



*Photo Courtesy of Mary Swander*

## Belltower Triptych Part III: Birthday Presents

MARY SWANDER

Once I had the bell tower restored on top of my old one-room schoolhouse, every Amish child in the neighborhood wanted to ring it.

“I’ll tell you what,” I told Joe the carpenter’s children last winter. “You can come down to my place and each ring the bell on your birthday.”

The next spring, when I had long forgotten my promise, their mother presented me with a piece of paper listing all of her younger children’s birthdays. “I don’t know if you remember about the bell, but my children haven’t forgotten,” she said.

I glanced down at the list. It was time to begin with five birthdays spread out over the course of the summer. The three older children were teenagers and beyond bell

ringing. Melvin, the twelve year old, was first. I drove down the road in my car and scooped up all the children—two squished in the front seat and three in the back. We sped the half-mile home, the children marveling at the buttons on the doors. Up went the window, then down went the window, then up again.

Inside my house, Melvin grabbed hold of the rope.

“Oh, first we have to sing Happy Birthday,” I said, breaking into song. Only the three school-age children joined me. I often forget that young Amish children only speak Deutsch until they go to school and learn English by total immersion.

Bong, bong. Melvin rang the bell twelve times, the sound echoing over the valley.

Then we raced outside with the dog and played a rousing game of Frisbee, the disk sailing through the clear, blue sky.

Each child had his or her turn throughout the summer. We kept the ritual the same—the song, the bell, then the romp with the dog. The children learned where I kept the Frisbee and rummaged it out of the basket, then raced outside. I gave each sibling a gift of a

cookie and the birthday child a slice of pie. They carried the desserts home gleefully on their laps in the car.

“Mom, Mom, look. I got apple pie!” Seven-year-old Daniel shouted when he reached his house.

Oh, that you could please all “English” children so easily, I thought. But in this family the children had never played a video game, never watched TV, had never even listened to the radio. At Christmas time, they might receive a comb or handkerchief from their grandparents. On the drive home I was amazed that they kept their cookies on their laps. I had expected them to start eating the treats immediately, gobbling them up in an instant. Instead, they slipped their prizes inside their pockets. The Amish culture is semi-communal, non-competitive and non-violent. Sometimes it’s astonishing to see how these principles translate on a small scale.

Inside the house in the kitchen Merlin asked his mother for a knife. With tiny, careful strokes, he cut up his slice of apple pie into eight parts and shared it with each of his brothers and sisters. 