



ORLEANS COUNTY HISTORIAN'S OFFICE

Christmas Park featured several barns, a train and some reindeer. There were spaces for Santa's workshop and sleigh, a restaurant, a life-sized Nativity scene, and its own postal system for Santa.

Recalling Howard's Beloved Christmas Park

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Starting in the mid-1950s, Charles Howard started the process of converting his farm and barns to a Christmas-themed amusement park. On Saturday, Sept. 22, 1956, this "entertainment, education, gift, and amusement center," opened for a short, 13-week season. Mrs. Henry Greene of Medina provided "Christmas Village," a collection of 20 small houses, schools, churches, and other structures, fully furnished and lighted – an endeavor that required 25 years of collecting to complete. Also included was "Toy Lane," a collection of 23 window scenes aimed at simulating store fronts. Children had opportunities to visit with Santa Claus, see reindeer in the stables, and visit Mrs. Santa's Kitchen for a bite to eat.

In the files of the Department of History is a five-page Director's Report prepared by Charles Howard for Christmas Park's Board of Directors in February of 1960. Howard noted that extensive efforts were underway to rebuild the south end of the big barn, as the timbers were rotting away – they gutted the section and a steel beam was installed. To prepare the miniature train for visitors, the cars were

touched up and the engine sent to Buffalo where it would be examined, putting it "up in first class condition." The business was in full swing and seeing considerable success after four years of operation. Howard noted that he sold the most merchandise in the history of the business during the current season, shipping out nearly 150 wigs and beards for cleaning and selling a large quantity of new merchandise.

The question of opening day was directed to the board members, noting that previous suggestions included opening the Saturday before Decoration Day (Memorial Day) all the way through the end of June. Howard mentioned the importance of shortening hours after Labor Day, but proposed extended hours over the summer, despite the need for added labor to do so. The biggest issue brought forth was the question of admission rates. He writes that 1959 was the first year since the Park opened in 1956 that complaints about the ticket prices were minimal; \$.75 for adults and \$.10 for children.

The surprising success of the Park was attributed to word-of-mouth advertising, but Howard recognized the importance of advertising outside of Orleans County to

attract visitors. In a detailed breakdown of marketing ideas, he suggested that 24 sheet billboards be leased at \$40 per month in Rochester and \$50 per month in Buffalo. Should they want to light those billboards up at night, each would cost an additional \$10 per month; he placed considerable emphasis on the point that this effort "must be done now." Road signs were also proposed for a more local approach. In 1960, the business had approximately 10 signs along Rt. 98 through to Batavia and Howard suggested adding a minimum of 40 more at \$40 per sign. The previous year, Christmas Park handed out 41,600 brochures, a little more than half of the total visitors to the park, and a minimum of 70,000 was the proposed number for 1960. That year the Park attracted over 80,000 visitors.

After several years of operating Christmas Park as executive director, the operation grew to a point where he could no longer oversee it alone and resigned his position to a corporation of businessmen. On June 25, 1964, Howard wrote a letter asking for his name to be removed from all printed material and the sign at the entrance to the park. The Buffalo Courier Express published a short article about the impending financial troubles

of Santa Claus School, Inc. quoting Howard as saying, "They put in merry-go-rounds and ferris wheels. I have nothing against these things, but in Christmas Park a ferris wheel should be in the form of a Christmas wreath, and a merry-go-round should have reindeer to ride on." He also claimed that the directors "lost the spirit of Christmas," which resulted in financial losses.

In 1965, the operation filed for bankruptcy with debts totaling \$95,324.00 (\$748,836.81 today). Two months later the operation, consisting of Christmas Park and Santa School Inc., was sold at public auction and purchased by Vincent Cardone for the sum of \$31,000. Elizabeth Babcock, who was acting as caretaker for the park and school after closing, acquired the Santa suit and equipment portion of the operation for \$2,000. Newspapers reported an attendance of more than 100 bidders at the auction, some coming from as far as Florida.

Unfortunately, the world lost one of its most beloved men the following year on May 1, 1966. Howard suffered a fatal heart attack, and as Bill Lattin so eloquently wrote, "guided his sleigh into the limitless great beyond."