

Department store Santas owe paychecks to Col. Jim Edgar

By Bob Cubie, Enterprise correspondent
Published on Dec. 20, 1987

BROCKTON — Hanover Mall was all dressed up for Christmas. Shoppers surged through the concourse and walked in and out of stores decorated with wreaths, holly, snow and reindeer. The weary, clutching bags from Child World, Sears and Zayres, sat on benches and listened as the loudspeaker played, "Hark The Herald Angels Sing."

In the middle of the mall, at the fountain, was Santa Claus.

He sat on a big, high-backed chair on a white platform and waited patiently as dozens of little kids walked up the stairs, sat on his lap and said: "I want an Apple IIe Computer, a hockey stick, an NFL football and a red 4X4 truck with afterburners."

It's a scene repeated in thousands of shopping malls and department stores across America. Today, the department store Santa is as much a part of the Christmas scene as shepherds and wise men.

The tradition started in Brockton in 1890, when a large, jolly Brockton store owner named James Edgar, put on a red suit and became the first department store Santa.

Edgar, who was 47 at the time, liked kids.

If he heard a child needed medical help, he'd send a check to pay the bill. If he heard a boy needed work, he'd give him a job, and he was always passing out pennies to children who came into his store.

"I love children, and they love me," he said in a 1902 interview in *The Enterprise*. "They dub me 'Uncle Jim.'"

He was most famous, though, for his July 4th extravaganzas, when he'd rent 30-or-so trolley cars and take several thousand Brockton children to an Avon grove for a day-long picnic.

"I enjoyed giving the children of Brockton a free ride or some kind of good-time every year," he said, "and the 3,000 to 4,000 children who go and enjoy these times show how it is to appreciate."

Jim Edgar was a born a ham with a loud, boisterous voice, and he loved the limelight. One year he arrived at the 4th of July party dressed in a red, white and blue Uncle Sam costume, another year he was George Washington, another an Indian Chief, another a kilted Scottish Highlander.

At Christmastime, he'd wander through the store dressed as a clown, pick out the girl with the prettiest ribbon in her hair and give her a doll.

At that time, a new Christmas character named Santa Claus was appearing in magazines and newspapers.

In 1866, Thomas Nast, a famous cartoonist, depicted him as a big, jolly man with a white beard. He lived at the North Pole and delivered toys from a sleigh and wore a red suit.

Edgar looked like Thomas Nast's Santa Claus.

Edgar was big and jolly, had white hair and a beard. So in 1890, when Edgar decided to try something different for Christmas, he went to Boston and had a Santa Claus suit made. Then, dressed as Santa Claus, he wandered the aisles of Edgar's, asking the children what they wanted for Christmas.

"It was like a dream come true," said Ed Pearson in a 1969 *Yankee Magazine* article. Pearson, whose daughter, Mrs. Jean Partridge, still lives in Hanover, ran Pearson's Hardware on Main Street for many years. "You were actually talking to Santa Claus."

It was such a novelty that before long, the store was filled with children.

On Saturdays and Sundays, parents from as far away as Boston and Providence brought their kids by train to talk to Santa. It got so hectic that Edgar had another Santa Claus suit made for his nephew, Jim Grant, and they took turns roaming the aisles.

The next year, the big stores in Boston and New York all had Santas walking their aisles.

Edgar, who was born in Duns, Berwickshire, Scotland, in 1843 and emigrated to the United States in 1867, was a sharp, ambitious young man. He worked for a while in a store in Providence, and then in 1878 he and his partner, George Reynolds, arrived in Brockton with \$1,500 and opened "The Boston Store," selling clothing and cloth over a counter.

One day, Edgar threw away his sales book and announced:

"Hereafter I shall sell no more; I'm going to run the business and show other people how to sell stuff."

That was when he began his career as the Ernie Boch of 19th century Brockton. He'd do anything to promote his store. He had coupon days, he sold \$1.39 dresses for 39 cents. One day he stood on the roof of his store and threw down handfuls of pennies to attract shoppers.

The *Enterprise* reported, "Col. Edgar attracted attention in Brockton and around the country. ... He advertised himself and his business by every available means. All precedent was shattered. He drew attention to his business by unusual clothing and unusual speeches."

"I have made myself ridiculous in the eyes of many," he said, "but I know the results and shall not change." He was the type of man who liked everybody, and everybody liked him.

Politically, he was a Republican, "but not hidebound," he said. Socially, he said, "I'm a 'Jiner.' " He joined everything in sight.

"My creed," he said, "I make as broad as I can." And he lived that way. In those days, church members rented pews on a yearly basis. Edgar rented pews in the Porter Congregational Church, which his wife and daughter attended, as well as the Unitarian Church and St. Paul's Episcopal Society.

He was also president of the Brockton Cricket Club, where he played cricket. He was given the title "Colonel" by the Union Veterans Union, even though he was in Scotland when the Civil War was being fought. He was also a 33rd Degree Mason, a member of the Odd Fellows and of the Ancient Honorable Artillery Co. of Boston.

He believed in newspaper advertising.

"Tell the people every day what you have, never fool them," he said. And he liked his merchandise to move. "I turn my stock over six or seven times a year," he said. "A nimble six pence is better than a slow shilling."

He seems to have been a good-hearted, kind man.

As a boy, he had been apprenticed to a draper and had worked from daybreak often until late into the night for \$50 a year. He vowed then that if he ever owned a store his "boys" would be treated better.

He was true to his word. His clerks were paid the highest wages in Brockton, and were often made members of the company. At a time when stores were staying open every night, he closed his store four nights a week so his clerks could be home with their families, and then went around to other storeowners to get them "to fall into line."

"I believe in anything that makes it easier for my boys and girls," he said proudly. "I hire the best help available and pay them the best wages. I make it possible for them to own their own homes, even if I live in an upstairs tenement to save a few dollars."

He settled labor differences quickly.

"If a man or woman is worth \$10, I give them \$12," he explained, "if \$12, I give them \$15, and so on."

He expected his people to work, though, and he ran his store like a sea captain runs his ship. His desk was on a landing reached by a winding staircase where he could overlook the whole store. On the walls were two signs. One said, "Rogues Gallery," the other, "Leave Hope Behind All Ye Who Enter Here."

"I can see every department in the store," he said. "And when the crowd is surging around and the clerks are hustling, I'm on deck, planning how things may be enlarged and made better."

He gave his subordinates responsibility, "I don't believe in keeping a dog and barking myself," he said. In his store, the customer was always right.

"My trade comes from all classes," he said, "but the poorest person must receive as courteous treatment as the richest or I will know the reason why."

Edgar, who liked to be called "The Did Man," or "The Colonel" by his employees, had few other pretensions.

"I live in a tenement house and have no use for fancy coachmen with epaulettes and cockades," he said, "and wouldn't know how to manage one side of a pink tea, but all my bills are paid and my bank account is comfortable."

Although he lived simply, there was no Scrooge in him.

"I have made a barrel of money, and I have spent it as freely as I have made it," he said. "Thousands of it goes back to the people from whom I made it, for I fully believe in that kind of an exchange."

He was always the innovator.

His store was the first in the city to have electric lights and cash registers. He instituted the Edgar Layaway Plan, in which the shopper deposited money at the store and received 4 percent interest compounded every three months.

When they bought something, the cost was simply deducted from their account.

In 1906, he put up the James Edgar Building, the biggest, most modern building in Brockton with 52,000 square feet of floor space, a restaurant on the third floor and a Bargain Basement in the cellar. It had 1,200 incandescent lights and 150 arc lights and a revolutionary vacuum system in which the dirt went down ducts in the wall to a bin in the cellar. The store had 149 clerks, and on its busiest day, 18,848 people came through the doors, 14,337 sales were made.

While the building was going up, though, Edgar was paralyzed by a stroke. He was recovering on Sept. 20, 1909, when a second stroke killed him.

He was 67.

On Sept. 21, 1909, his death was frontpage news, with a two-column picture of him at the top center of the page, over a headline that read: "James Edgar Met His Death "With Smile On His Lips"

The picture showed a large, florid-faced man with a close-cropped white beard and hair. The cutline said:

"Prominent Brockton merchant dies suddenly at his summer home in Lakeville."

When news of Edgar's death was announced in a bulletin in The Brockton Enterprise, telephone calls poured into the newspaper asking for particulars.

"James Edgar," The Enterprise wrote, "will be remembered in Brockton as long as the business district endures, chiefly as the pioneer of unusual methods of advertising and also as a big, broad-minded, public-spirited and generous Brocktonian."

His business associates remembered him as, "a big-hearted, wholesome man, who was universally liked," with a "sound, hearty handshake and greeting." One said, "His originality put him in a class by himself. There was only one Col. Jim Edgar."

Another added, "While he had his critics, he had more admirers and many imitators."

James Dyce, who ran a competing department store, said: "He was the first to extend congratulations when we first started in business January last, and the finest floral arrangement came from the James Edgar Co."

The funeral was conducted from his second-story apartment at 28 Arlington St. on Thursday, Sept. 23.

The City of Brockton was in mourning. Most of the stores on Main Street were closed, and during their lunch hour, hundreds of schoolchildren walked up the flight of stairs, into the living room and past Edgar, who had been laid out in a dark business suit, white shirt and tie.

Many of the mourners, though, saw him the way they remembered him — dressed in a red, white-trimmed Santa Clans suit asking: "What do you want for Christmas?" Just as his successor does at the Hanover Mall