

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin • County Historian

12-24-81



Vol III

No. 51

SANTA CLAUS
CHARLES W. HOWARD 1896 - 1966
Part II

Charles Howard used to say, "They err who think Santa Claus enters through the chimney. He enters through the heart." It was to this maxim which he lived generating the true meaning of Christmas. In order to improve the image of Santa Claus, Charles Howard opened the Santa Claus School in 1937. Since Santa Claus had originated in the home, he used his own house as a class room. The first year his tuition fee was set at \$15. He had three students, only one of which paid. The following year he raised the tuition fee to \$25 and within three years his enrollment had jumped to forty. Ruth Howard served noon meals during the week's course. Also

during this time many of the students who came from all over the United States roomed in Albion's Maple Manor. Charles Howard obtained specialists to teach the course of study with him. Charles Newton Hood of Medina taught showmanship and Ed Butters of Michigan was engaged in teaching the students all about reindeer. Other topics included: evolution of Santa Claus, make up, settings, child psychology, proper toys, Christmas stores, decorations, music and many other related topics. Following World War II his enrollment increased ever more.

Charles Howard wanted to impress upon his students the importance of the Santa Claus character and to this end he designed an appropriate suit worthy of such character. It was also during this time that Mrs. Santa Claus came into being. Another one of Charles Howard's ideas, as he felt Santa had been single long enough and was old enough to now have a wife. To this day Mrs. Elizabeth Babcock continues the suit-making business which was originated with the Santa Claus School.

In 1944 Charles left the McCurdy Store in Rochester where he had worked several years, for the Adam Meldrum and Anderson store in Buffalo where he continued work as a store Santa until 1948. In 1949 he went to work for the Macy Company and appeared each year as the Santa in Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. At this time he went completely out of farming so as to put his full energy into establishing his school and a shrine for Santa Claus. It was in 1953 and 1954 when he started to convert his entire farm into Christmas Park. In 1955 a corporation was formed combining the activities of the school and Park. Upon visiting Christmas Park one could see Santa's stable and sleigh, toy shop, castle, toyland with little houses brimming with toys, Christmas Village, Treasure Island, Santa's train, gift shop, wishing well and Santa's farm with a variety of animals.

In 1964 Charles Howard resigned from the corporation as its leader but kept his interest in the Santa Claus School. By then the tuition had been raised to \$150. Students from as far as Australia attended, many several times, feeling each time they were rejuvenated with Charles Howard's enthusiasm. His one special message throughout the years was never lie to the children. In 1965 Christmas Park went into bankruptcy for \$43,000. The following year Charles Howard guided his sleigh "into the limitless great beyond".

In June 1966 Congressman William Fitts Ryan on the floor of the United States House of Representatives, paid tribute to Charles Howard. The following is an excerpt: "Mr. Speaker, I know of no one who brought more joy to the hearts of the children of America than Charlie Howard, our nation's No. 1 Santa Claus. I was privileged to know him from childhood."

In 1968 Christmas Park's contents were auctioned off to the public. Ruth Howard 1890 - 1974 however, continued with the Santa Claus School in her house. Although the dreams of Charlie Howard's shrine to Santa Claus have dissolved, his school for Santa Clauses is still very much alive today in Bay City, Michigan under the direction of Nathan Doan, a former pupil of the Greatest.

