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Children's Sleigh Parade in the Prättigau Village of Fideris

Every few years, an event, an age-old local tradition, takes place in the Graubünden village of Fideris. A "horse", a "Schlittmer", a "Schlittmerin"¹, a beautifully decorated sleigh and plenty of snow are the main protagonists in the children's sleigh ride. Children from the picturesque village square of Fideris assemble beside sleighs crowned by wreaths, known as the "Rennbännä", are made of fir branches, richly adorned with paper roses and colourful ribbons

The older children wear blue shirts with red handkerchiefs, hats adorned with flowers and cheerfully tinkling bells hung around their necks. They are to be the "horses", an honour reserved for the older ones already in high school. They are in for a tough day, as it is their duty to pull the toboggans with their pairs of riders along the prescribed route.

The events of this morning are the culmination of what began weeks ago. In order to comply with tradition, the "Schlittmer" and the "horse" have been appearing regularly at the richly laid breakfast table of the "Schlittmerin". She is the one responsible for adorning the vehicle, for procuring the provisions and a small gift for her "Schlittmer" because he was the one to choose her weeks earlier. The "Schlittmer" in return organizes the "horse" and the toboggan with its special overarching construction, pays the "horse" for its services and covers the costs for drinks at lunch.

Sometimes the process is reversed and the "Schlittmerin" herself chooses her favourite. The long colourful train has sprung to action. With quite an effort, as every fresh start requires all the energy of the engine! But spectators, parents, relatives and friends are eager to help. First, the merry company moves through the village: Kreuzgasse, Unterwinkel and up again through a short, steep alleyway. And here the horses start to stumble. Their "hooves" are no longer shod, hobnailed boots nowadays are only to be found in the museum.

The "Schlittmer" is helping his horse, pushing with all his might to safely deliver his "Schlittmerin" cosily seated on the sled, to the final destination. The first goal is the church - a visit to the service is part of the tradition. Then the ride goes on to Strahlegg, a hamlet approximately a half an hour away, and back to the village for a lunch of warm barley soup.

Past and Future of the Children's Sleigh Parade

Up to the 1940s the merry procession went from Fideris to Pany or Saas. Later however, due to traffic and streets cleared from snow the trek needed to be shortened, visiting Küblis or Jenaz instead. But the custom was continued, with intervals of a few years, always in the month of January, because February, considered the "cats' month" was frowned upon.

With the exception of Valzeina, Furna, Seewis and Fanas, witnesses from each municipality in the Prättigau valley are able to recall memories of the children's sleigh ride. In Klosters the last one was organized in 2000, and now - 15 years later - in 2015, they put up another children's sleigh parade. Up to today the event is still on the agenda every year in Davos, but it's not easy there, either - to find horses is a difficult enterprise nowadays, they say. It could also be, that it is simply getting too much for the mothers in this day and age, with so many of them working outside the house.

In Küblis they started a new edition in the early 90's, but abandoned it again after only three years. 1959 saw the last ride of married couples. In Saas the custom has survived for a long time. Even in the mid-sixties the children's sleigh ride still went to Klosters, and in 1952 the young unmarried people went to Schiers by horse-drawn sleigh. In all the other communities the practice was abandoned shortly before or after WW II.

In Fideris, the children's sleigh parade was and still is a regular event that takes place every five to six years.

Copied from the Adults

It can no longer be ascertained at what time and where this tradition arose. It is most likely, however, that at some point in the past it was copied from the adults. As Fideris resident Hans Simmen pointed out in a 1985 comprehensive article in P & H, drawn sleigh rides belonged to one of the few pleasures in the past that interrupted the rather monotonous winter months and amused participants and spectators alike.

It was especially the young, unmarried crowd, who now and then organized sleigh rides to try to mingle with the opposite sex. In contrast to the children's sleigh rides with their two-legged horses,

the grown up "Schlittmer" guided a real horse, of course. But he, too, sat on a "Rennbännä", somewhat larger and mounted on a narrow "Ruttnerschlitten". The men sat astride and led the horse, but the ladies mounted the sleigh sideways, with their knees modestly locked. It was absolutely necessary, according to Hans Simmen's report, that "trölen" was to happen at least once during the ride.

It was Wonderful!

"Trölen" - keel over - is still very much part of it today. The narrow sleds or "Rennbännä" start to veer sideways on the road leading to Strahlegg, accompanied by shrieks and laughter. But quickly someone will be there to help the vehicle with the fragile wreath and the paper roses so vulnerable to humidity, to regain balance.

First and foremost, Fideris owes it to the teacher community, that this custom is still alive in an about five- to six-year interval in Fideris. They are in charge of the organization of the event and edit an information leaflet, so that everybody knows exactly what needs to be done and who is to fulfil which task

Fortunately it is no longer prescribed, how the paper flowers need to look and which colour they need to be. Mothers and grandmothers can let their imagination run wild and put in long hours, sometimes even days to produce handmade flowers from crepe or tissue paper.

Of course, comparisons are going to be made in the end of all this. Who has the most beautiful sleigh, the most magnificent flowers? And it is also part of it that members of the older generation, the grandmothers mostly, whisper amongst themselves, because the tradition has not been kept everywhere and red-and-white or the colours of the Graubünden costumes were not chosen. But it does not matter, really, because in the end everybody involved, young and old alike, at the conclusion of the obligatory vesper meal and the dance with the "Stelserbuaba" (folklore music group) will say from their whole heart: "It was wonderful!"

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Waikanae Swiss boy's new best friend



Eli Burkhalter and his assistance dog Taffy.

The family of a Waikanae boy, born with spastic quadriplegic cerebral palsy, is trying to fundraise \$20,000 for the ongoing training and support of his new assistance dog Taffy.

Eli Burkhalter, a fun-loving six-year-old who goes to Kapanui School, can't talk, walk or sit and needs an electric wheelchair to get about.

He requires a lot of care by his Swiss mother Simone Burkhalter, who lost her Swiss husband James Burkhalter in a motorcycle crash near Wellington when Eli was aged one.

Eli has a very helpful older brother Sean, 8, as well a great circle of friends but building networks and friendships can be challenging as Eli can't talk and his mobility is limited.

Last month Assistance Dogs New Zealand Trust gave Eli an assistance dog called Taffy and the pair have struck up an instant friendship.

Taffy, a two-year-old golden labrador, will not only change Eli's life by being a constant companion but will help take some of the pressure off Simone and Sean as the dog can do chores like pick up Eli's toys, call for help, walk alongside his wheelchair, wait with him, and even retrieve the television remote control. "It's really nice to know that there's always someone next to Eli," Simone said.

"Even though he's got an older brother, he only plays for so long with him, because he can't really interact like every other child."

"Quite often when we have friends over, or at school to, the kids play with Eli but will often drift off and do their own thing."

"But with the dog you can tell him to stay there and it will."

"It's also nice to see Eli happy and smiling a bit more."

"It has already made a change and it's only the beginning."

Taffy, a gentle and patient dog, is getting used to his new surroundings, establishing the ground rules with the family's 10-year-old Jack Russell called Molly, and the primary task of looking out for Eli.

It would be very fitting and appreciated if members of the Swiss community in New Zealand could participate in this effort. Any amount is welcome!

The family have set up a Givealittle page:

www.givealittle.co.nz/fundraiser/eliandtaffy