

OUR VIEW

History's most reprinted editorial answers important Christmas question

The most famous editorial in American journalism was published 117 years ago in the New York Sun, as a reply to a letter from 8-year-old Virginia O'Hanion.

The editorial was titled "Is there a Santa Claus?" and its most memorable passage was this reassuring declaration: "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus."

The editorial was written in less than a day by a self-effacing journalist named Francis P. Church, who was a veteran editorial writer at the Sun.

The response from Francis Pharcellus Church to Virginia O'Hanion's letter has since become history's most reprinted newspaper editorial.

In a world that seems to carry so much uncertainty right now, it seems only appropriate that we take a moment to reflect on the magic of the holiday season.

The Steele County Times takes great pleasure in presenting this novel editorial:

Dear Editor,
I am 8 years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, "If you see it in The Sun, it's so." Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?

Virginia O'Hanlon
115 W. 95th St.



Virginia O'Hanlon, a real girl, wrote a real letter.

Is there a Santa Claus?

Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect, as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole truth and knowledge.

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. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies! You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas Eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

You tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart. Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, Virginia, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.

No Santa Claus! Thank God he lives and he lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay 10 times 10 thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.



STAFF PHOTO BY RICK BUSSLER

Jerry Lageson strings 50,000 LED lights on a tree to create a luminous wonder along Interstate 35 north of Medford. The 45-foot tree brightly shines throughout the holidays.

A stunning luminous wonder



Hot Pursuit
RICK BUSSLER

For 10 years, Jerry Lageson has become known as the shining beacon of southern Minnesota, at least when it comes to the holidays.

In stunning fashion, Lageson has been sparking the darkness by lighting up a 45-foot Red Oak tree along Interstate 35 between Medford and Faribault. He has strung 50,000 LED lights in the tree.

I know in my travels through the area the lit up tree always makes me stop and pause. It brings happiness to my day no matter what has gone on.

He had hoped to add another 3,000 lights this year, but a shipping problem on the West Coast prevented him from getting the additional lights. This is the first year that no extra lights have been added since 2012.

For now, he's stuck at 50,000.

The idea for shining a luminous wonder came one year after Lageson saw a similar tree lit up by the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport.

"I thought man that looks nice and I have the perfect spot," he said, adding he thought about it for a while and decided to go for it.

Lageson doesn't string just any old lights in the tree. He uses commercial quality in order for them to last. "If the leaves protect them, they are good for a long time," he said, adding that he hopes to get at least 10 years out of them.

The job of stringing the lights is certainly no easy task.

During a year when he adds lights, Lageson rents a 55-foot lift to help him string the lights. He can be found dangling in the air at least 40 feet high. The lights have to be strung at night so he can see them illuminated.

And once the lights are up, they stay up. "It would be a heck of a job to take them down," he said. "They stay up there forever."

Lageson, who turns 75 next month, confesses the project is "bigger than you think." He has to secure the lights around the branches and often zip-ties them. He also has to be careful to leave enough space for the branches to expand and grow.

He hopes to get back on the lift next year and add more lights. "I imagine I can go up in that lift for a while yet, but you never know. Life is unpredictable," Lageson said. "You don't know how long

you're going to be around."

Mother Nature has been kind to Lageson and the tree, so far. About four years ago a late season tornado split around the tree and went in different directions leaving the tree unscathed. Lageson ran outside in his underwear to make sure the tree was still standing. He said it was a miracle how the tornado skirted around his farm leaving no damage.

"We pray over the tree all the time when a storm is coming," said Lageson, who retired seven years ago after being self-employed as a cabinet and countertop maker for 40 years. "I think God cares about the little stuff, too."

The little critters have also spared any major damage. Lageson said he has lots of squirrels and raccoons on his place, but they generally stay away. "They see all the wires and get afraid," he said with a laugh.

The tree is lit every day from two days before Thanksgiving until at least Feb. 1. They go on at 5 p.m. and continue until midnight.

It's Lageson's way of extending a holiday gift to thousands of motorists along I-35.

Lageson inherited the tree when he purchased the property in 1976. He said it was pretty good size at that time so he estimates

it's at least 60 years old.

He has toyed with altering the tree's appearance in the past. One year he added a lighted star near the tree, but he later scrapped the idea when people complained that it distracted from the tree.

Over the years, Lageson has become world famous. You-Tube videos of the tree have been shared worldwide. According to Lageson, it has received more than 1.6 million views on You-Tube.

Lageson was featured on KARE-11's Land of 10,000 Stories by Boyd Huppert Monday at 10 p.m. Noting Huppert recently was diagnosed with cancer, Lageson said, "keep praying for him."

When asked how long he plans to continue lighting up I-35, Lageson let out a big laugh almost as jolly as Santa Claus. "I laugh like that because everyone asks me that," he said. "As long as I can."

The wonder man uses the tree to become inspirational.

"Life is not about the breaths you take, but it's more about the moments that take your breath away," Lageson said. "That's my focus on this tree—something that will take your breath away and you will remember for many years."

And he's all about bringing light into a dark world.

"This world has gotten pretty dark and evil," Lageson said. "It's nice to put a little joy in people's hearts. Once you start something like this, you can't quit."

And who could ask for anything more this holiday season. It's nice to have someone like Lageson watching out and going in hot pursuit of cheering us up.

LUMINOUS WONDER FAST FACTS

- **2012:** 45-foot tree began being lit
- **55-Foot:** Lift needed to hang lights
- **50,000:** Number of lights on the tree
- **\$30:** Cost to light per month
- **5 p.m. to 12 a.m.:** Hours tree is lit until Feb. 1
- **1.6 Million:** Number of views story has had on You-Tube

