replied.

Small world. The Ronneburg is my favorite place to eat in Amana – my family went there often when I was growing up.

Five o’clock came way too soon, and we stumbled through the snow back to the Festhalle barn for our next performance. The Amana Society did not get their money’s worth out of that one – we were having a little trouble focusing. “This can’t be the same music we were playing before,” mumbled Bob, the tuba player.

But Christmas carols eventually got played and nobody got hurt.

There are still another couple of weeks remaining until Christmas, and <raising my stein of bier> here’s to having many more opportunities to say, “This is as good as it gets.”

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