

Brockton's Christmas Town dream



By **Brian McGrory**
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DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2010

More than 800 people gathered in downtown Brockton last year to break the record for the most people wearing Santa hats in one place.

The easy play here would be to dismiss John Merian as a few watts shy of a fully lit bulb, standing as he was on rain-splashed Main Street in downtown Brockton describing things I'm not so sure anyone else could see.



GLOBE FILE PHOTO/2009

John Merian posed inside his office building in 2009.

Around him were boarded-up windows in vacant buildings, variety stores, a custom T-shirt shop. But as he looked up and down an avenue that's seen more prosperous days, Merian had his eye on something else.

"Christmas Town," he proclaimed.

Christmas Town?

"Brockton should be to Christmas what Salem is to Halloween, what Plymouth is to Thanksgiving," he replied. "It is not out of the question, absolutely doable, to make Brockton a holiday destination."

But just when you think he's into the eggnog long before Advent, Merian starts to explain. A Scottish immigrant named James Edgar opened a dry goods store on Main Street in the late 1800s. One December day in 1890, he dressed as Santa Claus to give the local kids an unexpected thrill, and within days, families rushed to Brockton from far and wide.

Before that, Santa was folklore, an untouchable, ethereal figure. But Edgar's simple act, which made him the world's first department store Santa, spawned everything else. Macy's grabbed the idea. Santa suits became commonplace. Now there's a Santa in a store or a mall near you.

"The Santa Claus Hall of Fame confirms the whole thing," Merian said.

The Santa Claus Hall of Fame? As ridiculous as I felt, I found myself typing out the website, and there he was, James Edgar, one of the original inductees. "Edgar will be best remembered as the world's first-known department store Santa," it said.

Merian has taken this shard of history and built a tower of ambition. He lavishly decorates windows of Tuxedos by Merian, the third-generation shop he owns with his slightly saner brother, Paul. It's only mid-November, and some stores have already filled their windows with Christmas.

Then there's the Santa challenge he's overseeing, in which he's urging thousands of Brockton residents to come downtown this Sunday at 2:30 p.m. to vie for the record of most people gathered together in Santa hats. They've already distributed 14,500 of the red hats to local schools.

There's also the annual parade, which is, um – "Always the Saturday after Thanksgiving," Merian said, looking as though I was a raging idiot for not knowing. It's an all-day event, with a treasure hunt, a craft bazaar, a DJ on the roof of a downtown garage. There are bands, floats, Clydesdales ("A lot of money, but the kids love them"), and former boxing champ John Ruiz. It ends with the tree lighting.



Scottish-born James Edgar, credited as being the first department-store Santa, donned other costumes for turn-of-the-20th Century charitable outings including George Washington, a clown, and a Scottish chieftain.

“The movie is the real breakthrough,” Merian said.

OK, the movie?

Ends up, there’s a just-released film, “Becoming Santa,” set to air on Oprah Winfrey’s network on Dec. 7. An LA director attempts to recapture the spirit of Christmas by immersing himself in all things Santa, a journey that takes him to Main Street in Brockton (as well as Quincy) and results in a movie that is by turns hilarious and joyous. Merian is, of course, all over the screen.

“John tells you about James Edgar and how he was great for Brockton, and how everyone knew him,” Jack Sanderson, the filmmaker, told me.

Merian was standing outside his store, his tailor’s tape dangling from his neck, dusk falling, the street slicked by rain, when his tone changed.

“We’re trying to create an atmosphere where people feel a sense of belonging and pride,” he said, softer now. “Like a lot of industrial cities, Brockton is reinventing itself. People live here. They have to feel good about living here.”

Then: “Trust me. In a few years, this is Christmas Town.”

The thing is, John Merian, like Santa, makes it easy to believe.

Brian McGrory is a Globe columnist. He can be reached at mcgrory@globe.com.