

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin County Historian

Vol. XIX

12-18-97

No. 51

HOMAGE TO CHARLES HOWARD

"SANTA CLAUS"

Charles W. Howard 1896-1966

In 1937 He Established Here

A World Famous Santa Claus

School, The First Of Its

Kind & 1953 Christmas Park

Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade Santa Claus

The above words appear on an historic marker recently erected in front of the former Santa Claus school on Phipps Road just west of Albion. This residence is now the home of Jerim Klapper and John Kurtz. The marker in essence, celebrates the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Santa Claus School by Charles Howard. The cost of this tribute has been shared by the Orleans County Historical Association and the Orleans County Department of History.

Following the death of Charles Howard the Santa Claus School was taken over by Nathan and Mary Ida Doan and moved to Michigan. In 1994 the school was purchased by Tom and Holly Valant who continue to run it each season in Midland, Michigan.

On Thursday evening, December 4 this history marker was presented and dedicated at the annual Christmas membership party of OCHA. Present on this occasion were Gayle Bergeman, Charles Howard's Daughter and her children, Jand Holland and Doug Bergeman. A Christmas program was presented by Ken McPherson, an avid collector of Christmas Park memorabilia. It was indeed, a time of tribute and reminiscing which touched the motions of all those present.

It was pointed out that Charles Howard was the embodiment of the Christmas spirit and the personification of the true essence of Santa Claus. As he used to say, "They err who think Santa Claus enters through the chimney. He enters through the heart." His purpose of establishing the Santa Claus School was to impart to Santa students the importance of being real and truthful as Santa the personage. With this came a truly believable visage as he felt many Santa's looked shabby, not bringing the proper image across to children.

In May 1966 the Journal Register in an editorial honored him by saying, "If there ever was an opportunity to contemplate the value of living, it could be done in evaluating the life of Charles Howard...he brought more joy and fulfillment to thousands of boys and girls than any living man. He had the ability of imparting to them complete confidence in the intangible something called Santa Claus when the rest of the world about them was seemingly falling apart....Christmas time may come and go but there will be something about a



Macy parade that will not just be the same."

Our photo by the late Fred Holt shows Charles Howard around 65 years ago. He was indeed, a visionary who through his artistic expression, exemplified the eternal meaning and essence of Christmas by the way he lived his own life. This intangible ideal was brought into tangible terms by his persona as Santa Claus, and by training others and through his creation of Christmas Park. This corporation and financial venture failed in the mid-1960's following his death. The grounds and buildings that once held magical dreams are now only a mute reminder of those childhood days of a middle-aged generation. He used to say, "You give but a little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give."

The historic marker venerates a great man but let us remember at this Christmas season the essence of his message. Therefore, I'd like to close, leaving you with some thoughts by Clinton Lee Scott. "Always it is easier to pay homage to prophets than to heed the direction of their vision. It is easier blindly to venerate the saints than to learn the human quality of their sainthood. It is easier to glorify the heroes of the race than to give weight to their examples. To worship the wise is much easier than to profit by their wisdom. Great leaders are honored, not by adulation, but by sharing their insights and values."