

Who was really the first department store Santa?

In Brockton, there's no doubt James Edgar led the way

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BROCKTON —

Who was really the first department store Santa?

In Brockton, there's no doubt that the honor belongs to James Edgar, the downtown merchant who put on a red Santa Claus suit and strolled through his store to the delight of children in 1890.

Edgar's inspiration came from the 1862 Harper's Weekly cover, a drawing by artist Thomas Nast.

"It began the tradition of the department store Santa Claus," according to a filing at the Plymouth County Registry of Deeds where the document is included in the collection of notable land records.

Old World Farmer's Almanac recognizes Edgar as the first department store Santa, as do many other publications in stories throughout the years.

Answers.google.com also credits Edgar with creating the department store Santa, noting that some 40 years earlier, a Philadelphia merchant hired a man to dress up in a "Criscringle" costume and climb to the chimney.

That was before the famed Nast drawing that portrayed Santa Claus as a jolly, round bearded man in a fur suit.

And, then there's Macy's, the retail giant that links its Santa Claus to the classic holiday movie, "Miracle on 34th Street." And, the store's Web site, adds another twist, saying, "Macy's and Santa Claus have a long history. Santa has been visiting with children at Macy's since 1862."

The company did not respond to a request for further explanation.

John Merian, the downtown Brockton businessman spearheading the tribute to James Edgar, the dedication of a plaque in his name and a bid to put the ceremony in the Guinness Book of World Records for the most people wearing red Santa hats, has no doubt that James Edgar was the real item.

"I'm not trying to prove (Macy's) wrong," Merian said. "I know they associate themselves with that, but who was this person?"

Merian said Macy's had a "cookie-cutter" Santa, a person dressed to bring people into the store. That differs from Edgar's Santa, according to Merian.

"I'm talking about a man who owned a department store, dressed up as different characters to entertain children and took an illustration from Thomas Nast and brought the spirit of Santa to life in the very spirit of Christmas."

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