



Saratoga Santa

Photos by Image Photo & Events

Story By Melissa Downer

Traditional folklore tells us that Santa Claus lives in the North Pole with Mrs. Claus, his army of elves and the reindeer, but the children of Saratoga know the truth: Santa Claus lives right in town, just blocks from Broadway.

For the past 12 years Saratoga Springs native Fred Clark has slowly transformed from a regular guy with a white beard to full-blown Santa Claus. It all began with his wife Carol's suggestion to answer an ad from Hewitt's Garden Center looking for someone to play Santa for the holiday.

"At first I said no, but then I thought about it. Carol said how much I like kids and that I should just give it a try, so I changed my mind," Clark said. From there, the rest is history. He even had to purchase his own red velvet suit and custom-made boots – quite an investment, he said.

This time of year, Santa is very busy, but his work isn't strictly seasonal. Year-round people gravitate to him like a magnet to talk to him or ask to have their photograph taken.

"I'm Santa, even in August. The thing about it is, I have to have the real beard and the real tummy all the time. People, especially children, look at me all the time and say 'that's Santa!'" he said.

Just recently, Clark and his wife were dining at Mama Mia's Pizzeria on Route 50 when a family with three young girls approached him.





“One of the little girls asked me, ‘is my American Girl Doll ready yet?’” Clark said.

When moments like this occur, Clark has a stock pile of red and green toy elves to hand out to children.

“It’s one of the best investments I’ve ever made. People love the elves, they are a lot of fun,” he said.

Even visiting New York City is an experience for Clark. When sitting on a bench waiting for his wife who was shopping in a nearby store, a line formed in front of Clark of people waiting to talk to him and have their picture taken.

“Wherever I go, people want to talk to me. I always wear my suspenders (that either read “you better be good” or “Ho Ho Ho!”) to look the part,” he said.

A fan of Saratoga Race Course, Clark is always in character, for the children’s sake.

“Kids will come up to me in the summertime, especially at the race-track and ask me why I’m here, and not in the North Pole. I tell them that I’m on vacation, or that I spend my summers here in Saratoga. Kids always ask questions and they always tell the truth,” he said.

In past years, Santa said there are memories that stick with him, especially the things children say when sitting on his lap.

“As they say, children tell the truth, so you really have to watch what you say around them,” he said, recalling a time when he ran into a friend and his son. When Clark asked the young boy if he had been good all year, the boy naturally said yes. But when asked if his daddy had been a good boy, the answer surprised Clark.

“He said ‘no!’ so I asked him why not, and the boy said ‘because daddy got arrested! Daddy got a DWI!’”

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Yes! Saratoga Springs has its very own Santa Claus!

Saratoga native Fred Clark is the epitome of what Santa is all about - the beautiful twinkle in his eye, the perfect curly (and I might add, authentic) beard and his hearty rotund figure. Clark is not just Santa during the Christmas holidays. You can find him all year long in beautiful Saratoga Spring and always in character with his red suspenders that say "you better be good" as a constant reminder to all children.

Fred Clark was born in Saratoga Springs with 16 brothers and sisters! Christmastime was a very special time of year. Clark remembers going into the woods to collect the small Evergreen Princess Pine. The evergreens were used to make Christmas wreaths and other holiday decorations that the family would sell to raise money for Christmas. This is only one of the many endearing stories that Santa has to tell. While working on this project I had the opportunity to spend several afternoons with Santa. His takes of growing up in Saratoga Springs conjure up images of Saratoga's past and all its glory at the holidays.

I sincerely hope you enjoy my limited edition print "Saratoga Santa" as much as I enjoyed painting and spending time with Saratoga's very own Santa Claus! Available at Crafters Gallery and Impressions of Saratoga.

Sincerely,
Artist Karin Vollkommer



Photo by Mrs. Claus



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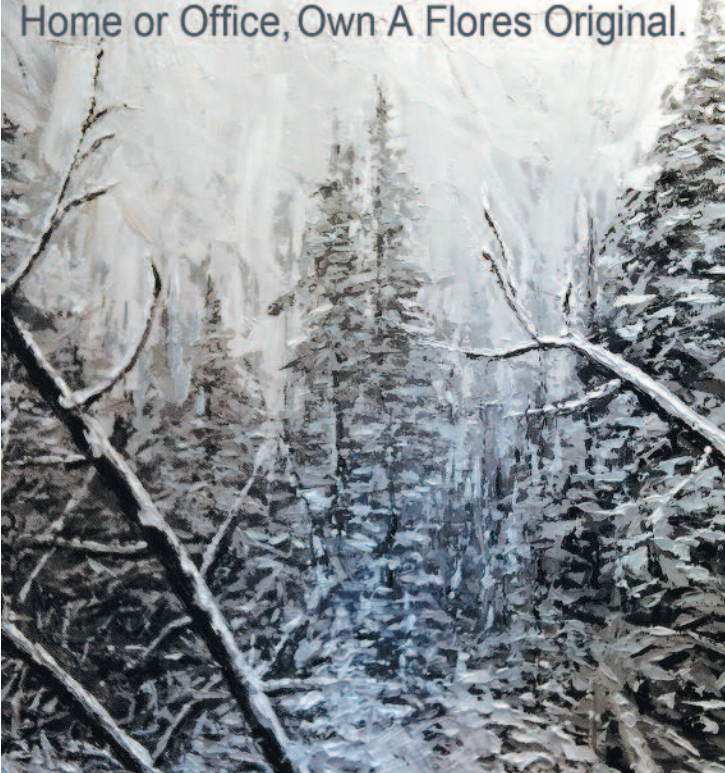
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There are sad moments as well.

“One boy, maybe 10 or 11, told me he didn’t want any gifts, he said ‘I want you to try to get my mom and dad back together,’” Clark said.

One of the many highlights is seeing the children light up when Santa walks into a room. Making appearances for special needs children has always been an uplifting experience for Clark, so much so that he does this on a volunteer basis.

In preparation for the slew of children that will be visiting Santa this holiday season, Clark did something he’s never done before – he got a flu shot.

“I’ve been watching TV and it’s on all the time, the H1N1 and getting a flu shot, and my daughter works in a doctor’s office so she’s been telling me I should get one. Then I got to thinking, it’s on the news night after night. Then the hospital called and said I would be a good candidate, so I got them both,” he said. He also made sure to tell the nurse administering the shots that “If you hurt Santa, you’ll be short a couple of presents!”

Now heading into the holiday season fully vaccinated, Clark is gearing up for a few weeks of parties, breakfasts with Santa, personal home visits and public appearances. Around town, Santa is hard to miss. With his meticulously-groomed beard, the Santa suspenders and a red sleigh (Honda Element) with a license plate that reads “Ho Ho Ho,” there’s no mistaking that Santa calls Saratoga Springs his home. He was born and raised in town in a family of eight girls and nine boys.

“I was born here and have lived here for my whole life. Even today, I don’t want to live anywhere else.”



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