

The New York Times

December 13, 2006 Wednesday
Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section B; Column 1; Metropolitan Desk; OUR TOWNS; Pg. 1

LENGTH: 781 words

HEADLINE: Tell Virginia The Skeptics Are Still Wrong

BYLINE: By PETER APPLEBOME.

DATELINE: NORTH CHATHAM, N.Y.

Here are some of the things you may not know about what is almost certainly the most reprinted newspaper editorial ever written.

It was summer, not December, when 8-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon wrote The New York Sun asking if Santa Claus existed. She probably wrote the letter shortly after her birthday in July, it kicked around the newspaper for a while, and the editorial was printed on Sept. 21, 1897.

The eloquent response beginning, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus," was written by Francis Pharcellus Church, a self-effacing man of 58 who had no children of his own. According to his editor, Edward P. Mitchell, Mr. Church "bristled and pooh-poohed at the subject," then knocked out an essay that was buried in the third of three columns of editorials.

It did not become an instant success, as legend has it. Instead, it was first reprinted five years later, with no great enthusiasm, after repeated requests from readers. It was not until the 1920s that The Sun (not to be confused with the current incarnation) gave in and prominently reprinted it every Christmas.

Virginia, later Virginia O'Hanlon Douglas, went on to become a thoroughly modern woman who earned a Ph.D., taught school and served as a principal.

She embraced Mr. Church's sentiments to the end, most conspicuously when she read her question and the newscaster Chet Huntley read Mr. Church's reply on Dec. 16, 1960, on "Perry Como's Kraft Music Hall."

She moved to North Chatham, near Albany, from New York City in 1959, and died on May 13, 1971, at age 81.

A grandson, Jim Temple, has a videotape of her, dignified in pearls and white gloves, reading the editorial as she did every year at the Christmas party at the local Methodist church.

SO in the interest of setting the record straight, in honor of Mr. Church's editorial, Mrs. Douglas and the spirit of the season, the North Chatham Historical Society paid tribute to

her last Sunday. Mr. Temple spoke, as did George Vollmuth, president of the historical society, and **W. Joseph Campbell**, a journalism professor at American University who researched the history of the editorial for his book, "The Year That Defined American Journalism: 1897 and the Clash of Paradigms."

It's not likely the 40 or so folks who came out on Sunday were all that interested in journalistic paradigms. But it's hard not to look at Virginia's question and Mr. Church's answer through one of two other lenses.

The first is wonderment at the impossible distance of it all.

"Papa says, 'If you see it in The Sun, it's so,' " she wrote. Ha!

Those were the days. Newspapers still do their best to tug at heartstrings, but it's hard to imagine one writing: "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! How dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus! It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias."

Today's version with an appropriately hip urban 8-year old might be:

Vnyc06: sup santa. r u for real?

elfnumber18: yes, V. he just doesn't use IM.

But the editorial has resonated for 109 years not because of what it said to children. Its appeal is what it says to adults -- about the fleeting nature of childhood; the importance and difficulty of faith, hope and belief; the thin line we walk between being responsible adults and a world with, as Mr. Church wrote, "no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence."

So more compelling than what is dated is what is not. "Virginia, your little friends are wrong," Mr. Church began. "They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age."

Skeptical age? It's 1897! Letters to The Sun cited by Mr. Campbell sound as if they could have been written today. One letter writer in 1926 said the editorial offered "a fine relief from the commercialism and unsentimental greed" of the Christmas season. One in 1940 said it was "a ray of hope on the path of human understanding in our troubled times."

And Mrs. Douglas popped up throughout her life to make Mr. Church's case. ("Yes, Virginia Tells Questioners Today, Santa Can Exist Even in an Atomic Age," read a headline on Christmas Eve, 1957, in The New York Times.)

But, a smart cookie, she managed to do him one better. In a newspaper interview 71 years ago, she cited the plight of poor city children, saying that they needed both belief and

help, the spirit of Santa Claus and the reality.

The story ends, "Nineteen thirty-five, she indicated, would be an especially good year to get started."

Everything changes and nothing does.