Folklife Today December 2020: The Peaceful Transfer of Mumming

Announcer: From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Music: "Breaking Up Christmas" played by Norman Edmonds, Paul Edmonds, and Rufus Quesinberry.

JOHN FENN:

Welcome to Folklife Today! I'm John Fenn, the head of research and programs at the American Folklife Center, and I'm here with Steve Winick, a folklife specialist at the Center and the creator of the Folklife Today blog.

Steve: Hi, everyone!

John: We have kind of an unusual episode for December. Every year, in the week or two before Christmas, staff members of the American Folklife Center put our research and performance skills into play, bringing collections to life in a dramatic performance that tours the halls of the Library of Congress. The performance is based on traditional mummers' plays. And this year, since we can't actually perform our mummers' play live, we decided to do it as a podcast episode, sort of like an old-time radio play. We did all the recording remotely over the Web, so sound quality varies.

Steve: Right, but we don't want to throw our audience in at the deep end, so we're going to say a little about the tradition first. And for that, we're joined by Jennifer Cutting, another folklife specialist at the American Folklife Center. Hi Jennifer!

Jennifer: Hi John! Hi Steve! Hi everybody out there!

John: So Jennifer, what are mummer's plays?

Jennifer: Well, "mumming" is an old word for a tradition of getting dressed up in costumes and going from house to house, doing a performance in exchange for food, drink...sometimes money. In various forms it goes back to the Middle Ages all over Europe. And in Britain, sometime in the 17th century probably, it took the form of a particular kind of play which includes music, and dance, and rhymes. And in the play, several characters

get in a fight. One or more are killed, and then a doctor arrives and revives the dead characters. Sometimes it's called a "death and resurrection" play.

John: OK, so, who are these characters?

Steve: In traditional mummers' plays, the main hero among the fighting characters is usually a saint, so Saint George or Saint Patrick are some of the most popular. The other fighting characters are sometimes represented as foreign knights from the crusades, as military antagonists of later times, and then as pirates or sailors sometimes. And some mummers' plays draw on the legend of St. George and the dragon, and have a dragon in the play. And then various monsters such as Beelzebub. And, of course, Father Christmas is in the mummers' play as well. And sometimes historical characters end up in there. In the early 19th century, the Philadelphia mummers' play included George Washington, and we're continuing that tradition in our play this year. And speaking of George Washington, I should mention that some of the male characters in our play are portrayed by female actors, and cross dressing was a feature of the traditional mummers' play as well.

John Fenn: So Philadelphia had an important mumming tradition, but where else was mumming done?

Jennifer: Well, this play spread to most places where English was spoken. England, Ireland and Scotland, certainly, but also the West Indies, Australia, North America. It was most widespread in the 19th century, and then in most places it became less common...but you can still find it here and there. Newfoundland, for example, has a really strong mumming tradition.

John: And how did our staff get started in mumming?

Steve: Well, in the early 2000s, we added couple of staff members with interest in mumming, including me, and it kind of tipped the balance because there were already many staff members who knew the tradition. At the University of Pennsylvania, where I went to graduate school, we had a mummers tradition. And I was in that play for several years, and when I arrived at AFC in 2005, there were three other staff members who had acted in those University of Pennsylvania plays. So that was one factor. And Jennifer was another staff member with her own approach to mumming.

Jennifer: That's right, because I had seen mumming and was aware of it from my studies of British folk traditions and my time in England in graduate school. And I took part in those days in Morris dancing and music, which often attract the same people who do mummers plays, and sometimes had some of the same characters, so I had a lot of exposure to the tradition. But I think my deepest involvement was as curator of the American Folklife Center's James Madison Carpenter collection. Carpenter was an American folklorist who collected in Britain in the 1930s. He wasn't there to collect during the Christmas holidays, so there aren't recordings of the plays themselves happening at Christmas, but he did make cylinder recordings of a few of the songs, and even more importantly he collected written play scripts. And there was also an artist named George Baker, whose father was one of the mummers in his community, and George Baker drew pictures of many of the mummer characters for Carpenter, and those pictures are fantastic as well. So I actually compiled our first play in 2009 out of mummers' play scripts that were in the Carpenter Collection.

Steve: After that, we just kept doing it. I took over most of the writing of the plays and updated the humor quite a bit. And at first we did it only at private events for Library staff—office parties, really. And we put in a lot of Library inside jokes.

John: But today's play won't be full of Library jokes, right?

Steve: You'll hear a little of that in this play, but not much!

John: And I know there are some historical references too. How did that come about?

Steve: It's always a challenge to create a new play within such a strict format. Some people use pop culture figures, so you can find Kirk and Spock mummers plays out there, and that kind of thing. People also put in contemporary references, but we wanted to be gentle with references to 2020 because both the pandemic and politics are just making people so anxious right now. We do reference everyone using Zoom meetings a lot, so that was one thing that we put in from 2020! But at the Library of Congress, we do have a keen sense of history, and we admire some things about several of our early American presidents who helped set up the Library of Congress, especially Jefferson, Adams, and Madison, after whom our three buildings on Capitol Hill are named. So we decided to go with

some silly adaptations of history. So I based it on the transition between the Adams and Jefferson presidencies in 1800, and used a series of letters between Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson as source material!

John: That sounds great! We've put an annotated version of the play, and more about the history of mumming at the Folklife Today blog, which you can find at blogs.loc.gov/folklife. And in fact, this is a historical costume drama, and you can also see pictures of the costumes at the blog.

You know, one of the fun treasures we have in the American Folklife Center is the first recording of Alistair Cooke's voice. So I'll channel his great Masterpiece Theater introductions:

Good evening, and welcome to Mummerpiece Theater! Tonight we have a very special production. It features three American presidents, two first ladies, Father Christmas, and assorted elves and monsters. It's an adaptation of traditional mummers' plays and stars members of the staff of the Library of Congress, our oldest Federal cultural institution. The adaptation is by Stephen Winick, and the accordion music is by Jennifer Cutting. So without further ado, we present "The Peaceful Transfer of Mumming."

Song: "Jolly Wassail" sung by unknown singers (Alan Lomax Collection): The master and mistress, sitting down at their ease Put their hands in their pockets and give what they please To our wassail, wassail, wassail, wassail And joy come on our jolly wassail....

FATHER CHRISTMAS:

Zoom Room! Gentles all, pray give us a Zoom room to rhyme We've come to show activity this merry Christmas time Activity of Youth! Activity of Age! Such activity has never been before upon the loc.gov/podcasts page! In comes I, old Father Christmas And be I welcome or welcome not.

[Everyone: Welcome!]

I hope old Father Christmas will never be forgot My beard is long, my back is bent My knees are weak, my strength is spent Two thousand years and twenty is a very great age for me And if I'd been quarantined all these years What a recluse I would be But speaking of quarantine, I should say Our hearts go out this Winter's day To all who have lost friends, lost work, or gotten sick We hope the world's recovery will be merciful and quick We urge you to be safe, to hunker down and persevere And we hope we'll all be vaccinated sometime within the year.

Up at the North Pole all is well.
There really isn't much to tell
Father Christmas, Linear Feet, and old Beelzebub
Are all still members of our little North Pole club.
And no guests or new arrivals have showed up since last year
And so we have no virus yet to bother us up here.
But it makes for a dull Christmas for us I confess,
Because we're used to having so many distinguished guests.
In fact, I've told you about US presidents coming here
But did you know we once had three in the same year?

[Bar chimes sound effect]

It was December 1800, and I remember one fine day Our good friend Thomas Jefferson appeared on his five-dog open sleigh!

[Dogsled sound effect]

THOMAS JEFFERSON:

In Comes I, Thomas Jefferson! I was up here just last year I came in search of ice for ice cream and I found these good folks here I thought I'd come to call again, since it is Christmastime To harvest ice and visit with these North Pole chums of mine!

BEELZEBUB:

Hello, Jefferson! Nice to see you! It's old Beelzebub!
I guess you recognized me by this awesome caveman club!
My big and curly ram's horns are also very cute
Especially combined with my woolly demon suit!
So what's the news? When last we saw you heading to the USA
You said there was an election and you were keen to join the fray!

THOMAS JEFFERSON:

There was! I won! I'm finally the President-Elect In March my new position is set to take effect The peaceful transition of power is our most cherished tradition It goes back almost...four whole years, to our very first transition!

When President Washington decided that he would no longer run, John Adams and I ran for President, and that loser, Adams, won. I became vice-president, and this year I ran once more Now Adams is our first "one-term president," and I'm showing him the door.

Father Christmas:

It's good to see you, Jefferson! I'm glad you came back this way!

Linear Feet:

[clears throat]

Father Christmas:

But what's this? Linear Feet, my Library Elf, has something she wants to say!

LINEAR FEET:

That's right! With my sharp elf-ears, I happen to hear That another dogsled's drawing near!

[Dogsled sound effect]

[Door opening sound effect]

JOHN ADAMS:

Jefferson? Jefferson!

THOMAS JEFFERSON:

Good god, it's President John Adams! He was following my sleigh!

JOHN ADAMS:

Ah, there you are! Let's get to work! We don't have all day!

THOMAS JEFFERSON:

I'm president-elect, I'm not your flunky anymore I'm tired of listening to you, because you know what? You're a bore! Besides, in your campaign you slandered me, and that was very rude! You said if they elected me, that people would be screwed! That "murder, robbery, and incest" would "openly be taught!"

[Gasp from everyone]

JOHN ADAMS:

Yes, that was good campaigning, or so my advisers thought! But you're not so innocent, Jefferson, I know your little game You hired that low-life pamphleteer to tarnish my good name! A "hideous, hermaphroditical character!" He called me that in print! ["ooh" from everyone] And other names that were so bad they made my poor wife squint!

THOMAS JEFFERSON:

Ah yes, the lovely Abigail, I hope she's doing fine! I know she's very fond of books, and she's welcome to borrow mine. In fact, this little piece of news might give her a surprise: She thinks you have a big library, but MINE is TWICE the SIZE!

JOHN ADAMS:

Now that's enough! I don't mind you stealing the election But I can't have you insulting the size of my collection! Your scurrilous campaign ads were offensive, mean, and cruel And so, you worthless scoundrel, I challenge you to a duel!

THOMAS JEFFERSON:

Pull out your purse and pay, sir!

[sword drawing sound]

JOHN ADAMS:

Pull out your sword and play sir!

[sword drawing sound]

[Sword duel sound effect]

Jefferson groans

BEELZEBUB:

Well, here's a situation for which we have no precedent: The president-elect's been killed by the sitting president!

JOHN ADAMS:

Ha! Now that Jefferson is gone, I'll keep this presidency thing I mean, let's face it, it was more stable back when we colonies had a King!

FATHER CHRISTMAS:

No no no, this won't do! Power's not his for the taking! I wonder who can free the US from this tyrant in the making?

LINEAR FEET:

I know who we can call, the man to save the day--St. George, the standard hero of the standard Mummer's Play:

[Everyone]: St. George! St. George! St. George!

[Music: Yankee Doodle Fanfare]

ST. GEORGE WASHINGTON:

In comes I, St. George...Washington
And over my shoulder I carry a gun
On my head a tricorn hat;
What do you people think of that?
In the war of Independence, I blew the redcoats down.
I defeated old king George, and I broke his fabled crown!
My countrymen made me president, and I served as best I knew
And when my time was over, I turned over power to...you.

JOHN ADAMS:

George Washington? No fair! You're dead!

GEORGE WASHINGTON:

No I aint!

I went up to heaven and I've come back as a Saint!

JOHN ADAMS:

Well, you're a tedious old has-been, and your time has come and gone I kind of like the presidency, so I'll keep it from now on!

ST. GEORGE WASHINGTON:

I can't let you do that, my principles won't allow it If you remain, I'll come back as a ghost to disavow it! Our citizens will heed my words, and force your abrogation After all, they still consider me the Father of the Nation!

JOHN ADAMS:

In that case, I have no choice...I challenge you to fight And when I win a second duel, that will prove I'm in the right.

ST. GEORGE WASHINGTON:

Real men despise battle, but will never run from it. So let me take my sword in hand, and remove my trusty gun from it!

[sword drawing sound]

JOHN ADAMS:

Ready? Good! Mind your eyes and guard your blows Or I will stab thee through the nose!

[sword duel sound effect]

Washington screams.

LINEAR FEET:

Alas! George Washington's dead again, and on the ground is laid! Who knew that old John Adams was such a badass with a blade?

BEELZEBUB:

Now that he's killed two presidents, the homicide is double We'll have to think of something, or America's in trouble.

FATHER CHRISTMAS:

Yes, he's murdered Washington, who led the revolution And Jefferson's been killed as well, which spoiled his constitution But here at the North Pole we have an excellent health care plan America ought to have one, Adams...anybody can Observe: I only have to call, and a doctor will arrive And with any luck at all, bring these two back alive Is there a doctor to be found, To cure his deep and deadly...wound?

ALL:

Wound!

[Sad trombone sound]

DOCTOR DOLLEY MADISON:

In comes I! My Name is Dolley Madison!

JOHN ADAMS:

You're not a doctor!

DOCTOR DOLLEY MADISON:

I am while this hat is on!

[Rim shot sound effect]

FATHER CHRISTMAS:

Hmm...how came you to be a doctor?

DOCTOR MADISON:

I'm the hostess with the mostess, the queen of the founding mothers And someday I'll be First Lady, if I really get my druthers But like poor Thomas, I'm into ice cream...and, in fact, I have to say I think ice cream could be a million-dollar business some fine day! So I snuck up here to harvest ice, and found, to my surprise That North Pole women are allowed to go to med school with the guys! So I sent James a letter that I'd be gone a year or two And I earned my own MD Degree from good old North Pole U!

JOHN ADAMS:

North Pole University? That's not a real school! Women can't be doctors! Do you think that I'm a fool?

FATHER CHRISTMAS:

Well, yes....I mean, it IS almost the nineteenth century These conventions are outdated! Besides, I've worked with thousands of male doctors And most of them are overrated! Women doctors are the future, of that we can be sure! So tell us, Doctor Madison, what diseases can you cure?

DOCTOR MADISON:

I can cure catalepsy, dogalepsy, elephantiasis of the Hippocampus Rhinovirus, horse fever, and abduction by the Krampus Also, P1 flat tires, VPN wheezes Continuing Resolution freezes And all other librarious diseases

FATHER CHRISTMAS:

Yes, but you can't cure a man who's been dead for five minutes

DOCTOR MADISON:

If he's been dead five YEARS I can cure him! Will you join me on my rounds?

Father Christmas: Very well!

(Jennifer plays walking music. During walking music, Linear Feet and Beelzebub stage whisper.)

LINEAR FEET: They're just WALKING around the bodies!

BEELZEBUB: That's called Grand Rounds!

(Walking Music Ends)

DOCTOR MADISON:

Definitely dead!

FATHER CHRISTMAS:

Hmm, and what can you do for him?

DOCTOR MADISON:

I have medicinal cakes called "chocolate zingers" Let's rub icing on his fingers And see if his condition lingers....

[Accordion music of the "Jeopardy" or "Time Passes" type]

BEELZEBUB:

It's not working!

[Duck calls.]

DOCTOR MADISON:

all right, all right, I'll have another go…let's see… Hmmm, Koo Koos and Googles and Razzys Won't work in these cases, I've found They're secretly the same thing as Zingers, Except for the fact that they're round.

[Uncorked bottle sound effect]

But THIS is a vial of "Ridge's Food," dissolved in cheap champagne It's the best of all folk medicine for them as has been slain!

Just a bit from my bottle, applied to his throttle...

THOMAS JEFFERSON:

[Glug, glug, glug] More! [Glug, glug, glug.]

LINEAR FEET:

He's moving! He's getting up!

[Triumphant accordion and cheers]

THOMAS JEFFERSON:

Well, that was a strange dream, but I guess the night is done; Whether I retire early or late, I Rise with the Sun!

BEELZEBUB:

But what about St. George Washington, Doctor? Will you fix him next?

DOCTOR MADISON:

I've been told that no one can fix Washington, but I'll do my best! Here, St. George, have a drink from my nip-nap.

ST. GEORGE WASHINGTON:

[Glug, glug, glug] Cough. [Pause] Comical Cough. [pause]. More comical cough. [pause]

LINEAR FEET:

Look, he's getting up too!

[Triumphant accordion and cheers]

ST. GEORGE WASHINGTON:

Death is the abyss from where no traveler may return. Or that's what I thought this time last year, but there's always more to learn!

JOHN ADAMS:

That's Washington all right, a platitude for every occasion! I killed the man with a sabre, and now? Not even an abrasion!

ST. GEORGE WASHINGTON:

I can't believe he killed me!

THOMAS JEFFERSON:

I can't believe he killed ME!

[Sword drawn sound effect]

JOHN ADAMS:

I'll teach you two to play Possum! I'll carve you to the heart!

.

Father Christmas:

Grab them, quick, Hold them fast! Keep them all apart!

(Struggling sound effects)

Washington: Where's my sword?

Jefferson: Why you...

BEELZEBUB:

Hold it, hold it, this won't do! When we let them go, they'll just fight again!

LINEAR FEET:

There must be someone at the North Pole to control these crazy men!

FATHER CHRISTMAS:

I hear someone coming...I hear trouble brewing

ABIGAIL ADAMS:

What in God's name do you fools think you're doing?

JOHN ADAMS:

Abigail? Oh, h...h...hello, darling. How did you get up here?

ABIGAIL ADAMS:

I stowed away in your stupid sleigh between the salt pork and the beer! And now I find you've been killing the other Founding Fathers? Explain yourself at once, if it isn't too much bother!

JOHN ADAMS:

I...well, dearest Abigail...I know it was unwise But Jefferson started it by boasting about his library's impressive size.

ABIGAIL ADAMS:

Huh! Men! I'll tell you a secret that all women know But every man overlooks: It's not the size of the Library that counts But what you learn from hitting the books!

THOMAS JEFFERSON:

But 6487 volumes is impressive, is it not? And I did learn some clever things by reading quite a lot For example: "Pride costs us more than hunger, thirst, and cold." And I learned how to win an election, as I'm sure you have been told.

ABIGAIL ADAMS:

Oh, stop your preening, Thomas, I thought you were my friend But your vile slander during the campaign has brought that to an end. Your foulest falsehoods taught me a lesson that needed to be learned: You're a base calumniater as far as I'm concerned.

THOMAS JEFFERSON:

[mumbles] Sorry, Abigail

ABIGAIL ADAMS:

And you George? What have YOU got to say for yourself?

ST. GEORGE WASHINGTON:

I cannot tell a lie; my answer is a sad one: "It is better to offer no excuse than a bad one."

ABIGAIL ADAMS:

Well, at least ONE of you got ONE thing right, there's no excuse for this! If women could vote, we'd vote you fools down into the abyss!

So listen up, here's what we'll do... We'll stay here til the new year comes And then we'll go our separate ways and pretend we're all still chums. John and I will go to Boston, George to Paradise Thomas can go to Washington with a ton or two of ice We'll never speak of these duels again, whatever should occur So the world will never know how dumb the founding fathers were. That's my firm decision, that's all I have to say, Now John, get me some stiff egg nog, because it has been a day!

JOHN ADAMS:

Yes, dear

FATHER CHRISTMAS:

Abigail Adams, we humbly thank you for ending this dissension And now let's have some music...I think that might break the tension!

[accordion fanfare]

LINEAR FEET:

My name is Linear Feet, as we have said before I'm a Library elf of great request, and I'll leave you wanting more With my brain so big, and my hands so small I'll call you a tune to please you all!
Muddy boots and dirty faces
Now all you dancers, take your places!

[Music, "The Girl I Left Behind Me."]

FATHER CHRISTMAS:

So that's the story of the three presidents and how they came to visit And the awkwardness of that Christmas party was something quite exquisite!

The presidents' visit to the North Pole is now known to but a few For the bitter memories faded, as such memories tend to do And after new year's, sure enough, they went their separate ways And eventually became friends again towards their final days. And so may it be for us as well, as the years go by Let our friends be many and our enemies few, and our happiness multiply!

All Sing: "Gloucestershire Wassail." [26]

(Cast invites audience to sing along)

Wassail, wassail all over the town Our toast it is white and our ale it is brown Our bowl it is made of the white maple tree With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink to thee

And here's to the bullock and to his right eye Pray God send our master a good Christmas pie A good Christmas pie that may we all see With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink to thee

So here is to the milk cow and to her broad horn May God send our master a good crop of corn A good crop of corn that we may all see With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink to thee

And here's to the calf and to her left ear Pray God send our master a happy New Year A happy New Year as e'er he did see With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink to thee

Then here's to the maid in the lily white smock Who tripped to the door and slipped back the lock Who tripped to the door and pulled back the pin For to let these jolly wassailers in.

John Fenn:

The Folklife Today Podcast is a production of the American Folklife Center. "The Peaceful Transfer of Mumming" starred Stephen Winick as Father

Christmas, Stephanie Hall as Beelzebub, Valda Morris as Linear Feet, Michelle Stefano as Thomas Jefferson, George Thuronyi as John Adams, Hope O'Keeffe as George Washington, Thea Austen as Doctor Dolley Madison, and Jennifer Cutting as Abigail Adams. Jennifer also provided the accordion tunes. We want to thank our engineer Jon Gold and staff throughout the Library of Congress who help us deploy this podcast. Finally, thanks to contributors at freesound.org for the Foley effects we used. Thanks for listening—we'll see you next year!

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