

Boys in Toyland

Christmas caters to kids.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

“**T**he most successful Christmases,” Loudon Wainwright wrote in *The Annual Crisis of Love* some years back, “are enjoyed by people 3 or 4 years old.

“They understand what’s going on well enough to look forward to something big and juicy; everyone they love is offering them lots of attention, and the presents are a grab bag of dazzling surprises.

“If little things go wrong around them, they don’t notice. After those early years, it gets tougher. The disappointments of Christmas, disappointments of love, become tangible.”

That got me to thinking about Frankie Murn’s attic at Christmastime. We were older than 4 or 5 when we started going up there, but Frankie’s attic was a treasure house of toys that he had received over the years—some toys did indeed date back to Frankie’s fourth and fifth years—lovingly collected and kept by his loving parents who had come from the Old Country and were raising up their son in this New Country called West Allis, Wisconsin.

Up in Frankie’s attic there were toys all over. I always thought that Santa’s workshop must look something like this. No, not Santa’s workshop, one of Santa’s warehouses. Toys all over. Later in life, I saw Orson Welles’ magnificent movie *Citizen Kane*, and when the camera was panning that endless crammed, jammed warehouse stuffed full of a lifetime’s treasures, my first thought was: Frankie’s attic at Christmastime!

Frankie’s attic was stuffed to the rafters with Frankie’s toys. Boys’ toys. That was because Frankie was an only child, and he got boys’ toys.

It’s true, there *were* a few new teddy bears in there—I always figured Frankie



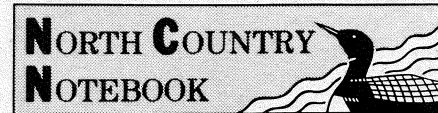
still slept with the old one—and some Raggedy Anns. But, overwhelmingly, boys’ toys.

Tricycles and two-wheelers. Coaster wagons. Big Little Books. Wind-up freight trains and wind-up passenger trains and boxes of silvery track sections.

There were racing cars with rubber bodies and little metal monoplanes, some with silver wings and some with red bodies, and all the little monoplanes had little metal propellers that you could spin and rubber wheels on the landing gear that turned.

There were ice skates—shoe skates—with racing blades and there were clamp-on ice skates and roller skates, too. The roller skates clamped to your regular shoes and you tightened those skates with a skate key that Frankie’s mother had tied to the skates with red and green yarn. Frankie’s wooden skis were in a corner, along with his old Westclox pocket watches that didn’t work anymore.

It was funny that there was so many toys, because Frankie was an only child. Yet there were more toys in his attic than you could find in a whole block of houses in that factory neighborhood around 69th



and Greenfield.

At one time or another, Frankie and I looked at and held, if only for a fleeting moment, each and every one of Frankie’s toys, but the only ones we really played with were the little lead soldiers.

We played war.

The little lead soldiers were from the armies that had fought in the Great War—World War I, it would be called later, when there was a World War II. The soldiers were painted in the uniforms of Germany, France, England and the United States. Neither of us ever really wanted to have the German soldiers on our side. Sometimes, we would line up all the soldiers in battle lines, and after we had them all lined up, we would have only British and French and American soldiers on the battlefield. There would be the German soldiers, still in their boxes, off to one side, off by themselves, shunned, unwanted.

We played war with the little lead soldiers that today are worth a fortune to antique collectors. The little lead soldiers have become treasures beyond price to the collectors, who probably never play with them at all. They probably have the soldiers in a room under glass where the dust can’t touch them and where they’re always upright and never felled by shots from the enemy armies commanded by little boys in army field caps. Little boys yelling commands and filling the attic with POWS! and BANGS! and the BOOM! BOOM! of heavy artillery.

One Christmastime in Frankie’s attic, we were yelling and shouting and screeching at each other—even banging the floor—and suddenly, Frankie’s mother opened the attic door and came halfway up the stairs. She stared at us and asked Frankie if everything was all right.

Later, Frankie said that his mother

thought we were fighting, not just playing war—really fighting—because that’s what it sounded like downstairs—really fighting with fists, hitting each other. Once she realized we were only playing war, she never came up the attic stairs again. She would only open the door and call up the stairs that “the generals” could have cookies and cocoa in the kitchen when the war was over. Then she closed the door.

In a flash, the arms of the generals would sweep forward like scythes in one last all-out attack and cut down the enemy infantry like wheat, like grass. Down, down, down the lead soldiers would go, tumbling, stumbling in a jumble of metal and colors and battle flags. It was so real that you could smell the gunpowder and the burned flesh. You could still hear the ringing of shot and shell long after the guns fell silent.

After some battles, a terrible silence would hang over the dusty battlefield, and the only soldiers left standing, left surviving amid the battle junk and the carnage, would be the two rival commanders.

We would stare at each other, and I don’t know about Frankie, but I felt we were both as bloodied and wounded as our fallen troops. I felt there was a loss in both of us that was not to be talked about, but there was a loss, nonetheless, that was to be shared without speaking.

We put the soldiers away and we were very quiet, and it was like we were burying them in their little boxes. When we were done, you would never know that a great battle had been fought there—to the death.

Then we went down the attic stairs, into the bright glow of peacetime, of peace on earth, where steaming cocoa and Mrs. Murn’s warm Christmas cookies waited, and she would ask how the Great War had come out. Frankie said no one won yet. There was a Christmas truce. ■

George Vukelich reads selections from North Country Notebook Saturdays at 8:30 p.m. on Wisconsin Public Radio, WHA (970 AM).