

Santa Lives in Runnymede Park

A Herndon Christmas Story

By Barbara Glakas

The following story is a historical fiction. Many of the locations and character names mentioned in the story are real. Runnymede Park is a nature park located in the Town of Herndon.

HERNDON, VIRGINIA, 1946. The oddest man lived on the property next to my Grandpa Carroll's cabin in Herndon. He was an elderly German immigrant, and my father always knew him as Mr. Klaus. Mr. Klaus was somewhat of a recluse, considered a loner amongst the many Herndon villagers.

My Grandpa built his stone cabin around 1909 as a retreat from the sweltering summer heat in Washington. However, winter days were often spent there as well. My father often spoke fondly of his childhood days with Grandpa, trampling through the open fields of snow which surrounded my Grandpa's cabin, roaming through the cold and quiet woods, sometimes wandering his way down to the stream, Sugarland Run.

My father said he spotted Mr. Klaus only a few times during his childhood. He seemed to be more taken with Mr. Klaus's dog and constant companion, Rudy, than of Mr. Klaus himself.

On one of our recent holiday visits to Grandpa's cabin, I was allowed to go out into the woods to collect fire wood for the cabin. As I roamed through the woods I spotted a stout old man standing down by the stream.

Standing very still and silent, I watched as the grey-bearded man - accompanied by his dog - picked berries from the fruit-filled bushes. Then something amazing happened. A deer appeared from the edge of the thick wooded area, approached the man's outstretched hand and ate the berries - right out of his hand! The man stroked the deer's neck as it lowered its head and antlers in seeming affection. Amazingly, several other deer then appeared from the woods and approached the old man as well.

My eyes widened and a slight gasp came from my mouth. The dog turned toward me and gave one loud bark. The deer scampered off. The old man, peering at me over top his round eye glasses, said, "Approach, boy."

I walked slowly toward him, glancing all around me as I cautiously moved forward.

"You shouldn't sneak up on people," he said.

Without skipping a beat I asked, “How did you get those deer to eat from your hands?”

“They are my friends.” He paused. “What’s your name?”

“Frankie.”

“Well, Frankie. My name is Chris. Where do you live?”

“Horse Pen Drive near Mr. Middleton’s Farm.”

“What are you doing here, then?” he inquired.

“My Pa and I came to visit my Grandpa for Christmas Eve.”

“Ah, yes. Your Grandpa lives in the cabin over by the grassy field.”

“Where do you live?” I decided to ask back.

“A little further down the hill by the stream.”

“Where did the deer go?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Probably back down to my cabin. We have to go on a long trip tonight.” He smiled. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

Hesitating, I followed him several yards down a woodsy trail, until we came upon his cabin. The glow from his cabin windows was bright and I wondered why I had never noticed it before, as it did not seem to be too far off from my Grandpa’s cabin. As we approached the cabin I could see the name “Klaus” carved into the wooden lintel above his doorway.

“Over here,” he motioned me over to the barn behind his cabin. “Here they are.”

Peering inside the barn I could see eight deer milling around a large red wagon. I entered in awe.

“Here -- give them some of these.” Chris reached into his pocket and handed some berries to me.

I stuck my hand out to the deer and they approached. One-by-one they ate out of my hand as I saw them do with Chris a few minutes earlier. My eyes bulged out of my head in amazement as I continued to feed the deer.

Suddenly, Rudy gave an instructive bark and the deer went back over to the wagon.

“Well, Frankie, it’s almost time for me to leave on my trip. I’m afraid I’m going to have to send you back home now. Do you know your way back?”

“Yes sir,” I said.

“Nice to meet you, Frankie,” he said as he patted me on the head.

“Nice to meet you too, sir.”

As I left the barn, I hustled up the trail, panting as I headed back to Grandpa’s cabin as fast as I could. Out of breath I told my Pa and Grandpa about Chris, his bright cabin and how he let me feed the deer. Furrowing their brows, they looked at each other skeptically.

“Now Frankie,” my Pa explained, “Mr. Klaus was an old man when I was a boy. I haven’t seen him in years. I’m sure he and Rudy are no longer with us.”

“That’s right, Frankie,” Grandpa added. “There’s nothing down by that stream except an old abandoned shack.”

“But I *swear!* He was *there!*” I plead with my father and tugged hard on his shirt arm, begging him to come with me. Grudgingly, my father got up and accompanied me back down the trail. As we got close to where Chris’s cabin was located, I could see there was nothing there but an old, dark, abandoned shack, with weeds and vine overgrown all around it. No lights, no deer, no Rudy, no Chris, no nothing. “But, Pa, I *swear* it was here!”

“That’s okay, Frankie,” he said reassuringly. “Let’s go get that fire wood.”

The next morning, we bid farewell to Grandpa as we loaded up the wagon to head back home. A frigid December morning, I could see the steam come out of our horse’s nostrils. I pulled a wool blanket from the back seat of the carriage to keep myself warm on the ride home. Under the blanket I found a big red package. Atop the package was a scribbled note that said:

“TO FRANKIE, THANKS FOR HELPING ME FEED MY DEER. CHRIS.”

About this column: “Remembering Herndon’s History” is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon’s past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of “Remembering Herndon’s History” columns is available on the Historical Society website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org.

The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society’s website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org, and the Historical Society’s Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.

Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com.