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Tom Walz

A MAN WHO WOULD BE SANTA

OLD BILL could hardly have been a less likely candidate for fame and fortune. He spent forty-four years in an institution for the feeble-minded, entering it at the age of seven, and his I.Q. barely matched his age when he was finally discharged to his home community. Without a doubt he was “feeble-minded” as some were labeled in his day, though he chose to call himself a crack-minded man.

Yet fame came his way, even though fortune continued to elude him. Bill died as he had lived, a certified pauper. His brush with fame was occasioned by a couple of television movies that chronicled his life. The first of these went on to win Emmy Awards—for the actor who played his part, and for the script writer who had once served as his conservator. Thus Bill’s life was bared to hundreds of millions of viewers world wide.

What on earth had he done to draw this kind of attention? To many outside observers, not much. Following his discharge from the state hospital in the late 1960s, Bill had been befriended by a young college student. He followed this young man to the University of Iowa where he eventually found employment running a small coffee shop. But Bill had a special charm that drew people to him. Children followed him as they might the pied piper. Instead of a flute, Bill played the harmonica. He played with more heart than talent and with a repertoire of no more than three songs. Yet, no one tired of listening to him. Tapping his foot, his eyes ablaze, he made listeners want to dance. At one of the big movie award ceremonies, in full view of a nationwide audience, Jane Fonda had done just that to Bill’s impromptu rendition of the “Too Fat Polka” when he stepped on stage to receive an award on behalf of Mickey Rooney, who had played his part. In minutes the whole celebrity audience was clapping and tapping along with Bill.

“Why you looks jus like downtown,” Bill would say to any child to whom he was introduced. But his magnetism extended beyond children and adults; he seemed to have a special way with birds and other pets. He spoke to animals with the same rapt attention he gave to the

people he met. To Bill, all creatures were equal though it wasn't the St. Francis in him that attracted the movie makers. To my mind, Bill hooked them, as he did the rest of us, because of his rare likeness to Santa Claus. Why else would the moguls choose December as the month to release his films?

Bill was a perfect Santa Claus. Except, perhaps, for his having been born a Jew, he had it all. He was the right age for December's mythical hero. His short, roly-poly body could not have been better crafted for the part. His beard was long, unruly, and had exactly the right shade of gray. He loved to laugh, had eyes that twinkled, feet that couldn't stop prancing, and a spontaneous ho-ho-ho that took up about five percent of his talk.

The popularity of the films thrust Bill into an unfamiliar role. The Social Work department which hosted his coffee shop had to hire a part-time secretary to handle the hundreds of letters and cards he received. Invitations for visits flowed in from around the nation and included everything from being the half-time guest of a newly franchised professional football team to being a special awardee of an international physician's organization. Mostly, however, Bill's invitations came from colleges, which always seemed to want him for a December visit.

One such invitation came from a small midwest Lutheran college the year prior to his death. It was early December in a year when winter had made an unusually early appearance. The college planned a full day of activities for Bill. He was to visit some handicapped groups in the area, attend a black tie dinner in his honor sponsored by the president of the college, and be the special guest at a showing of the movie based on his life.

To fulfill such invitations, Bill always required assistance. People failed to recognize that he could neither read nor write. Nor had he ever learned to use a telephone, drive a car, or even ride a bike. On this occasion, I was his volunteer, and Bill and I had to be on our way by dawn. When I pulled up to his boarding house, Bill was waiting on the curb. The poor guy couldn't tell time, and for all I knew had spent hours out there in the dark, waiting. Yet without complaint, his innocent face wearing a shy grin, he jumped in my rusty Toyota. Early morning sleet had laced his magnificent gray beard with what looked

like corn rows of slender icicles. It took nearly an hour to de-ice him with the heater on at full blast.

Our journey of less than 150 miles took four hours due to the icy conditions. Most of the way I was tense and drove in silence, my hands clinging to the wheel. Meanwhile Bill was at peace, anticipating another adventure. Breaking our silence finally, Bill said, "You know buddy, I am really gonna enjoy this day and we are gonna end it with a nice cold beer. You'll buy me a beer if I do good, won't you?" What could I say but "of course"?

The visits to group homes, day centers, and various other institutions went splendidly. The center of attention, Bill grew more and more animated throughout the day. For a man of seventy, he showed little sign of fatigue when shaking hands or handling questions. It was obvious he was a folk hero to the many handicapped persons he met. Everyone wanted a picture taken with him and his autograph. Fortunately, Bill had learned to scratch out a semi-legible resemblance of his first name. He would autograph one of his business cards that read, "Old Bill, Clinical Optimist and Proprietor Extraordinaire of Wild Bill's Coffee Shop," and hand it to the admirer.

By late afternoon we were escorted to the college president's dinner party in a lovely turn of the century building emblazoned in glittering decor. Both town and gown dignitaries were among the forty or so invitees. Bill was seated at the head table between the president and his wife. I was seated far enough away that I wouldn't be able to bail Bill out if he became confused or troubled.

To avoid one possible problem, I had alerted the planning committee about one of Bill's idiosyncrasies. Mention of presidents, of any kind, could get him riled. The only explanation for this seemed some past enmity he held for Richard Nixon. Any mention of Nixon would elicit, "He's a donkey's ass." To my knowledge Nixon was the only individual whom Bill did not like or at least pretend to like. The committee assured me that references to the college president as president could be avoided. He would be addressed instead as Doctor.

The supper went flawlessly. Bill relished both his meal and the attention he received. All seated near him enjoyed his company. Afterwards the president (doctor) gave a glowing testimonial about Bill, his generosity and zest for living. Then Bill was invited to share a few

words. Confidently he rose from his seat and with a well fed grin said, "Thank yous very much for inviten me," to which he added his standard message, "God's been good to me. I had some bad times, but now I gots the good times. I jus wish everbuddy could be as lucky as me. Thank you very much. God bless you. Shalom." Then he reached into his pocket, pulled out his Hohner, and played the "Too Fat Polka." His sincerity brought the crowd to its feet. Obviously pleased with the fun he inspired, Bill's eyes sparkled and a self-assured glow covered his face.

It was in this spirit that Bill trotted off to the final event of the evening. His movie would be shown to a full house audience in the college's largest auditorium. To give Bill more of a role in these gigs, I had arranged for him to slip out during the showing and dress as Santa Claus. Bill would then make an on-stage appearance at the end to wish his audience a Merry Christmas. This was meant to provide a visual postscript to the movie, which ended with a still shot of Bill in a Santa outfit.

Bill could not have looked more the part than he did that night. A light snow had blanketed the town with a fresh Christmas whiteness. In the quietness of a mid-week evening, the town resembled a Christmas card. The full house audience was as mellow as that of a midnight mass on Christmas Eve. As the movie drew to its close, Bill bounded on stage in full dress. With perfect voice he shouted his "ho-ho-ho and Merry Christmas everyone" and shook his sleigh bells like a percussionist. He ended, of course, with his thank you very much speech and a harmonica virtuoso, bringing everyone to their feet.

Before exiting center stage, Bill gave each of his well-wishers a copy of his pre-autographed business card. On each card he had crudely printed a misspelled version of his name, "Bll," with the middle l dotted as an i, taking on the functions of both.

Magic evening or not, I was tired. After quite a while, I cornered Bill and told him we simply had to go. I reminded him we had a similar gig in another college town the next day. Bill was not pleased and let me know it. There were still people waiting to greet him. When at last I succeeded in separating Bill from his well-wishers, he reminded me of my promise to buy him a beer. It had been a spectacular day, so there was no possible way I could renege.

Now a Norwegian Lutheran college town just before finals week is not one of your big party towns. Locating an open bar was like finding a Gideon bible in the Vatican. We settled for a seedy looking tavern that still appeared to be open at 11 p.m. Whatever marquee it may have had was no longer present.

There were perhaps ten dedicated drinkers spread out among the half dozen booths in the tavern, leaving us the lone patrons at the bar. Both Bill and I were dead on our feet and looked it. The bartender, a tall gangly man about Bill's age, didn't look much better. We ordered a couple of drafts and sipped in silence. A few minutes into our drinks, I got the distinct feeling of being stared at. From the corner of my eye I could see that the stares were directed at Bill. Then it hit me: we hadn't taken the time to get Bill out of costume.

Bill was oblivious to the stares, or else felt them appropriate to his station in life. I studied him for a moment and was struck with the thought that maybe old Bill really believed himself the part. After all, many a crack-minded person has thought himself Jesus or Napoleon or J. Edgar Hoover.

When we finished our drinks—I said no to Bill's request for a refill—we slipped off our stools and headed towards the door. Until then no one, not even the bartender, had as much as spoken a word to us. Yet as we were about to pass through the door and into the wintry night, some unsteady, slurred voices whispered, in soft unison, "Good night, Santa." Bill whirled in their direction and in a deep voice sang out, "Ho-ho-ho, Merry Christmas, good buddies."

By the time that Christmas season had ended, Bill had managed to live his Santa identity another sixteen times for various groups. His reputation as the perfect Santa had spread throughout the region. From child day care centers to nursing homes people wanted him as theirs. Bill was even given a part in the annual Christmas pageant program put on by the university.

But most of all Bill loved to walk the streets of Iowa City in his December work clothes and soak up the hundreds of "Merry Christmas, Santa" greetings he received. At least for the month of December any crack-minded image Bill may have known was given some respite. The man who would be Santa could have been.