

James Edgar's Santa Claus — the spirit of Christmas

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BROCKTON —

To the children, he was “Uncle Jim,” to fellow businessmen he was the big-hearted, wholesome man with a sound, hearty handshake and greeting.

Today, James Edgar's memory is alive in the spirit of the Santa Claus that he brought to life in 1890.

“Children need to believe in the make believe,” said John McGarry, who continues the tradition in the spirit that Edgar embodied.

After all, said McGarry, Christmas is all about children.

To Edgar, a Scottish immigrant whose dry goods store became a landmark in downtown Brockton, every day was about children.

“I have never been able to understand why the great gentleman lives at the North Pole. He is so far away ... only able to see the children one day a year. He should live closer to them,” Edgar once said, according to Jamie Kageleiry's account of “The First Department Store Santa,” that appeared in Yankee Magazine's December 1990 issue.

Edgar practiced what he preached, becoming “Uncle Jim” to the children he entertained in his store and at annual July 4th extravaganzas — renting trolleys to carry thousands of Brockton youths to holiday outings where he would dress in costume to delight them.

“I love children and they love me,” he said in a 1902 interview in The Enterprise.

“James Edgar was a born showman,” Brocktonian Robert A. Kane wrote in his late 20th century biography of the person who would become the man behind the costume, “the P.T. Barnum of Brockton.”

Through the years, “Colonel Jim,” as he was known, was photographed in a variety of costumes, from the historic — George Washington — to the sportsman — a cricket uniform — and even as an Indian — “Big Chief” for one of his annual outings for children.

At Christmastime, Edgar would dress as a clown and walk through the store, visiting with children.

Then, in 1890, he brought Thomas Nast's 1862 drawing of Santa Claus — jolly and round and dressed in a red suit — to life.

In a custom-made red suit, the tall, ample-bodied and bearded Edgar became the first department store Santa Claus, a designation widely recognized today and about to be memorialized in a plaque in downtown Brockton.

That plaque will be dedicated at Main and Centre streets on Nov. 23, the first in a historic trail noting the city's "15 rounds of history."

To John Merian — downtown businessman, president of the Downtown Brockton Association and a true believer in the spirit of Santa Claus — the plaque represents the significance of Edgar's contribution to the department store Santa of today and to the memories that have been made since that day in 1890.

Merian envisions a restored downtown Brockton as "Christmas Town," where the holiday is celebrated 365 days a year and where Santa Claus lives on in the character that Edgar created.

"Without his persona, the millions and millions of happy memories may have never been a reality," Merian said.

Those memories reach back to Edgar's earliest days as Santa Claus.

The late Edward Lowery Pearson was in his 90s when, in 1976, he shared his memories of that first Santa sighting with the publication *Modern Maturity*.

"You just can't imagine what it was like," Pearson said. "I remember walking down an aisle and, all of a sudden, I saw Santa Claus. I couldn't believe my eyes, and then Santa came up and started talking to me. It was a dream come true."

Edgar, born in Scotland in 1843, came to Brockton in 1878 and died at his summer home in Lakeville in 1909, five years after he was partially paralyzed by a stroke.

By then, he was known as "Brockton's grand old man," a businessman, family man and a man whose love for his community and the children would live on.

His store was the first in the city to have electric lights and cash registers. He instituted the Edgar Layaway Plan. And, in 1906, he built the James Edgar Building.

Edgar shared his good fortune, paying for children's medical care, offering jobs to youths in need and passing out pennies to children who came to his store.

"He captured the very essence of Christmas in his philanthropic ideas," added Merian.

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Edgar's Children's Day parade lined up outside his Boston Store on Main Street in Brockton in this undated file photo.



Brockton Public Library

James Edgar, the first department store Santa, is dressed in his clown costume in this photo provided by the Brockton Public Library.



Brockton Public Library

James Edgar became the nation's first department store Santa in 1890. He was the owner of The Boston Store in downtown Brockton.