

Intrepid Pantagrapher paid visit to Santa's North Pole

In 1897, 8-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon famously wrote the New York Sun newspaper to ask if that "jolly old elf" was in fact real. One would think the now-classic, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus" response settled the matter once and for all.

Sadly, that was not to be, for by 1927 there were enough disbelieving children in Bloomington-Normal and the surrounding area to spur the mysterious explorer "Danny Dare" into action.

From late November through December 22, The Pantagraph printed Danny's adventure-filled dispatches as he undertook an arduous trek to the North Pole to meet Santa Claus. "The main thing is to FIND him and PROVE it and then there can never, never be any doubt again," Danny wrote on Nov. 29 as he readied his expedition into the Great White North.

With a secret map tied in oilskin and ten pounds of chocolate as sustenance, Danny traveled by rail, hydroplane, raft, dogsled and foot in search of Santa's "Snow Hut Village." His three-week "dash to the Northland" read like a Jack London story with its stoic aboriginal people, fur traders, snarling, snapping wolves and forbidding landscape of ice and snow.

In Toronto (or so the dateline read), Danny bumped into French-Canadian woodsman Jacques Valiant, an old friend from his army days who offered the services of his hydroplane. In Gogama, Ontario, on the shores of Lake Minisinakwa, Danny and Jacques met Joe Leflamme, a trapper whose sled was pulled not by Siberian huskies or Alaskan Malamutes but rather six untamed wolves! When Danny attempted to photograph the lead wolf "Valiant" (named for Jacques), the wild beast escaped his pen and disappeared into the snowy backcountry. Would Valiant be seen again, readers were left to wonder.

During his many wild and woolly adventures Danny diligently filed dispatches for The Pantagraph, many of which inexplicably ran the same day they were written. Danny was careful to share more than a few facts he picked up along the way, which were heretofore unknown to many midwestern schoolchildren. For instance, Danny was told that in the North Country, "Santa wears an extra bearskin or so, thrown over his red coat, and he has to keep a muffler around his face to keep his beard from freezing and breaking."

Despite the harshest of conditions, Danny plowed ahead, undeterred and thinking only of finding the Snow Hut Village and meeting Santa. In the wilderness settlement of Nakina, he encountered Joe Petersson and "Jerry," who was Joe's famous bloodhound "Jerry showed great excitement when I pulled the picture postcard of Santa Claus from my pocket," Danny related. "Until then he had eyed me coldly, tugging at the chain in his mater's hand."

Petersson (toting a Swedish army rifle, no less) and Danny then “plunged into the bush country” by constructing a raft and floating down the fast-moving, ice-choked Ogoki River. For food they relied on “herbs and roots and winter berries,” as well as Jerry’s ability to “scare up a rabbit.” Petersson also brought down a moose, and so the travelers (and one hopes Jerry as well!) dined on fresh moose steaks. Upon reaching a camp of full-blooded Ojibwas, Joe turned back while Danny continued northward

Yet Danny should’ve known better than to travel that far north all alone, without the companionship and protection of man or dog. And sure enough, he was set upon by a pack of hungry wolves. And it looked like the end for our brave correspondent until another wolf appeared as if out of nowhere to beat back the attackers and save Danny’s hide. “It was Valiant!” Danny shouted, the prized wolf who had escaped Joe Leflamme’s cage several weeks earlier.

Although Danny dodged certain death, he and his enigmatic canine protector now found themselves lost and with little hope, and they could do little but stumble exhausted into an abandoned cabin. Meanwhile, The Pantagraph reported Danny missing as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, among others, organized search parties.

But just when it seemed as if this fairy tale adventure would end in tragedy, Danny’s byline reappeared in the December 21 Pantagraph. He was alive! And with Santa! Unbeknownst to the Mounties or anyone else, Danny had been rescued from the bleak cabin by none other than St. Nick, who was out for a midnight spin on his sleigh, getting his eight reindeer (this was more than a decade before Rudolph made his debut) in shape for the big night ahead.

In Danny’s telling, Snow Hut Village (see accompanying image) included Santa’s igloo residence, doll factory and toy workshop, while the North Pole was marked with “the biggest Christmas tree you ever saw, all hung with spangles and bangles and little lights and candy canes and things like that.” He further reported that, true to the legend, the “clever old chap” (that is, Santa) “hears just about everything.” In fact, the Beloved Bearded One told Danny of a girl on Mulberry Street in Bloomington who had the impudence the day before to answer “I won’t” when asked to do something by her mother.

Danny stayed at the North Pole but one day, though not before befriending Inuit kindergartener Jimmy Wugah, who was serving as Santa’s official candy taster.

Santa Claus also told Danny that he would pay Bloomington a visit on Friday, December 23, for the Children’s Christmas Jubilee held at the Illini Theater. This ambitious event involved activities such as a Christmas carol sing-along and a short play staged by the Junior Dramatic Club. And then there was Santa himself, straight from the Snow Hut Village, handing out socks filled with candy to each and every child.

And after that, it was back to the North Pole to get ready for the toy-filled, globe-spanning sleigh ride on Christmas Eve.

