

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ November 2005

## Mother Wippell and the Half-Pint Princess

*The Rev. Fred Fenton*

“Grandpa, who are you going to be?” Perry did not mean when and if I ever grow up. She wanted to know whom I would be when accompanying her to the party at a Berkeley bookstore to celebrate the midnight release of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*.

Once again, my nine-year-old granddaughter had caught me off balance. What, me wear a costume? At my age? And in the midst of a heat wave? That was not what we had in mind when my wife Billie and I moved halfway across the country—from Southern Louisiana to Northern California—to be near our granddaughter and her parents.

I thought back to the last time I had worn a costume. It was years ago. Billie borrowed a choir robe and dressed as a friar. She put me in short pants and a beanie, gave me a Raggedy Ann doll and a big lollipop, and dubbed us, “St. Francis and a Sissy.”

Thinking fast, and remembering the borrowed choir robe, I blurted out, “Professor Snape!” The momentary frown on Perry’s face quickly turned into a smile. Was she thinking any costume, even that of the dreaded “Potions Master,” was better than none at all? I asked who she planned to be. “Fleur,” said our little princess. Fleur is a beautiful French witch who can ensnare unwary males—like me.

Professor Snape’s all-black outfit was easy for a retired priest: black shoes and pants, clerical shirt without a collar, and for Snape’s cape, my “Mother Wippell” cemetery cloak. But what about that bald head of mine? The menacing Snape had long, shoulder-length black hair. My son said not to worry; he and Perry would find a wig.

When the evening arrived, I said to Billie, “How did I get myself into this? It’s hot outside. I wish I could stay home.” Sipping iced tea and reaching for the book I had just started reading, she said, “Don’t worry, you’ll enjoy yourself. This is what grandpas are for.”

My wig, purchased from a costume shop, was called a “Biblical Character Wig.” Professor Snape was clean shaven. I left the beard in the box. Perry shouted, “Yikes!” when she saw my costume. “Yikes” is her response when excited beyond measure. Dressed as I was, a hot night was sure to get hotter.

That is how I found myself standing next to Perry in the costume contest at a bookstore. “Grandpa, you look great,” she said, bouncing excitedly on my toe.

Competition between stores holding Harry Potter parties left this one with few contestants. There were five children, one teenager, and me. At 70, the “Berkeley Snape” was the oldest contestant by 56 years. This made me feel rather foolish, but my son called me a “good sport.” Praise from grown sons is not to be taken lightly, especially when it comes at the cost of a damaged toe.

The judges were three young clerks whose job was to make the store’s party a success. Seeing the pitiful turnout, they kept announcing: “Come to Aisle 9 for start of the BIG costume contest!” Alas, no more costumed figures showed.

There were three children under five. All were pronounced winners and given a star sticker on the cheek, marking them as future recipients of a bag of treats. Perry was one of two girls in the six-to-nine

category. Both of them won prizes, too. Perry glowed and gave me a look that said, “You’re next, Grandpa.”

There were just two of us in the “14 and up” group of contestants: a 14-year-old girl who, when she saw there was a contest with prizes, hurriedly applied Harry’s special scar to her forehead and joined Professor Snape, sweating profusely under his heavy, English wool cloak.

The young woman received the judges’ last star sticker. Her minimalist costume was judged “most muggle.” I was awarded “best costume” for my Snape outfit. The judges promised a bag of goodies for me, too. Looking up at the black figure towering above her, one said, “You’ll be easy to find, even without a sticker on your cheek.”

To celebrate our wins, I treated my granddaughter and myself to SORCERER’S POTION at two bucks a glass, while my son stood in line to purchase reserved copies of the Harry Potter book. It was scheduled to go on sale at the stroke of midnight. Unfortunately, no books were going to be sold in that store. Due to a power failure, all the lights went out well before the magic hour, and disappointed customers were sent into the night bookless.

Perry and her mother were leaving for Hawai‘i early the next morning. The thought of not having the latest Harry Potter to read on the plane was too much for a tired little girl. She was close to “meltdown.” Her father did his best to reason with her, but she wanted that book NOW and wouldn’t take “no” for an answer.

At this point, her dad took Perry over to the store manager, introduced her, and retired from battle. At a safe distance, he observed a patient manager listening to a determined, would-be customer gesturing wildly with both arms and pressing him to make an exception in her case.

“I’m really sorry, Perry. We’re disappointed, too. We hoped to sell a lot of books tonight.”

“All I want is ONE copy to take on the plane with me. My dad reserved it MONTHS ago.”

“Let me assure you we have stores in Hawai‘i. You’ll be able to buy the book when you get there.”

“But it’s a BIRTHDAY PRESENT from my DAD. I want him to give it to me TONIGHT.”

The manager was helpless. No electricity meant no computers to record sales. If you made an exception for one person, you had to do it for all. We would have to take our chances finding a bookstore with the lights on in another part of town. That was OK with me. I had been standing for hours. All I wanted was to shed Snape’s cape and sink into the comfort of the car.

Driving across town, we found a well-lit bookstore. My son went in to check out the place. “There goes Dad on his mission,” Perry said. A few minutes later, we joined a happy crowd of children and their parents. There were a few Harry Potter look-alikes, but no other grandfathers in costume. We joined in the countdown to midnight and the cheer that went up as *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* began flying across the counter.

On the way home, I thought about “Professor Snape’s” night on the town. An evening like this was exactly why we moved halfway across the country.



With Billie’s help, Fred tries to be a good parishioner at St. John’s, Clayton, CA, where they are enthusiastic members. The two celebrated their 51st wedding anniversary in September. They live in Concord with Brandy, a Tibetan Spaniel who practices unconditional love.