

Original department store Santa

By FREDERICK JOHN
Special to The Gazette

BROCKTON, Mass. — The warmth of Christmas should have filled the air. The snow drifted down from the heavens, covering the city with a gentle blanket of white. Already, the twinkling Christmas lights had started to appear in some windows. The stores were gaily decorated, and the church choirs were preparing their most beautiful hymns. The great day was only days away.

BUT the Christmas mood had been replaced by the nagging torment of poverty. The happy smiles of anticipation on the faces of children were few and far between. The year was 1920. The place was Brockton, Mass., an industrial city where too many factories had closed down.

No person was more aware of the poverty that existed in Brockton than Charles F. Brooks, the city's truant officer. He had discovered that a lack of shoes was keeping hundreds of youngsters home from school. Money was so tight in Brockton that year, parents could not afford to buy their children new shoes, or repair the old ones. In many families, there was only one good pair of shoes for several youngsters, and the children took turns wearing them to school. The absentee rate was fantastic.

THUS IT WAS that Charles Brooks trudged through the snow to Edgar's, the town's largest department store, that day in December years ago. He had an appointment with William L. Wright, store manager.

"What can I do to help?" asked Wright after Brooks had told his story.

"Just do what the late James Edgar would have done," Brooks said. He was referring to the store's founder, who had died a decade earlier.

Brooks' words hit home. Wright paused and reflected for a moment. Then he said: "Jim Edgar would have helped those youngsters, especially at this time of year. Christmas was an important part of his life. I'm going to do exactly what Jim would do, if he were alive today."

EVERYBODY knows that the Christmas season is the biggest money-making time of the year in the department store business.

But at Edgar's in 1920, they closed down the top floor of the three-story store at the height of

the Christmas season. The clerks and counters and merchandise were all moved out. A \$3,000 shoe repairing machine was purchased, and bundles of heels and shoes, and leather findings were delivered to the top floor.

A half dozen cobblers, each paid a weekly salary of \$40, a healthy sum in those days, were hired. In short order, the James Edgar Shoe Shop was ready for business.

And children lined up outside the department store and waited patiently to get upstairs to have their shoes repaired. The service was free.

In addition, a huge hoghead known as "The Edgar Barrel" was placed inside the front entrance. Local citizens who were blessed with steady employment that year were urged to deposit spare shoes their own children had outgrown.

HUNDREDS and hundreds of pairs of shoes were left there, and by Christmas that year, they were being worn by children who needed them.

It has been estimated that more than 1,000 pairs of shoes were repaired on the top floor of the department store by Christmas. By spring, when the James Edgar Shoe Shop finally closed down, more than 5,000 pairs of shoes, all of them repaired free of charge, were walking the streets of the industrial city.

Department store president William Wright had kept his pledge. It had cost a small fortune to do it. But he had done exactly what James Edgar would have done.

JAMES EDGAR, a native of Scotland who came to the United States when he was only a child, is the man who made American children more aware of Santa Claus than they had ever been before.

Yes, for some unknown reason, the story of this man has been lost amid the hustle and bustle of the modern American Christmas season. Before the yellowed newspaper clippings crumble away, and all who remember him pass on, his story should be told.

James Edgar was a tall, well-stuffed soul with a ruddy complexion, and a loud and hearty laugh. He had a rich, warm voice. And a snowy white beard.

James Edgar was the very first department store Santa Claus. He was a natural.

THIS CLAIM to fame in itself might be considered crass commercialism were it not for the

very nature of the man. He loved children. He would stand on the roof of his department store and shower pennies down on them on Saturday mornings.

And on the Fourth of July, he hired all the trolley cars available so he could take every youngster in Brockton on a picnic in the neighboring community of Avon. It has been estimated that some years he hired as many as 30 trolley cars for the annual outings.

If he heard of a child who was seriously ill, the best medical care available was dispatched immediately to the youngster's home. The donor was always anonymous.

If there was a youngster who needed to earn extra money to help out at home, Edgar was quick to hire him, even if there was no real need for a new employee.

"TIMES WERE hard, and I had to find work even though I was only a boy," recalled famed artist John Castano, who is now approaching 80. "James Edgar hired me on the spot. When he learned I wanted to be an artist, he put me to work painting scenery for the store windows. That was the first time I ever painted anything for money. It was the start of my career as a painter."

Edgar opened The Boston Store in Brockton in 1878. Later, the establishment became known as Edgar's. He loved children and it was for this reason that he did, in time, become Santa Claus for them. He was married and had a daughter. Perhaps, his love for her inspired the great love he had for all children.

HE WAS a showman of sorts, and he loved to dress up in costumes to delight his children at the annual Fourth of July picnics. One year, he came dressed up as Uncle Sam. Another time, he appeared as George Washington. He also appeared as an Army general, in an Indian costume, and in a Scottish outfit complete with kilts.

Naturally, he appeared in a clown's costume. In fact, his appearance as a clown brought such a great response he decided to wear the costume in his store the following Christmas. Every day, he wandered through the store dressed as the clown, and selected the girl with the prettiest ribbon in her hair. She received a Christmas doll.

This went on for three or four years. Then, in 1890, Edgar decided to try a new costume at Christmas. He rode up to Boston on the train, and had a Santa costume tailored at a shop there. The following week he made his first appearance in a department store. The rest is history.

"I CAN still remember seeing Santa Claus for the first time," says Edward Pearson, who was there that first day. "As long as I live, and I've lived quite a few years, I'll never forget that experience."

Pearson, who is in his nineties, resides on Cape Cod now. But he still has warm memories of James Edgar, and that day his parents brought him to the department store to purchase a gift for an aunt.

"Nowadays, Santa Claus is everywhere," said Pearson. "Back in 1890, we saw drawings of him in the newspapers and magazines. But you never thought you'd ever have a chance to see him in person, unless you sat up all night on Christmas Eve beside the fireplace at home."

"YOU just can't imagine what it was like. My parents had taken me over to the Boston Store on Main Street. I remember walking down an aisle and, all of a sudden, right in front of me, 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."

The following day, the department store was crowded with children. And their parents, too. They had never enjoyed the pleasure of a face-to-face encounter with the merry old soul either. A week after Santa made his debut, there were long lines outside the store every day after school got out. All the kids in town wanted to meet Santa.

Originally, Edgar planned to appear for only a couple of hours each day in the Santa costume. This was supposed to be during the late afternoon at the end of the school day. But his idea proved to be so popular he had to send up to Boston for a second Santa outfit. This costume was worn by "Jim Grant, a big floorwalker."

NOW the children were arriving by train from Boston and other surrounding Bay State communities. Some even came from Providence, R.I. A few sophisticated New York youngsters showed up. Just about every child who could persuade mom and dad to make the trip to Brockton visited the department store that Christmas.

During the year that followed, word of Edgar's great success spread across the nation. Thus it was that, in 1891, Santa made his first appearance at a number of major stores. By the turn of the century, he had a throne in department stores in just about every city of any size in the nation.

Nowadays, there are elaborate parades heralding Santa's arrival in important cities. In smaller communities, he arrives at shopping plazas in a helicopter. Rare

indeed is the American city, town, village or hamlet that does not have its own store Santa.

In 1890, when James Edgar first had his idea, only a few thousand children had an opportunity to shake Santa's hand. This year, millions and millions of eager young children whispered their Christmas secrets into Santa's ear.

JAMES EDGAR once said: "I have never been able to understand why the great gentleman lives at the North Pole. He is so far away. He is only able to see the children one day a year. He should live closer to them."

This Christmas, as the children play beneath the tree, pause for a moment and reflect on the goodness and kindness of the man who was James Edgar.

He loved his children. When he was alive, he helped them when they were most in need of help. He filled their lives with happiness. Even in death, he inspired others to help the young people of his city.

James Edgar never lived too far away. He was always close to his children.

He was a jolly gentleman with a hearty laugh and a snowy white beard.

He might well have been Santa Claus.



JAMES EDGAR wears his first Christmas costume.



EDGAR LOVED children, and he took them on parades, such as this one stopped in front of his Brockton, Mass., store, and picnics, when he hired all the trolley cars for annual outings. But best of all he loved to bring children closer to Christmas.



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Floor Fashions

by ERNIE BAHM

DIFFERENT TEXTURES

DIFFERENT TEXTURES do a lot more than just offer variety on the carpeting scene. There is no such thing as a "best" texture for every purpose, and each may function well under special circumstances.

Shag is at or near the top of the popularity poll today, but it is not all things to all persons. Some find it too casual or informal in the very long lengths, and harder to vacuum. Happily there are short shags, too, so there's shag to please any taste. But you may be happier with another texture on stairways, for instance, where all the traffic is concentrated.

Loops and twists come in all styles and lengths. They make very durable carpet textures, and are thus practical in rooms that take a beating or that have limited traffic lanes because of the room's arrangement or furnishings. But remember, that some fibers, such as nylon, wear longer than others, so texture is not the only consideration.

Loops and twists show very little shading. Plushes do. They are like velvets in that characteristic, as they are in general appearance. Rub your hand across velvet or a plush carpet to see what we mean. Many homeowners and designers love this look of shading or shadowing, but others don't. Check your own reaction before choosing plush.

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