



Transcript
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Michigan Radio Stateside Interview with Mark Harvey and Tom Valent | Santa School

Cynthia Canty: We're in the midst of the holiday season and with that in mind, we've asked our partners at the Michigan History Center to find something that combines Michigan history with the holidays. State Archivist Mark Harvey, what did you find for us?

Mark Harvey: Cynthia, we looked around – we looked high and low – and there's a lot of Christmas sad stories that we found. We didn't want to do that. Then, we remembered that there is a very special school in Midland, Michigan – the Charles W. Howard Santa School, the longest operating Santa school. The school's mission is actually a quote by its founder, Mr. Howard. It says, "He errs who thinks Santa enters through the chimney. Santa enters through the heart."

We thought since you put us to the task, who better to bring us the details of the school than the dean, the current dean of the school, Tom Valent.

Cynthia Canty: Well, Tom Valent, welcome! It's so good to have you on Stateside.

Tom Valent: Thank you for having me. This is a pleasure.

Cynthia Canty: I have to ask, Tom: how did a guy who's made his living and his career as a civil engineer wind up running Michigan's famed Santa school?

Tom Valent: Well, I didn't plan on it. It just happens that when you portray the image of Santa, it's a privilege and it's an honor and it's a wonderful thing. It's basically making people happy and enjoying the spirit of Christmas and the spirit of Santa Claus. When you make folks happy, you know how it is – they let you know how good they feel. It's just a good feeling that grows.

Cynthia Canty: How did you come to be a part of this school?

Tom Valent: I'd always gone to the school – this is my 42nd year of going to the school. I started in 1976 and then in 1986, the second dean of the school passed it on to myself and my lovely wife, Holly.

Cynthia Canty: Wow. Now, I've heard this school – the Charles W. Howard Santa School – called the Harvard of Santa schools. Tom, why do you think your Santa school has this strong international reputation?

Tom Valent: I think it's because we teach the spirit of Christmas, the spirit of Santa Claus – we don't really get into the business of being Santa Claus. However, we do have some business classes and we are set up as a non-profit organization and we do a little business that way. We grow their Santa spirit. We can't teach anyone to be Santa in 40 hours, but we can get their Santa spirit growing and make it grow throughout the year.

Cynthia Canty: How do you define Santa spirit?

Tom Valent: Love and giving. If someone wants to ask me when I'm portraying that image, "Am I the real Santa?" I'd say that I'm the spirit of Christmas. I stand for love and giving. That sums it up right there.

Cynthia Canty: Where have your students come from, Tom?

Tom Valent: Oh, all over the world, I'm gonna tell you. We had students this year from Australia, two from Denmark, two from Norway...probably around 20 from Canada. All over the United States – every state.

Cynthia Canty: Men as well as women come to the school, correct?

Tom Valent: Yes. There are more women coming each year. They either find it really enjoyable to be with their Santa, their husband, or some women go out on their own as Mrs. Claus.

Cynthia Canty: OK, so they're training to be Mrs. Claus. Mark, tell us a little more about the history and the founder of this school. Who was Charles W. Howard?

Mark Harvey: He was a native New Yorker. He was born in Albion, New York and it's reported that he first portrayed Santa in the fourth grade...and he was hooked. He kept doing it and his renown grew - clearly, he had that Christmas spirit – to the point where a couple of interesting things [happened]. One, he was the Macy's Christmas Parade Santa Claus from 1948-65. If you ever watched that parade, that was Charles W. Howard portraying Santa from 1948-65.

Cynthia Canty: I suspect that is probably like the ultimate gig.

Mark Harvey: It has to be. In 1937, because he was so renowned for this, prior to becoming the Macy's Parade Santa, a journal suggested he start a school. He did that right in his own home. He started the first Santa classes in his own house. It became

popular and then he grew and built the Christmas park next door to his residence and held the classes there. He passed in 1966 and that's when the school moved to Midland, Michigan.

Cynthia Canty: So, Tom, how many hours of classes do folks come and take in Midland with you?

Tom Valent: Each year, there's 40 hours of classes in three days. There's 40 hours in the three days – we start early in the morning and we go 'til late at night. All those Santas are just really tired. We cover a lot – the history of Santa, the legends, we let them be comfortable singing as a group. We show them a little sign language. They actually have flight lessons so they know what it feels like to really fly the sleigh with reindeer. They have a real animated reindeer sleigh and reindeer. We have real reindeer, also.

Cynthia Canty: So, they get a little reindeer training?

Tom Valent: They do! I like to look at it as you have to understand 90% of who Santa is in order to portray that image. The more you know about the North Pole, the legends and all that...it really all comes together.

Mark Harvey: I want to know if you serve cookies and milk during class.

Tom Valent: Yes, Mark, we do. I've got to say that. We also have health class, though, too. We tell them not to eat all the cookies and milk, even though we feed them all that to keep them happy and jolly. Keeping Santa healthy is important, too. [Laughs].

Cynthia Canty: Tom, what do you think are the biggest misconceptions people have about representing Santa?

Tom Valent: Maybe they might think that portraying the image of Santa is hard work, which it is, or maybe talking to five-year-olds doesn't sound too exciting – but it is really exciting. Five-year-olds have no boundaries – they'll talk about everything. They'll let you know everything – that's the most creative age there is. The misconceptions are "can I pull your beard," or stuff like that. That doesn't happen.

Cynthia Canty: What is the biggest secret to being an effective representative of Mr. Claus?

Tom Valent: The most important thing is to really feel that character and talk to the whole family – don't just talk to the little five-year-old, talk to a family at a time and it'll flow. You have to read the crowd, you have to read each family. Everybody is different. When you're feeling that character and you're talking to these folks, you might have only two minutes to talk to this family. It's surprising what will come out. The parents are

more excited about seeing Santa than the kids. The kids are learning about Santa. The parents are the ones that are excited.

Cynthia Canty: I think parents can so relate to thinking back to when they were that five-year-old. It's easy to put yourself right in that place again. What is a perfect moment of being Santa like? How does it feel?

Tom Valent: [Laughs] It feels really good. It feels really good - you talk to a little 12-year-old who's on the verge and he walks away and he stands back and stares at you for a few minutes while his brother is up there. Then, he points directly at you and says, "That's the real one! That's the real one!" That's what makes you feel good. Not that I'm trying to be the real one - I just want to do a great job. You just mentioned it, Cindy: they remember it for a lifetime, that Santa visit.

Cynthia Canty: They really do. Mark Harvey, thank you for finding this wonderful story of the Charles W. Howard Santa Claus School in Midland - the longest continuously running school of its sort in the entire world, and it's right here in Michigan. Tom Valent and his wife Holly are the deans of the Santa Claus School in Midland. Mark Harvey and Tom Valent, have a wonderful, wonderful Christmas and thanks so much for being a part of our Michigan history.

Tom Valent: Thank you, Cindy. Merry Christmas!