

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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Before the long white beard and a belly that shook like a "bowl of jelly" when he laughed; before the bright red suit trimmed with luxurious white fur; before eight tiny reindeer and a big red sleigh brimming with packages; before even Mrs. Santa and many working elves, there was a boy. Yes, my friends, even Santa Claus was once a boy. In fact, here is the proof, his picture at about three years of age amidst some snow banks at his family home. His real name was Charles W. Howard but if ever there was a convincing Santa Claus, he was it. It was as though he was born to be Santa and indeed, he lived, ate and slept the part throughout his lifetime. His first incarnation as Santa came when he was in the fourth grade while attending the old Loveland School located on Gaines Basin Road just east of the Howard's home located at Phipps Road and Route 31 west of Albion. He wore a false face and a suit his mother made for him. He was perhaps a little bit fat and had a very jolly personality. The part fit!

In fact, at the early age of seven he began making toys long before his famous toy shop. This came about because an aunt had given him a coping saw which he put promptly to use ever relying on his chimerical imagination. Yes, it was as though he was destined to be Santa Claus. It

was ever present in his mind and in the late 1920's during one autumn he set up a Santa Claus Toy Shop in the front window of a furniture store in Albion owned by J.B. Merrill & Son. There he dressed as Santa and operated a foot treadle jigsaw for making toys. It was visual success and a financial failure. Then in the fall of 1933 he went to work for McCurdy's in Rochester as a department store Santa. He soon came to realize how really important Santa was to all children. And too, he came to recognize that Santa was not just a pagan symbol, but held the real essence of what Christmas is all about. As he often said, "they err who think Santa Claus enters through the chimney. He enters through the heart." To improve the image of Santa, he established, just fifty years ago in 1937, his world-famous Santa Claus school. It was located in the old family home and attracted students from department stores from all over the United States.

In 1944 Charles Howard left McCurdy's and went to work for AM&A's in Buffalo where he portrayed Santa until 1948. In 1949 he went to work for the Macy Co. in N.Y.C. and appeared there each season as the Santa in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. At this point, having retired from farming which he did during the fair weather, he went full steam ahead on establishing his Santa Claus School as a shrine and developed his farm into Christmas Park. In 1955 he formed a corporation for this enterprise which was to go bankrupt ten years later. Charles Howard died in 1966, but he left upon anyone who knew him, an indelible image of the real Santa Claus, an image he produced even to creating the character of Mrs. Santa Claus which was portrayed at Christmas Park by his wife Ruth Webster Howard.

Although Christmas Park no longer exists, the Santa Claus School is still operated by Nathan Doan in Bay City, Michigan.

Yes, Santa Claus was a boy too, back when this picture was taken in the year 1900. Although he guided his sleigh from this life "into the limitless great beyond" he is yet with us in spirit. "...I am what never lay in the cradle and no coffin can hold, but sits behind smiling at what was brought forth and expires."