

## **A visit from Belsnickel**

*by Sarajane Williams*

Sometime between December 6 -24, if you were a child living in the 18th- or 19th-century Lehigh Valley area, you probably would be anxiously anticipating the arrival of the trickster, Belsnickel.

Anxious is an appropriate word because the mean, crotchety, dirty, fur-clad, masked figure with a long tongue would first let you know that he arrived by rattling chains and scraping birch branches on your windows. The front door opened slowly and a handful of cast chestnuts and walnuts rattled across the wooden floor. A few suspenseful minutes later, the door opened a little wider and a few more nuts and shellbarks scattered. After entering the house, Belsnickel, adorned with his heavy boots, whip, and jingling bells, would hand out coal or use a rod or hickory switch to rap the knuckles of bad children who had been disobedient. To prove their worth, some of the terrified children were required to pick up the nuts, sing, dance or recite a verse and promise to mend their ways. When finally satisfied, the hideous visitor would then reach into the sack, slung over his shoulder, and dispense gifts of popcorn, dried apples, cookies, nuts and candies to the thrilled children.

The Belsnickel tradition was brought by early colonial immigrants from the Rhineland of southwestern Germany and passed down through successive generations of the Pennsylvania Deutsch. It all began with St. Nicholas, a Greek Catholic bishop who lived during the third century, who was revered for his generosity, his love for children, and his concern for seafarers. The anniversary of his death, Dec. 6, is still celebrated as St. Nicholas Day, and is celebrated throughout Europe as a day for gift-giving and merry-making. Pelsnickel ('hairy Nicholas'), would arrive on Dec. 5, St. Nicholas eve, to determine which children would be deserving of the Saint's gifts. Belsnickel later became a secular replacement for St. Nicholas after the German Protestant Reformation.