

Merry Christmas from Santa past

Hide this column from your grandchildren. It's highly unlikely they even know it exists, so it's okay to tell this story after a long self-imposed silence without worrying about destroying the myth of jolly old St. Nick.

I was Santa, Yep, several times. Right here in town. The kids loved me, and why not. I granted every wish-list, whispered, slobbered, screamed in my ear regardless of length, or family fortunes. I was a giver.

If a kid wanted a pony, he or she could leave my knee in a state of sheer excitement. I left it to the parents to soften the blow, as ponies were not house-broken and had great difficulty going down or upstairs to basement or high rise apartments.

Dolls, fire trucks, puppies, drums, baby sisters and brothers, were practically guaranteed with a hearty ho-ho-ho, while parents stood shocked into bankruptcy and disbelief with every generous nod or verbal verification of childish dreams. The kids had hit the mother lode.

You see it was my first time out as a volunteer Santa and I wanted to do well to impress the kids. What I did was impress the parents and their wallets.

Thank goodness for the make-up, white beard and red baggy suit. Many a shell-shocked parent vowed, if it took a lifetime, to discover who the red-suited old villain was that had just ear marked them for debtor's prison.

It was me.

Cotton Bros had a clothing store for men and women where the Royal Bank stands today on Main Street. They had a side for men and a side for ladies. It was a busy and popular store. At the back of the store was a flight of wide stairs leading to the shoe department. It was at the top of these stairs they would place a big chair, and as the hundreds of kids, parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents ascended the stairs to the kingdom of make-believe, there would be me laughing, greeting and ho-ho-hoing.

Beside me, would be two lovely high school girls in red elf outfits with little green caps to assist me.

They were there to encourage the timid, soothe the aggressive, manhandle the difficult, encourage the disbeliever, and perpetuate the myth Santa was a yes man. "No" was not in my vocabulary.

There were two performances for Santa on a Saturday, two-to-four in the afternoon, and six-to-eight in the evening. It was a hard gruelling risky business. The store would send a donation to the Toronto Star Fresh Air Fund or a Crippled Children donation for



Have You Got A Minute?

Stories by W. Steamer Emmerson

my services.

But back to the evening appearance of Santa. The first year it didn't dawn on me kids that had slipped their confidential wishes in my ear in the afternoon were returning for the evening show to pad their lists.

It was downright embarrassing to ask a child his or her name at the night show and be scolded "if you have forgotten my name already, how will you know where to deliver my presents?" Today they call it a "gotcha."

I did it on Sunday afternoons at the old Roxy Theatre for employee groups.

One Sunday afternoon after the show was over, a little girl about five wondered where I was about to change. Naturally, I couldn't doff my beard, so I sat and waited 'til she was finally found by her parents.

She had a private audience with Santa that was about 10 minutes. It was a wonderful magical time for me and her. Somewhere, at this time of year, a mother, or even a grandmother, is telling her kids about how she and Santa just sat and talked at a Christmas party, alone.

To those of you who have been coaxed into a white beard and red suit, and are to be the grand finale at any type of Christmas do, here's a list of suggestions that may help you make it through the day or night:

1. Be cheerful, plenty of ho-ho-ho's, and Merry Christmas's.
2. Break every 30 minutes to change clothes, if need be. Kids wet in excitement, usually on your knee.
3. Don't take a shot of rye before going on. Kids will tell mother Santa's breath is just like Daddy's.
4. If you are appearing twice, don't try to remember their names. They become mean and ugly when you forget.
5. Be prepared for the frightened kid who suddenly pulls your beard till the elastic snaps. Break their arms before it snaps so you are not caught barefaced.
6. Don't tell anyone, family or friend, you are Santa. If you promise what can't be delivered, you are in trouble, maybe for a lifetime.
7. And last but not least, give

lots of love and attention to the kids and their Mom's, you'll be surprised how many want to sit on your knee and kiss you. I mean the Mom's.

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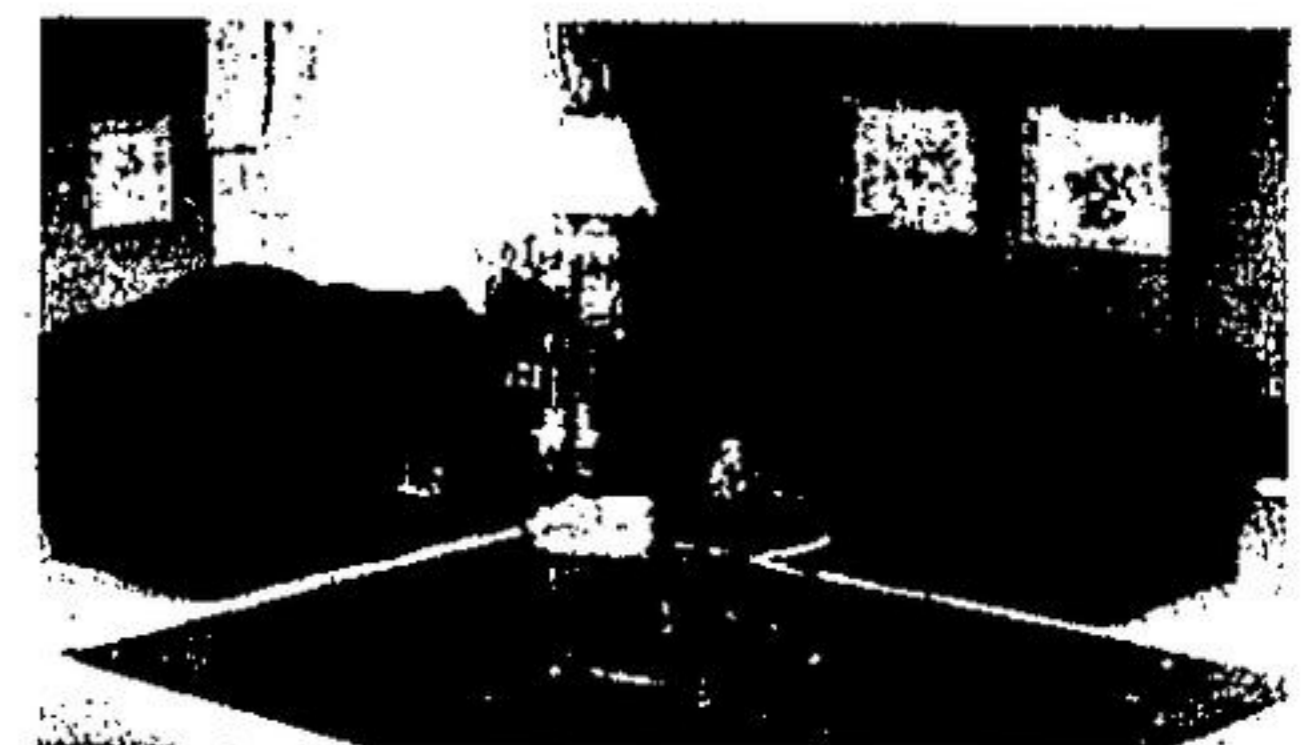
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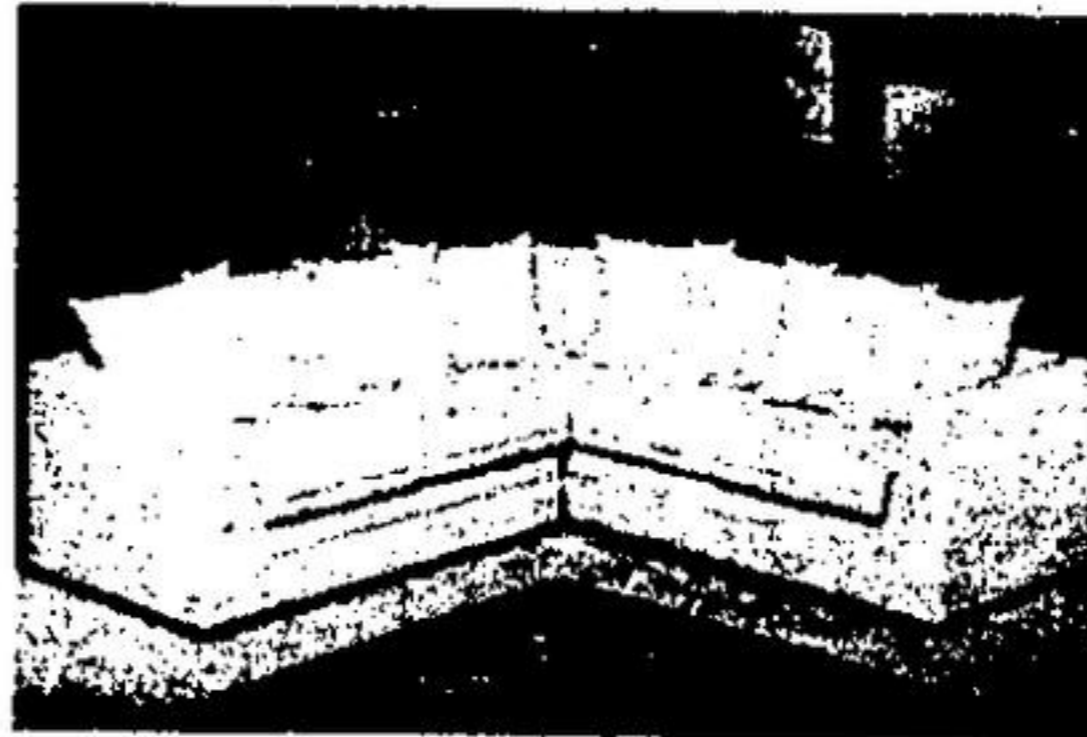
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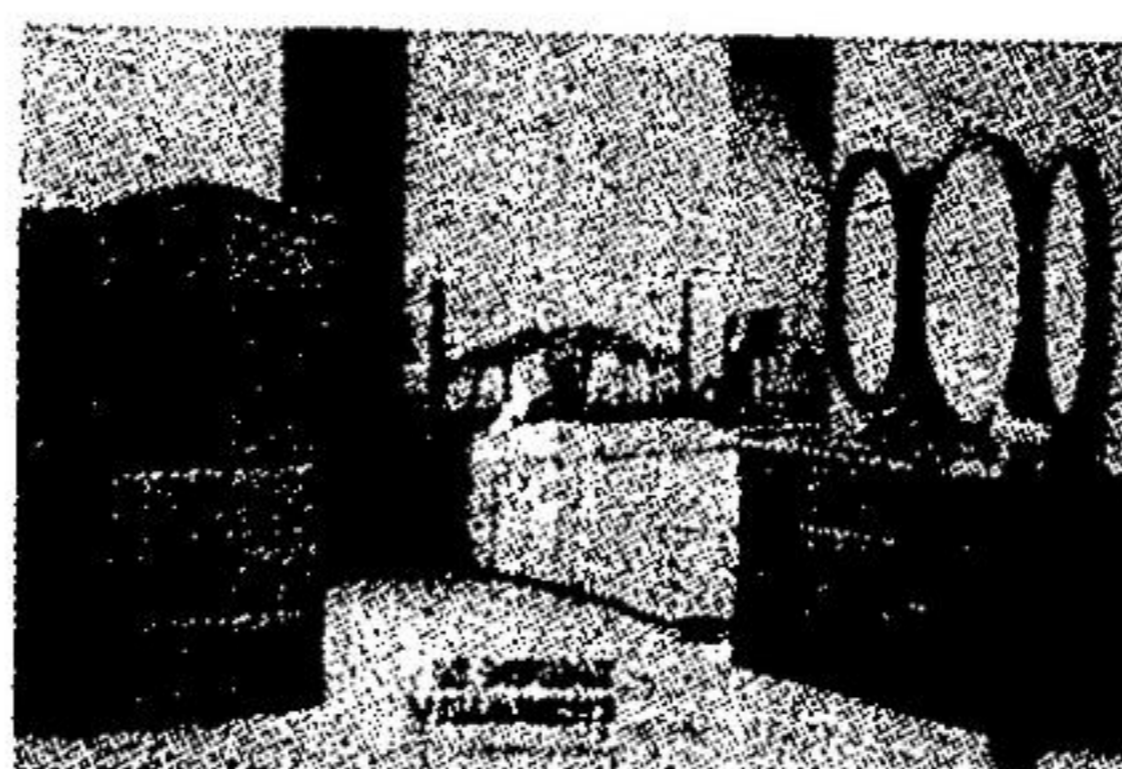
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