

Buford's Christmas Adventure 2016

© 2016 by Russ Franzen

*Christmas comes but once a year
A day that's filled with joy and cheer
And food that's good and some that's weird
And cookie crumbs in Santa's beard!*

Buford set the pen down and looked at the verse he wrote for Russ's annual Christmas card. He was pleased.

“That calls for another hot chocolate!” he said.

The little pink pig scurried into the kitchen and fixed himself a hot cup of Buford's Blend, which is hot chocolate with just enough caramel syrup to make it taste like a candy bar.

The house was quiet. The quiet and the hot chocolate made Buford sleepy. Soon he was fast asleep.

When he awoke, he was outside.

“Boy! Is it cold!” he exclaimed. “How did I get out here?”

As he looked around it was clear to him that he was not at home. He was standing in snow beside a ten-foot wide path. On the other side of the path, boats were parked next to an old wooden dock.

“Where am I?” he asked himself.

“You're on the canal,” came the answer from behind him.

Buford turned around to see who was there.

“Donkeys!” he squealed.

“We're mules,” said the one with the white diamond just above its eyes. “You can tell it's a mule by looking at its face. At least that's what our Hoggee says.”

“You have a talking sandwich?” Buford asked.

The mule shook its head. “The Hoggee is what they call a mule driver. He walks beside us on the towpath.”

Buford looked dejected. “I could never be a Hoggee,” he said. “I couldn't use the towpath.”

The mules looked at each other and said in unison, “Why not?”

Buford lifted up a front foot. “I don't have toes!”

The mules shook their heads again.

“I'm Petunia,” said the mule with the diamond. “This here's Gus. He don't talk much.”

“*Doesn't* talk much.” said Gus.

“That's what I said,” Petunia countered.

“Well.” Buford said. “I have to get home for Christmas. It is Christmas Eve, after all, and I want to see my friend Santa.”

The mules bent their heads down and looked closely at the little pink pig. “You say *you* know Santy Claus?” Petunia asked.

“San-TA. Santa Claus,” Gus countered.

“That's what I said,” Petunia retorted.

“Yes!” Buford squealed. “Santa is my good friend. He comes to visit every year and sometimes I go to visit him!”

“Well, maybe you can put in a good word for us here. These boats are stranded on the canal,” Petunia explained. “The canal froze before they could get home. The ice is thin by the dock but on the canal it's too thick to let the boats through. All of those boats have kids aboard and Santy doesn't know where they are.”

Buford looked at the stranded boats and thought.

“I can play Santa for the children,” he said.

“You will need a red coat and hat,” Petunia said.

“And a beard,” added Gus.

“Let's get going!” Buford squealed.

For the next two hours, Buford and the mules looked through barns and behind houses and stores to find what they needed.

Buford found a big doll with a red coat that he borrowed.

Petunia borrowed a big red stocking that was hanging on a clothesline that Buford could use as a hat. Gus found two bags, one filled with candy and one with nuts, on the back steps of the general store.

All they needed to find was a beard.

Buford was tired. He stopped to rest on the lockmaster's back porch. As he rested, he smelled something sweet coming from a barrel on the porch. Buford climbed up and pushed the top away.

“Molasses!” he squealed. A moment later he was up to his snout in the sweet, gooey liquid.

“Buford!” Petunia yelled. “Get out of there!”

Buford's head jerked up in surprise.

“MmmmmMmmmmMmmmmM!” he mumbled, his mouth stuck shut.

“Come look at this!” Petunia yelled, ignoring whatever it was that Buford was trying to say. “Here's something you need to look at.”

They walked over to the chicken coop.

“You go in,” Petunia said to Buford. “I'm too big.”

Buford walked in. After a few moments of clucks, squawks, and chickens scurrying out the door, Buford emerged.

“Perfect!” Gus exclaimed.

“Just what I was going to say!” Petunia added.

“What!?” Buford asked.

What Buford couldn't see, that everyone else could, were the white chicken feathers stuck to him by the molasses

from his ears to his chin.

“You have the beard, now let's get you dressed.”

The two mules quickly went to work dressing Buford to look like Santa. It was dark outside when they finished.

“That's a pert near, perty good Santy,” Petunia said. “Best I've seen since last year.”

“San-TA,” Gus said.

“That's what I said,” Petunia replied. “Let's go down to the boats.”

There were seven canal boats parked next to each other.

Smoke from the cook stoves rose into the air.

When they got alongside the first boat, Petunia picked up Buford by the rope around his waist that kept the coat in place. She plopped him on top of Gus's head.

“Gus will lean over and you can walk down his nose and get on the front of the boat,” she said.

“The BOW,” Gus said. “It's called the bow.”

“That's what I said,” Petunia replied.

“This coat is too tight for me to bow,” Buford said.

The two mules just looked at each other.

Then Gus leaned over and Buford stepped onto the bow.

“Now walk over the big plank that connects the front and the back of the boat,” Petunia said,

“The catwalk,” Gus interrupted. “It's called the catwalk.”

“That's what I said.”

“Cats walk softly,” Buford said. “Should I walk softly?”

“As I was saying,” Petunia continued, “Walk across the catwalk to the back of the boat and on the till deck on back of the boat, you'll see a hatch...a little door. Open it up, yell 'Merry Christmas!' deliver the candy, and close the door.

Then come back across the catwalk and Gus will be here to take you to the next boat.”

“That sounds like a lot of work,” Buford said. “Santa uses reindeer and they take him right to the chimney.”

“You won't fit down these chimneys,” Gus said. “So just do what she told you.”

With the plan in place, the three new friends got to work.

One boat to the other. On each one, Buford opened the back hatch, hollered 'Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas!' and dropped some candy and nuts down to the kiddies before closing the hatch and retracing his steps back to Gus.

By the time they got to the last boat, children and parents stood on top of their boats laughing at the sight of two mules and a little pink Santa. Buford, hearing the cheers and laughter, made a big production of dropping down the last of the candy and nuts with twirls and dance moves.

Gus was concerned when he saw Buford dancing on the top deck. “Get down from there!” he yelled.

Buford danced to the edge of the boat and looked down.

They were so close to the dock, he dropped down onto the bumper that ran along the side of the boat.

“It's called the GUN'!

Thanks, Gus. But that's what I said.

As I was saying, the canaller families were still cheering and Buford started dancing along the narrow ledge. It didn't take long for him to hit an icy patch and flip beard-over-bottom through the ice and into the canal.

The adults came running and quickly fished the little pig out of the water. He was soaked and shivering. Someone brought him a blanket and wrapped him up tightly.

One lady said to Buford, “Thank you for bringing Christmas to our stranded boats. It means a lot to us.”

“It was their idea!” Buford squealed, pointing to Petunia and Gus.

The canallers and their families surrounded the two mules, patting and thanking them.

“It was nothin',” Petunia said. “We were just trying to spread some mule-tide cheer.”