

PowWow#38

PowWow #38 is by Joyce Worley Katz, created for the monthly assembly of Apa V, Dec. 7, 1996. Thanks to Arnie, for the onerous chores. To quote Gene Shepherd, 'Ah, Glorious Christmas...the center of the kid year.' Trimming the tree is certainly the highspot of this kid's year. the season when all the dolls and cars and ponies come out to play for their month. It's probably also the highspot of kitschy culture; don't gag on the tinsel and lace.

Local Culture

Missouri Christmases were dominated by a cold slow rain that made rainbows of the headlights and the streetlights and the tinsel decorations that hung on Main Street. The snowy season didn't usually start until January, but December could be depended on to produce soggy days. But no matter, the town still preened itself in its humble local culture.

Long about the tenth of the month, Poplar Bluff merchants would start the countdown to Christmas. On the first evening that stores stayed open late, the townsfolk would throng the streets, going from shop to shop to look at the windows, and cast their votes for the prettiest. The florist usually won; Ms. Shannon Flowers made a trip to the Big City each fall, and bought last year's decorations from some store in St. Louis. Animated elves, swans floating on ponds made of mirrors, queenly dolls lordling it over the rest of the toys...these were the ingredients, along with the banks of flowers.

Naturally, that was the night that Santa came to town. With no fanfair, yet always a surprise to small girls, suddenly he'd be on the corner, walking up and down the

block in front of our Court House, ho-ho-ho-ing with the townsfolk. I never talked to Santa, nor shook his hand...he was far too imposing a figure, too important to risk offending. But he was always there, looming over the evening, a tangible promise of toys and treats to come.

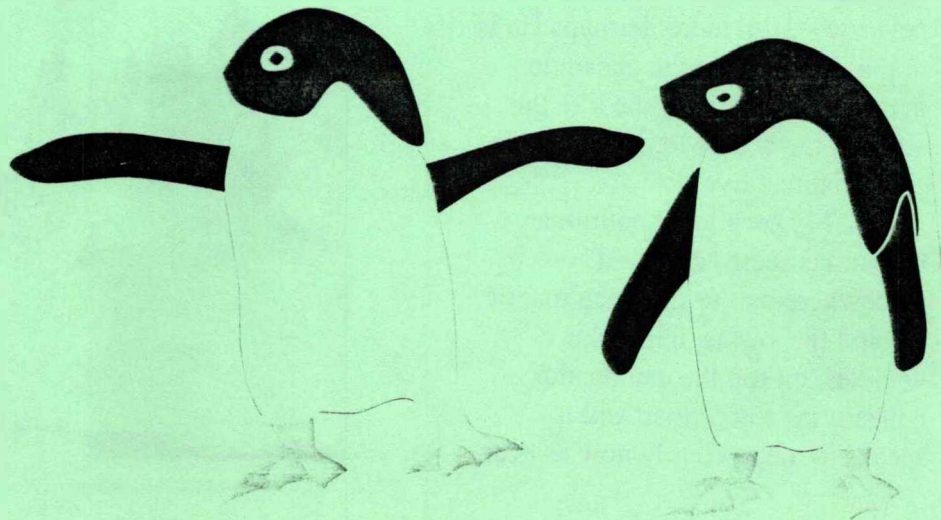
Christmas Eve was spent cooking and wrapping and anticipating, and then off to Church. Until I was five or six, the family lived in the country, and Church meant the Twin Springs Baptist Church on Route 19, a one-room frame building with a flock of 30 or 40 decent souls. They were ministered to by Brother Gene Sells, who once preached against women in red patent leather shoes, walking the streets to hell with

cigarettes dangling from their lips.

I've often gazed out the window on damp December days, hoping to catch sight of this army of red-shoed femmes, and who can blame me for wanting to march in those ranks as well.

Later, when the family moved to town, Christmas Eve was spent at the imposing First Baptist Church on Vine Street. God lived there; somewhere just over the left shoulder of Brother Chester B. Pillow, and He usually manifested himself on Christmas Eve through the chirpy little voices of the Sunday School kids acting out the Christmas pageant. (Once I was a shepherd, and another time a sheep. Don't tell me I don't know Culture.)

Mother always went, and when I was old enough I joined her



in going to Midnight Services at the Methodist Church on the corner of the block where we lived. After an almost unbearably beautiful service with carols and praise, the congregation would light candles, passing the flame from one to another. And then we'd all leave the Church in the cold dark night, with our candles glowing. Mother and I would walk the block to our house, shielding the tiny flames, while we watched the flames of other scattering supplicants, sort of like a scene from Disney's Fantasia.

Ah, Christmas. In New York, it doesn't usually rain in December. It's crisp and cold, and the scent of charcoal smoke drifts down Fifth Avenue from the braziers of the chestnut vendors. Although the windows were larger, elves and swans on mirrors and fancy dolls and toy trains and strolling Santa Clauses made the City smaller, not really all that different from where I came. The bells from the Cathedral rang out, sort of like God's own voice, telling us to Rejoice! and the skaters at Rockefeller Center made great swooping curves as they danced like Currier & Ives images.

I'm not quite sure where God lives in New York City. I suppose He must be just behind the left shoulder of the Cardinal, but I never saw Him there. Perhaps He is in the smoke from the chestnuts; that scent hangs with me like the scent of the good Methodist candles on Christmas Eve.

My own local culture at Christmas seems centered somewhere on the fireplace mantle. Behind the swans, under the vehicles, on top the candlestick, beneath the toy trains. And it speaks to me as clearly now as ever.

