



Friday, November 20, 2009

Popular Santa Letter Program Ends in Alaska



ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Starry-eyed children writing letters to the jolly man at the North Pole this holiday season likely won't get a response from Santa Claus or his helpers. The U.S. Postal Service is dropping a popular national program begun in 1954 in the small Alaska town of North Pole, where volunteers open and respond to thousands of letters addressed to Santa each year. Replies come with North Pole postmarks. Last year, a postal worker in Maryland recognized an Operation Santa volunteer there as a registered sex offender. The postal worker interceded before the

individual could answer a child's letter, but the Postal Service viewed the episode as a big enough scare to tighten rules in such programs nationwide. People in North Pole are incensed by the change, likening the Postal Service to the Grinch trying to steal Christmas. The letter program is a revered holiday tradition in North Pole, where light posts are curved and striped like candy canes and streets have names such as Kris Kringle Drive and Santa Claus Lane. Volunteers in the letter program even sign the response letters as Santa's elves and helpers. North Pole Mayor Doug Isaacson agreed that caution is necessary to protect children. But he's outraged North Pole program should be affected by a sex offender's actions on the East Coast — and he thinks it's wrong that locals just found out about the change in recent days. "It's Grinchlike that the Postal Service never informed all the little elves before the fact," he said. "They've been working on this for how long?" The Postal Service began restricting its policies in such programs in 2006, including requiring volunteers to show identification. But the Maryland incident involving the sex offender prompted additional changes, even forcing the agency to briefly suspend the Operation Santa program last year in New York and Chicago. The agency now prohibits volunteers from having access to children's family names and addresses, said spokeswoman Sue Brennan. The Postal Service instead redacts the last name and addresses on each letter and replaces the addresses with codes that match computerized addresses known only to the post office — and leaves it up to individual post offices if they want to go through the time-consuming effort to shield the information. Anchorage-based agency spokeswoman Pamela



Moody said dealing with the tighter restrictions is not feasible in Alaska. "It's always been a good program, but we're in different times and concerned for the privacy of the information," she said. ([Full Article Here](#))

Couple Busted for Refusing to Pay Tip

Bethlehem, PA -- If you're frustrated by poor service at a restaurant, think twice before you decide to not tip. You may be in for a bit more than just a dirty look from the waiter.

"Nobody, nobody wants to be forced to pay a tip or be arrested for terrible service," Leslie Pope said when her happy hour ended in handcuffs. Pope and John Wagner were hauled away by police and charged with theft for not paying the mandatory 18 percent gratuity totaling \$16 after eating at the Lehigh Pub in Bethlehem, Pa. with six friends. Pope claimed that they had to wait nearly an hour for their order and that she had to get napkins and silverware for the table herself. "At this point I became very annoyed because I had already gone up to the bar myself to have my soda refilled because the waitress never came back," Pope said. After the \$73 bill came, the group paid for food, drinks, and tax but refused to pay the tip. After explaining the bad service to the bartender in charge, Pope claimed he took their money and called police. The couple was handcuffed and placed in the back of a police car. "I understand that, you know, we didn't pay the gratuity, but it was a gratuity, it wasn't something that was required," said Wagner. The owner admitted that the group waited unusually long for their food, but said the pub was extremely busy that night. He said managers offered to comp the food, a claim the couple denies ever happened. "Obviously we would have liked for the patron and the establishment to have worked this out without getting the police involved," said Deputy Police Commissioner Stuart Bedics. Police charged them with theft since the gratuity was part of the actual bill. However, it is doubtful that the charges will hold up in front of a judge. The couple is scheduled to appear in court next month. ([See Video Here](#))

Giant chicken crashes city council meeting



DURANGO, CO - A person in a chicken costume ruffled the feathers of Durango's city council as they discussed rules for backyard fowl. At a council meeting Tuesday, someone in a chicken costume wordlessly entered council chambers just as Mayor Leigh Meigs was discussing a recently-passed backyard hen ordinance.

The costumed chicken took a few turns, flapped its arms, then took a seat in the nearly empty gallery.

Several minutes later, the chicken left -- without being identified -- after laying an egg on the floor. Council members told The Durango Herald they were perplexed by the costumed chicken but found the visit humorous.

The council voted 3-2 earlier this month to make it easier to keep backyard chickens. "I thought it was hilarious," councilwoman Christina Thompson told The Durango Herald. "I was laughing so hard my eyes hurt. There are just so many other things for us to be serious about, it's good to take a break once in a while." ([See Video Here](#))

White Castle Stuffing



MAKES 12 SERVINGS

4 tablespoons butter

1 large white onion, peeled and diced
1/2 head celery, diced
1 pound brown mushrooms, sliced
1/2 ounce fresh sage, chopped
1 tablespoon paprika
1/4 teaspoon fresh grated nutmeg
18 White Castle hamburgers (no pickles), chopped into 1-inch pieces, or 1 small loaf white bread, cubed and toasted
1 cup chicken stock
Salt and pepper

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

In a large saute pan, heat butter until foamy. Add onions and celery and cook until tender but still slightly crisp. Add mushrooms and some salt. Cook until mushrooms are brown and liquid is gone.

Add sage, paprika and nutmeg to the pan and cook until spices are fragrant.

Pour the mixture into a bowl and add diced White Castles; toss together. Put the stuffing in a baking dish and drizzle chicken stock over. Toss again and season to taste.

Bake for 20 minutes, uncovered, until the top is brown and crispy.

Jill and Chris Barron

Alleged Burglar Warms Up Bottle For Crying Baby

INDIANAPOLIS - An 18-year-old is in police custody after he warmed up a bottle for a crying baby inside the house he was allegedly robbing. Indianapolis police arrested the suspect at Arlington High School on Tuesday after receiving a tip from a television viewer saw surveillance video on a newscast. Detectives said two suspects forced their way into a home on Friday morning and began ransacking the house. Police said that when a baby started crying, one of them warmed a bottle in a microwave oven and gave it to a child to feed the baby. The suspect was being held on charges of burglary, robbery, criminal confinement and pointing a firearm.