



Bethinking of Old Orleans

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SANTA CLAUS
CHARLES W. HOWARD 1896 - 1966
Part I

“You give but little when you give of your possessions.
It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.”

Charles Howard

Here is the story of a man who thoroughly enjoyed living and courage that could only be within one who brought joy and fulfillment to countless thousands of children. His was a life consecrated to humanitarian accomplishments of which volumens could be written. Shown here with his wife Ruth working in "Santa's" toy shop, he captioned the back of the picture with true Charlie Howard humor, "Can you tell which is a dummy?"

Charles Howard was born and grew up on the family farm just west of Albion at Rt. 31 and Phipps Road. At the age of seven he began to show a special creative ability. His aunt gave to him a coping saw with which he started making toys and doll furniture for neighbors. He attended a one-room cobblestone school, which has since been razed, known as the Loveland School House on Gaines Basin Road. He was a rather fat boy with a jolly sense of humor and first played the part of a Santa Claus in the fourth grade wearing a false face and a suit his mother made. In 1916 he graduated from Albion High School.

During World War I he made toys in Medina. His advertising slogan was "Buy Liberty Bonds and Howard's Toys and make the Kaiser stop his noise." When this business failed he went into farming.

One autumn in the late 1920's he set up a Santa Claus toy shop in the front window of the furniture store belonging to J.B. Merrill & Son. There he dressed up as Santa and operated a foot treadle jigsaw for making toys. This venture was a visual success but turned our poorly financially.

It was also around this same period of time that some of his greatest achievements were attained which brought to him national attention. The first such piece of ingenuity came when he created a miniature Niagara Falls at the Orleans County Fair in 1928 using 10,000 gallons of cider to promote the apple industry. The following year of 1929 at the Fair brought about the largest apple pie in the world which was again his creative endeavor. It measured 12 feet in diameter and contained 100 bushels of apples. Then in 1931 he outdid himself by having the world's largest cake built. It weighed 3½ tons and measured eight feet at the base and fourteen feet high. A special building was erected on the Fair Grounds for it and pieces were sold for 10 cents each. It was said to be most delicious.

But aside from these magnificent accomplishments and his involvement in community plays, the building of parade floats and work in the Methodist Church, Santa Claus was ever present in his mind. In the Fall of 1933 after having completed the major farm work for the season he ventured into McCurdy's department store in Rochester and asked to work for them as a Santa Claus. He was so convincing that the manager's reply was "When can you start work?" He was very nervous the first day but soon gained confidence and spirit unexcelled by anyone. He came to realize that Santa Claus was very important to every child. It was then that he started indepth reading and research about this jolly Christmas character. And it was through this study that he came to recognize Santa Claus as not just a pagan symbol but truly the real essence of what Christmas is all about.

Next week this story will continue with his Santa Claus School and Christmas Park.