

No doubt, city believes in its Santa



An ad for the 1907 opening of James Edgar's department store. (courtesy Brockton Public Library)

By L.E. Crowley

Globe Correspondent / November 16, 2008

If John Merian could whisper a Christmas wish to the man who brought the department-store Santa to Brockton, it would be to return to the era when the city's center was a bustling beehive of commerce.

It was back in the Christmas season of 1890 that James Edgar, known for wearing costumes at public events, traded in his customary clown suit for a specially tailored Santa Claus outfit and began bellowing "Ho, ho, ho" to shoppers browsing through his Main Street department store.

Handing out gifts and pennies, Edgar and his costume ushered in countless copycats - a legacy that endures to this day and will be commemorated by the city next weekend.

But even this heart-warming seasonal tale isn't free of controversy.

Brocktonians believe that Edgar was the world's first department-store Santa. That claim is disputed, however, by the Macy's website, which says its New York City store had a Santa in 1870.

But Bob Rutan, Macy's historian and director of event operations, conceded in an interview that H.R. Macy, who also had a store in Haverhill, got the idea for a department store Santa from Edgar.

"Yes, Brockton is home of the first retail Santa. H.R. Macy stole the idea from a gentleman from Brockton," said Rutan. "We admit it."

Gerald Beals, former president of the Brockton Historical Society, said this question crops up every so often, but he thought the matter was decided long ago.

As a teacher at Brockton High School in the 1970s, he helped develop a local history curriculum that included Edgar as the first department-store Santa. Beals said one of the teachers received an acknowledgment that Edgar was the first, but there is no record.

Beals said the difference is that Edgar wasn't a hired hand like Macy's Santa, who sits in a chair hearing gift wishes. Instead, Edgar was a store owner who greeted his customers on the sidewalk near the store and walked the floor handing out gifts and pleasantries as he impersonated St. Nick.

"He is the Santa that we all know and everyone tried to be," Beals said.

Merian sides with Beals.

"This is where it all started - the department-store Santa. It wasn't Macy's, it was right here in downtown Brockton," said Merian, who has owned Tuxedos by Merian on Main Street since 1976.

Whatever the historical facts, Edgar's extroverted spirit, sense of community, and altruism will be remembered next Sunday, when a bronze plaque will be unveiled near the spot where his department store once stood. The plaque's \$3,000 cost was shared by the Metro South Chamber of Commerce and the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

The plaque is the first stop on a proposed trail that will highlight famous firsts and historic moments in downtown Brockton.

Called 15 Rounds of History, the trail includes the Edison building, where the first electric company powered the first municipal operations, and the gym where "Marvelous" Marvin Hagler trained and rose to become the world middleweight boxing champion.

Merian, president of the Downtown Business Association, said each site on the trail will have a plaque. The goal, he said, is to attract more business to the downtown.

A statue of Brockton's favorite son, Rocky Marciano, near City Hall is expected to be a part of the trail when it is completed next year, although there is a dispute over its location.

Edgar, known as the "P.T. Barnum of Brockton," was born March 5, 1843, on a farm in Scotland, according to Brockton historian Robert A. Kane.

He came to the United States permanently after 1865 and opened his first store in Brockton on March 16, 1878. It was called the Boston Store.

By 1890, Edgar was a prosperous man, and popular for the Fourth of July picnics and seasonal trolley rides he hosted - and paid for - for the children of the city's working class. Edgar died in 1909.

The James Edgar School was built in 1899 in his honor, and remained open until 1979, when it was demolished.

The ceremony to unveil the Edgar plaque will begin at 1 p.m. Merian has also organized an attempt to establish a world record for people wearing Santa hats in one place.

Guinness World Records doesn't have a listing for Santa hats, and Merian isn't sure this feat will be recognized by Guinness. But he said setting a record isn't what matters. "It's just something to have fun and raise awareness," he said.

Those who want to participate in the record attempt need to register at Joe Angelo's Cafe and pay \$1 per person. All proceeds will support Brockton's annual holiday parade. Participants may bring their own Santa hats or buy one for \$2.

Looking further into the future, Merian envisions a Christmas-themed downtown centered on Edgar's Santa history, including an entire window at Merian's shop, which will be ornately decorated and dedicated to Edgar's memory.

"Edgar really loved this city. He did a lot for the city, especially its children," said Merian. "He is the essence of Santa Claus."■

© Copyright 2008 Globe Newspaper Company