

Bethinking of Old Orleans

12-24-85

C.W.Lattin • County Historian

Santa Claus

Charles W. Howard 1896-1966

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

—Charles Howard

When Christmas comes around I always remember Charles Howard as Santa Claus and his Christmas Park. Somehow at this season it only seems fitting to do an abbreviated story of his life once again in this column.

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 even 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 out 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 in-depth 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.

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. His own house was the 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, makeup, settings, child psychology, proper toys, Christmas stores, decorations, music and many other related topics. Following World War II his enrollment increased even 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. In fact, Charles Howard is seen here modeling a Santa suit made by Mrs. Elizabeth Babcock's Santa Claus Suit and Equipment Co.

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's 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 1954 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.

