

A simple Christmas made special

One boy's determination to make his neighbors feel welcome warms the hearts of both families.

Story by Louise A. Jackson
For the News-Leader

J.T. Kiley blurted out his news as soon as his father said "Amen" over supper. "Pa, the new man on the old Crumley place — Mr. Zimmerman — he's moved that fence he built! He put it just where you said it should've been to begin with."

Pa speared a chop from the meat platter. "Oh? And how might you know that? Did a helpful fairy whisper it in your ear while you were working at the woodpile?"

J.T. focused on his plate. "I got a pretty big pile chopped, Pa." He looked up. "But I thought, since it was such a warm day for December and we haven't had any fried squirrel lately and I know how you like it. ..."

"So you went hunting instead of finishing your chores," Pa said. "And you just happened to be up on the ridge and you just happened to notice that stubborn German had moved his fence." He chewed a bite of meat longer than he probably needed to and washed it down with a long drink of water. "I see."

J.T. nodded. "I got three fat squirrels, too, Pa. And I thought, maybe, since the fence was back where it ought to be, I could go over and get acquainted. They have a boy about my age."

Pa looked at Ma. "Nellie, do you think someone who doesn't finish his work ought to go visiting?"

Ma thought a moment. "Probably not, but it would give me a chance to send a cake for a housewarming gift. I'd have done it sooner but you men had to go and get into that argument over fence corners." She laid her fork down. "I declare! You two looked like a couple of banty roosters, him yelling in German and you yelling in English and neither one of you knowing what the other one meant."

"He knew what I meant, all right," Pa said. "He's just a stubborn newcomer. I think foreigners

 Enlarge



Illustration by Wes and Jason Wilson

MORE ABOUT THIS STORY

Meet the author and illustrators

Author: Louise A. Jackson, a Springfield resident, is the author of three children's books: "Gone To Texas: From Virginia to Adventure," "Grandpa Had a Windmill, Grandma Had a Churn," and "Over on the River." A former elementary teacher and reading/language arts professor, Jackson is known for her spirited presentations to children in schools and public libraries and for her ability to inspire and encourage young writers. A true Christmas Eve anecdote about her great-grandfather's family and their neighbors was the inspiration for this story.

Illustrators: Wes and Jason Wilson, father and son, are both artists. Wes also is a farmer and lives in Aurora. He is considered by many music historians to have fathered the '60s rock poster genre. He created many for bands such as

ought to have to learn English before they can buy our land!"

Ma walked to the pie safe and opened it. Pies and cakes filled every shelf. "At least the disagreement is cleared up. I'd hate for Christmas to come and us be at odds with our nearest neighbors."

J.T. wasn't quite sure why his mother baked so much this year. There were only going to be the three of them to eat it. Truth was, this was going to be the least special of all his 12 Christmases. For the first time in J.T.'s memory, they weren't going to Grandma's house. She was spending the holidays with her sister in Illinois.

To top it all off, it didn't even look like it was going to get cold enough to snow. Some Christmas!

It sure would be nice if he could make friends with the Zimmerman boy. He'd never made friends with someone who couldn't speak English, but he'd like to try.

"Pa, is it OK, then, if I take Ma's cake over there tomorrow?"

"I guess so," Pa growled. "For all the good it'll do. You won't be able to understand a word they say." He stood abruptly and stalked outside.

Next afternoon, Ma handed J.T. a cake wrapped in brown paper.

"Now, don't drop it!" She lowered her voice. "And, if it seems right, you might invite them for a Christmas visit."

"How am I going to do that?" J.T. asked.

"You'll think of a way," Ma said. "A cake and a smile are the same in any language."

J.T. shook his head doubtfully and started over the ridge. It was quiet at the Zimmermans. No one came when he knocked. He had set the cake down and turned away when Mrs. Zimmerman opened the door.

"Bitte?" she said.

"Uh, I'm J.T. Kiley from over the ridge." He pointed toward home, picked up the cake and held it

the Grateful Dead. Particularly known for his illustrative lettering style, he created cover art for "The Art of Rock: From Presley to Punk," a book that features the rock poster work of Wilson and other artists. He maintains his creative energies and held the Art Show on the Farm in October. Jason lives in Springfield and works on freelance art projects. A single dad, he most enjoys spending time with his 5-year-old son Keegan, who is the model for the boy in this illustration.

out. "My mother sends this cake."

Mrs. Zimmerman looked puzzled; then her face cleared and she smiled. "Von dein mutter?"

The last word sounded something like "mother," so J.T. nodded. Raising his voice and speaking very slowly, he said, "Yes, from my mother."

The woman took the package and raised her hand to her chest. "Fur mich?"

J.T. nodded.

"Ah-h. Danke, danke!"

There didn't seem to be any way to deliver the rest of Ma's message but J.T. figured he had to try. He racked his brain. There was one possibility.

"Do you have a pencil?" he asked. He held his left palm up and pretended to write on it with his right index finger.

"Ein moment." The large lady disappeared with her cake and returned waving a pencil and carrying the brown paper wrapper.

"Thanks." J.T. held the paper against the doorjamb and slowly drew a simple map, beginning with a house labeled "Z" and ending at a house marked "K."

Mrs. Zimmerman peered over his shoulder, repeating "Ja, Ja!" as J.T. traced the road from one house to the other. He paused a moment and added five suns. Under the last sun, he drew a moon and a Christmas tree. On either side of the tree, he put stick figures, ending by drawing a circle around them all.

J.T. jabbed at the Zimmerman house symbol, pointed at Mrs. Zimmerman, then traced along the route to the Kiley's. He held up five fingers, then touched the moon and tree, questioning with raised eyebrows.

Mrs. Zimmerman nodded again, looking pleased.

J.T. wasn't sure she really understood but he'd done all he could think of. If it didn't work, at least he'd tried.

Five days later, on Christmas Eve, the Kiley family gathered around the parlor organ for their usual holiday sing-along. They didn't have Uncle James' bass and Aunt Dora's alto like they did at Grandma's, but Ma was determined to follow tradition.

During "O, Come All Ye Faithful," they heard a loud knock. The singing halted abruptly, and Pa opened the door. There stood the Zimmermans, faces beaming, with Mr. Z holding the biggest ham J.T. had ever seen.

"Froliche Weihnachten!" their new neighbor bellowed. He shoved the ham into Pa's arms.

Pa staggered back a step, seemingly in shock. As the silence lengthened, J.T. stepped forward. After all he'd gone through to arrange this visit, he wasn't about to let things fall apart now. Pushing in front of Pa, he stuck out his hand.

"Mr. Zimmerman, I'm J.T. Merry Christmas!"

J.T.'s words seemed to shake Pa from his trance. Stammering a bit, he said, "Come on in," and moved aside.

Coats removed, Ma turned back to the organ. Pumping the pedals in time, she struck the first notes of "Silent Night," nodded her head sharply and began to sing. J.T. joined in. To their surprise, Mr. Zimmerman's booming bass was next. "Stille nacht, heilige nacht." The words were different but the tune was exactly the same.

By the time they'd sung a few more carols, everyone began to warm up, even Pa. They laughed and gestured. Ma served coffee and fruitcake.

Sitting there, taking it all in, J.T. felt a whole lot better about this Christmas. It was different, for sure. Unusual, too. But it turned out to be special after all.