

The Art of Belsnickling



What is belsnickling?

- *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*:

belnickling: the word you've entered isn't in the dictionary. Click on a spelling suggestion below or try again using the search bar above.

- *Adelman-Olson Dictionary* (unofficial):

belnickling: the practice of dressing in garish costumes and visiting neighbors on Christmas Eve to amuse and entertain them.

Who are the belsnickles?

A member of a typical group of belsnickles was a teenage or young adult male who was usually unmarried. Women and married men occasionally participated, but this was uncommon. The groups usually numbered around eight to fifteen people, with a twelve-person group being the average.

Costumes		
Anthropomorphic costume that aimed to be grotesque, usually achieved with ragged clothing and scary masks	Animalistic, inhuman costume, usually achieved with ragged clothing, animal masks, and cowbells	Transvestite/sex-reversal costume, usually achieved with crude exaggeration of curves and painted masks

Belsnickles always wore gloves and old boots to mask their hands and feet. These often belonged to someone else to enhance the disguise. They would also distort their voices to achieve the same anonymity and carried bells and horns as noisemakers.

Belsnickles almost exclusively visited houses in their own community. However, they performed under the guise of being strangers who were unfamiliar with the neighborhood. One member of the group usually pretended to be a “guide,” who would usher the belsnickles from house to house.



When and where did belsnickling take place?

This particular article examined belsnickling on the La Have Islands in Nova Scotia, though the practice did take place in other parts of Canada. Belsnickling was also popular in the eastern United States, such as Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Maryland.

Belsnickling became popular in the early twentieth century and faded from popularity when the second World War began in 1939.

What did belsnickles do?

The belsnickles went around the neighborhood late on Christmas Eve, requesting entrance into people’s houses. They were generally only refused by the elderly, household perfectionists, and families with very young children.

Once inside, the belsnickles would amuse the family with song and dance. The performance was always gregarious and enthusiastic with the main motive of making the

small audience laugh. The family would reward the group with “a bit of brouse”: cakes, cookies, and fruit, which were eaten later to preserve the disguise.

The belsnickles were eager to flirt with, tease, and scare the members of the family, especially the women and children. There was also the ongoing game of trying to guess the identity of the belsnickles. Both of these things often led to behavior that was not considered appropriate in any other setting, such as sitting in the women’s laps and trying to peel away clothing.

What was the significance of belsnickling?

Belsnickling was a tradition of socializing and merrymaking during the Christmas season in La Have and elsewhere. It was a time where social barriers were ignored, and people could interact as they wished, honoring the spirit of the holiday.

Outside of the Christmas season, parents would use belsnickles as a threat similar to the modern-day monster in the closet. Children were told that the belsnickles would “get them” if they did not behave.

Belsnickling was also a rite of passage. The ritual was a step in transitioning one’s identity from child to adult. The anonymity of the costumes ushered the teenage boy into the role of grown man.

Discussion Questions

- What are some modern forms of belsnickling? What are the rituals and traditions associated with them?
- Why didn’t women participate in belsnickling?
- How and why did belsnickles hide their identity?
- What was the purpose of the guide?