

The Sacrifices of a Santa

George Hansen was as innocuous as everyone's next-door neighbor until the day he looked in the mirror and refused to shave.

By Julie Sturgeon

He'd had enough of the warm Barbados sun for the afternoon, packed his beach towel and began trudging down the sidewalk toward the Hilton Hotel. Suddenly, a car pulled to a stop alongside him, and an English chap leaned out the window. "I say, are you Burl Ives?" the driver inquired.

Are you blind, man? Didn't you notice the vacationer's blue eyes — how they twinkled! His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry! The beard of his chin was as white as the snow; he had a broad face and a little round belly that shook, when he laughed, like a bowlful of jelly. Even the flight attendants en route to his tropical vacation laughed when they saw him in spite of themselves, and passed out champagne to all aboard in an impromptu celebration.

Of course, it's an easier guess in Lafayette, Indiana, when this size-56 man climbs into the driver's seat of his own silver Cadillac Sedan De Ville, the S Claus license plate prominently displayed. In fact, the butcher at Marsh, the druggist up the corner and Howard, who runs the Downtowner restaurant, don't know his real name. "Hi Santa!" has sufficed for 15 years. And because he plays the Kris Kringle year-round — indeed, sometimes it's impossible to separate the man from his alter ego even in July — the rotund elf readily answers the salutations.

George Hansen pulls off the Santa Claus persona better than many of the predecessors in his experience. His own childhood Christmases in Chicago, Ill., during the Depression were Hollywood material. His grandmother from Switzerland would light her tree with candles, and the young lad was mesmerized by the beauty — until the tree caught fire one year and the family had to throw it out the front window. Santa (a.k.a. Uncle Bill — "He put on his red rubber boots, that's how I could tell who was in the suit," says Hansen) passed out electric trains, sleds and sundry toys to him and his two siblings. "Certainly we never knew how poor we were," he recalls.

One of Hansen's first jobs upon leaving the Navy after World War II was as a performer in a USO show overseas. He knocked about the country picking up a few acting bits here and there, had a contract with RKO before Desilu bought it ...

but when his father dared him one Christmas to sell real estate with him, the son took the bait. Hansen ended up with a string of president and vice president titles in the business world on his resumé instead of starring roles on marquees.

By 1979, a competitor bought out the mortgage company he ran and effectively put him out of a job. The high-school educated, self-made man owned a six-bedroom ranch home (complete with an indoor hot tub in a tropical room) in a Big Ten university town, could afford plane tickets to any destination in the world and eventually even hired a live-in caretaker for the grounds. Yet along the way, his marriage of 30 years fell apart, his son landed in a halfway house in Madison, Wis., and Hansen was carrying around a bad ticker in his chest. Retirement, to Hansen, meant drifting, searching for a new way to give his life meaning.

“Every morning for 40 years I went to work clean-shaven,” he says. “One day I looked in the mirror and thought to myself, ‘I can’t do this any more.’” He put down the razor and let the white beard grow out. His second wife, Chee Chee, kiddingly pronounced him a skid row bum. Then she read about a Santa lookalike contest in the *National Enquirer*, and pestered him to apply. The drawback: Santa Claus costumes from retail sources hover in the size-46 range, a relatively petite size for his girth.

“Now she doesn’t do any sewing, but we bought a pattern to alter,” Hansen raises his bushy eyebrows. “I had to lay down on the living room floor while she traced around me.” A few stuck pins, a pair of shiny black boots from K-Mart, a 120-year-old pair of gold-filled rim glasses bought at a flea market and a wide leather belt (from Frederick’s of Hollywood of all places) and *voilà!* Hansen was Santa. The original flannel suit with the pocket sewn on upside down lasted for several years until Mr. Claus backed into a candle at a party and burned a hole through to his undershorts. The hazard amuses him — what’s a little holiday fire among Hansens?

Neither a quintuple bypass heart operation, diabetes, cataracts nor the flu and pneumonia the 75-year-old catches from the kiddies on his knee each year stop him from his appointed rounds. That’s because every thin dime he earns goes to charity — his 17-year total contribution is a well-kept secret but is estimated at more than \$100,000. Hansen serves mainly as a collection agent, handling checks made directly to charities ranging from soup kitchens to the American Cancer Society, St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, the Children’s Museum, the Salvation Army. He sets no amount — this *is* charity — and covers expenses from his own bank account.

“I’m sorry that Christmas is so commercial, but I’m making something useful of that,” he says between bites of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. “Any time you can gracefully help people without obligating them, it’s worth it.” With this philosophy as guide, Hansen poses for photos with slobbering dogs; waves from his 14-foot high seat aboard a float on a parade route for hours in a cold, steady sleet; frolics with senior citizens at nursing homes and hospices. He’s caroled with Purdue University fraternities. Passed out bonus checks at the Suburu plant. Hosted children’s parties at Great Lakes Chemical plant. Filmed a series of “Where’s Santa?” spots for Big Bear Stores’ promotional campaign in Ohio. One of his longest-running gigs, an upscale Indianapolis shopping mall appearance, requires a 140-mile round-trip drive every weekend in December.

He keeps the hours for any appearance shorter than the customary eight-hour shifts because “every child is entitled to a fresh performance. It’s not fair to give someone a tired, bedraggled Santa Claus who wants nothing but to get off that chair,” he preaches. He starts a conversation with each child, telling a story of Rudolph getting sick on chocolate chip cookies, or Fred, the new reindeer who flunked the flying test. He once played along with an impromptu chewing out from a mother who claimed he dropped soot on her carpet the year before; “Yes, ma’m, I’ll try the front door this time,” he winked at her children. Families drive from as far as Pittsburgh to treat their children to his act.

The list of what he won’t do is blessedly short: Hansen refuses to parachute as a grand entrance to his shopping mall home, and ixnays having a fire truck deposit him onto the roof, as well. “I dropped 6 feet one year from the ladder to the shingles and it’s lucky I didn’t break my leg.” He pauses, then throws in for preventative measure, “And I don’t think Santa Claus should walk on stilts.”

Funny, the public does. One lady became angry when he wouldn’t pose for a photo with her children, even though he was changing a tire in the middle of a snowy intersection at the time. Neighbors insist he leave his own holiday guests, don the red suit and visit with their grandkids. Roller skating rink managers insult him when other appointments prevent him from staying longer than the scheduled time. “Santa is public property and you must give yourself completely,” he sighs.

“You can’t take yourself out of character just by changing suits,” Hansen admits. “Santa doesn’t say damn or drink alcohol.” (He painfully discovered that Santa doesn’t tell off-color jokes on stage during amateur night on cruise lines, either. His act bombed as adults squirmed in their seats, unsure whether to laugh.) “It’s a responsibility you have to realize when you get into this tradition. You’ll be good whether or not you want to be!” Still, he claims, the exuberant children who

hang on to his beard, shyly hand him sticky, half-wrapped candy, stick letters under his windshield wipers or stare wide-eyed while he eats lunch at Red Lobster balance the demands.

“Santa Claus is a commercial figure; I’m as close to the 1930s’ rendition Norman Rockwell created for Coca-Cola as possible. But he represents the true spirit of giving, of being kind to your fellow man,” Hansen stares at his hands. “Some would say, ‘It’s about getting something.’ I say it’s more than that. Everybody likes to receive a gift, but everyone needs to be loved.”

Which is why Hansen can’t rid himself of the memory of one little boy’s pleading eyes. The shabbily dressed tyke, face full of hope, asked Santa for a pair of shoes that nobody else had worn. Sixty-five years ago, that could have been himself snuggled up next to the man in a red suit. “And I didn’t do anything,” Hansen whispers, then breathes faster in an attempt to reign his emotions. Still, a tear slides down his face and becomes lost in the beard. “That little boy is like an albatross.” Today, if he can’t find an organization to help such children, he silently takes care of the need personally.

“I get my Christmas out of that. Frankly, I’d pay my clients for this opportunity — shhhh!” he mocks, fingers to his lips. Then he lets out a naughty chuckle. “I’ll die before I retire from this job.”

Prophetically, his doctors gave him seven years before any complications from the heart bypass crop up ... in 1990. Although Hansen feels fine today, “I’m here on borrowed time. You never know how much time you have left,” he shrugs. “I run out of steam once in a while, but this is something worthwhile to me.

“I’m a selfish person in that I look for the joy in doing this. Even the bums, the schnooks, the worst of us are better at Christmas.”