You are cordially invited to attend and inspect Brockton's finest retail store.

Santa Claus aka James Edgar

by Robert A. Kane
hile "visions of sugar plums danced in their heads," children of the 19th Century had little or no hope of ever meeting that mysterious and elusive man with the white beard and red suit who appeared every Christmas Eve, dropped off a load of presents, and then disappeared into the night with a hearty Ho, Ho, Ho. Then, in the Christmas season of 1890, it happened - that wonderful and magical moment - Santa Claus came to Brockton.

In an interview with Modern Maturity in 1976, Edward Lowrey Pearson, then in his nineties, recalled with great relish one of the happiest days of his childhood: "You just can't imagine what it was like," said the old gentleman. "I remember walking down an aisle, and, all of a sudden, 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."

Santa, of course, was none other than James Edgar, owner of the Boston Store, a man who loved children and who dressed up in various costumes to amuse them. Tall, roly-poly, a gentle wit and kind disposition, Edgar with his white beard and booming voice, was the personification of Jolly Saint Nick.

Born on a farm in Duns, Berwickshire, Scotland, James Edgar first saw the “light of a tallow dip” on March 5, 1843. His parents, John and Margaret Lubgow Edgar, had high hopes that their son would aspire to the ministry or the life of a farmer. The bonnie young lad said “Nay” to their hopes; he would become a trader.

For five years he labored as an apprentice to a linen draper, working from early morn to dusk for a pittance of ten pounds ($50.00) per year. "Drudgery" said Edgar. Yet he considered this period of his life as his “college education.” He also made a resolve that if he ever became an employer he would treat his help far better than he was treated.

Edgar then plied his talents between Glasgow and Edinburgh, becoming as good a tradesman as the best, learning the trade from the bottom up and earning - no, receiving - 45 pounds ($225.00) per year. In the early 1860’s he emigrated to St. John, New Brunswick, where he remained a short while. During his stay he formed a lasting friendship with William Watson whom he admired and hoped to emulate as a salesman.

He then pawned his watch to pay his fare to America, arriving in Boston in 1865 with a total capital of one $2.50 gold piece and 25¢. He found employment with the dry goods firm of Hogg, Brown and Taylor and received a weekly wage of $12.00 - the most money he had ever made. This convinced Edgar that America was the place for him.

He also developed a philosophy that became part of his business creed: "There are two particular points in the human make-up, viz., the pocket and the stomach. Appeal to them successfully and you bring out the latest business talent and industry concealed in a person."

Ill-health forced him to return to the "Land of the Thistle" for recuperation, after which he returned to the States, settling in Providence, Rhode Island. Upon his arrival he sought and found the young lady, Miss Annie McLeod, a native of Nova Scotia, who had nursed him during his period of sickness. Love blossomed and they were married on March 9, 1869. One daughter, Eva, was born in 1871.
The "visions of sugar plums danced in their heads," children of the 19th Century had little or no hope of ever meeting that mysterious and elusive man with the white beard and red suit who appeared every Christmas Eve, dropped off a load of presents, and then disappeared into the night with a hearty "Ho, Ho, Ho." Thus, in the Christmas season of 1890, it happened—that wonderful and magical moment—Santa Claus came to Brockton.

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After ten years of working for the firm of Callendar, Macdougal, & Troop, a firm operating a wholesale and retail plant under the name of the Boston Store, James Edgar came to the conclusion that he could make more money working for James Edgar.

In a joint venture with a co-worker, George W. Reynolds, with each contributing $1,500, they opened the Edgar & Reynolds Store on March 10, 1878, in Brockton, Massachusetts. In 1880 the name was changed to the Boston Store. The company prospered until December 2, 1886, when a fire destroyed the historic Opera House Block in which Edgar’s store was located. It was in this building that the City of Brockton government was first inaugurated in 1882.

Although Edgar & Reynolds suffered a loss of $25,000 the firm reopened for business on E. Elm Street until the burnt-out store was rebuilt. Following the death of his partner, Edgar acquired his interest from the estate, paying $6,000 more than the valuation of the shares, feeling that his partner would have done the same.

A self-made man with inborn shrewdness, imagination, and very innovative, James Edgar introduced his own methods of how a business should be run and made his store one of the greatest business enterprises in Plymouth County. In his first year he cleared $22,000, eventually increasing it to more than $500,000.

A great believer in advertising he took full advantage of it, turning his stock over six or seven times a year, saying: “a nimble Sixpence is better than a slow Shilling.” He never forgot his childhood and the revenge he had made. As an employer he was liberal, generous, considerate. He hired the best help and paid them the best wages with the result that there was little turnover. Said Edgar: “The only trouble in getting new faces behind my counters is that none will leave and none die.” His employees called him “the grand old man.”

Colonel Edgar also loved animals - his favorite being his faithful horse Pauline who was for years a familiar sight on the streets of Brockton and Lakeville. After she died of old age Edgar wanted her to be buried with dignity, so she was taken to the vicinity of Sossawamset Lake in Lakeville and interred with due respect: “and the Bees to the Bees and the Breeze Blow above her Head.”

Regarding his religious beliefs James Edgar had this to say: “As to church affiliations: I was born a Presbyterian, was taught to believe in the Westminster Catechism and Confession of Faith, but will say I do not believe all I was taught. My creed I make as broad as I can, and see good in all, and try to help all classes of faith when I am satisfied they are trying to do good. I maintain a pew in the Porter church, the Unitarian church, and have notified St. Paul’s Episcopal society of my desire to have a holding there. They say a Scotchman’s religion is Heaven, Hell and Number One. Heaven and Hell for the next world and Number One for this.”

In matters of labor and management he fell back on his old business credo: “The Stomach and the Pocket.” If a man or woman was worth $10, he paid them $12, if worth $12, he paid them $15, and so on. He treated his workers, spouses and sweethearts to an annual dinner. He arranged sleigh rides and theatre parties, followed by a collation at a local hotel.

During the 1880’s the Boston Store bought for closing four evenings a week. The movement for not opening until 8:30 A.M., rather than 7 A.M., came from the Boston Store. Edgar then shook the business community by closing his store on Tuesday afternoons, an event celebrated with great jubilation by the clerks riding through the streets in a special trolley car.

James Edgar was born showman, he loved being the center of attention, dressing in various costumes as he appeared before his customers and friends. He was called the “P.T. Barnum of Brockton.” During the Christmas season he always wore a clown outfit: strolling through the store he would select the girl with the prettiest ribbon in her hair and present her with a Christmas doll.

Then in 1890 Edgar had a Santa Claus suit made in Boston and, as they say, made history. “I can still remember seeing Santa Claus for the first time,” said Mr. Pearson, a well-known appliance store owner, who was there that first day. “As long as I live, and I’ve loved quite a few years, I’ll never forget that.”

“Nowadays, Santa Claus is everywhere,” continued Pearson. “Back in the 1800’s, we saw drawings of him in the newspapers and magazines. But we never thought we’d ever have a chance to see him in person, unless we sat up all night on Christmas Eve besides the fireplace at home. Then one day - 1890, it was - I remember that - my parents took me over to the Boston Store on Main Street in Brockton, Massachusetts. And there was Santa in person - red costume, snow white beard and all.

“I later on, I learned that was the first time Santa had ever appeared in a store that way. I was there on the very first day. Later on I learned the name of the man who wore the Santa Claus outfit. It was James Edgar, of course. He was such a kind, good, man. He loved children. He loved them with all his heart. He didn’t put that costume on to attract people to his store. He wore that costume because he wanted to delight the children who dropped by with their parents.”

“That was many, many Christmases ago,” said Pearson, “but I still say God bless James Edgar. He gave me a memory I treasured all my life. What a wonderful person he was.”

The word that Santa was in town spread like wildfire and there were long lines outside the store each day. Edgar had a second suit made and his nephew, James Grant, a big Boozelilter, became the regular Santa Claus.

James Edgar felt very strongly that more could be done for the children so on July 3, 1894, to celebrate the “Birthday of Liberty,” he held what would become an annual event - the first Children’s Day Outing. Intensely patriotic he tried to inculcate love for country by handling out American flags. He hired 20 trolley cars, dressed himself up as Uncle Sam, held a parade on Main Street and then transported over 2,500 children between the age of five and twelve to nearby Randolph for a day’s outing. This went on for nearly ten years with Edgar, alternating costumes, appearing as Uncle Sam, George Washington, an Indian Chief or a Scottish Chefain. The children were transported to the neighboring towns of Randolph, Stoughton, Whitman and, perhaps, their favorite stop - Highland Park - on the Brockton-Iron line.

On another occasion they remained in Brockton, celebrating at Perkins Park where the children were given a ride in a hay ride. The kids dubbed him “Uncle Jim,” the media referred to him as the “Father of Children’s Day - First in Fun - First in Patriotism - First in the Hearts of Children.” When it was deemed impracticable to tie up 20 trolley cars each year, the custom ended. However, Henry W. Robinson, president of the Brockton Fair adopted the idea and Children’s Day became a part of the annual Brockton Fair program.
James Edgar as "UNCLE SAM"

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In 1896 Uncle Jim traveled to England with a contingent of Ancients and Honorableables where they were wined and dined by royalty and those who were privileged to wear the purple. Dressed in full regalia, Edgar made his "bow" before Queen Victoria. It was the highlight of his career. In the same year the Civil War Union Veterans' Union bestowed upon him the honorary commission of Colonel in appreciation for all his works in their behalf.

There were no bounds to James Edgar's generosity and kindness; he gave freely to help those in need, and worthy causes never asked a second time for his support. On February 1, 1899, 25 of his oldest employees were made stockholders as an award for their faithful service.

James Edgar had a great imagination; he was years ahead of his time. In 1895 he installed a soda fountain and on a number of occasions dispensed free soda to his customers. His store in 1897 became the first to install a Bundy Time Recorder. In the early 1900 Edgar gained national renown as the only merchant to hire a man to sweep the streets after the city failed to do the job. The man was known as the "white winged angel."

In 1904 James Edgar was stricken with a stroke which left him partially paralyzed. He began to spend more time at his beautiful summer home at Lakesville. His son-in-law William L. Wright took over the reins of the company.

In 1906 the Kingman estate across the street from the original store was acquired and work was begun on a more palatial store. The cornerstone was laid on June 20, 1906, and the grand opening took place on March 25, 1907, with Edgar present. The new building was the first concrete department store in the United States and, because of its fireproof arrangements, enjoyed the lowest rate of insurance.

On September 20, 1909, Brockton's "grand old man" died at his summer home. He was in his 66th year. Five years later, January 4, 1914, his beloved Annie McLeod Edgar followed him in death. In memory of her parents, Eva Edgar Wright donated five plots of land to the city to be used as a playground.

On June 11, 1914, the Common Council passed an order introduced by Councilman Oscar E. Young of Ward 2, naming the proposed playground the James Edgar Playground. The Brockton Times noted: "There wasn't a whisper of opposition to the plan, and the order was sent to the aldermen for concurrence." It was on this playground that future Hall of Famer and boxing's greatest heavyweight champion, Rocky Marciano, honed his athletic skills.

Today there are thousands of Santa Clauses in department stores throughout America. Yet, there is only one Santa Claus - the first one, James Edgar, the man who started this wonderful tradition - who might have...just might have been...the real thing.

There are no known photographs of James Edgar as Santa Claus...

The End

THE BOSTON STORE
ANNUAL CHILDREN'S OUTING 1899

HIGHLAND PARK

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JAMES EDGAR SCRAPBOOK

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