

{ first turn }



TBT

Becoming Santa

FRED CLARK HAS LONG BEEN THE PHYSICAL EMBODIMENT OF THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT. IN HONOR OF HIS 25TH SEASON AS THE SARATOGA SANTA, WE LOOK BACK AT THE COSMETIC CHANGE THAT MADE A CAREER OF SPREADING HOLIDAY JOY POSSIBLE. ■ BY NATALIE MOORE

Twenty-five years ago this year, Fred Clark's wife, Carol, saw an ad in the newspaper announcing that Hewitt's Garden Center was in need of someone to dress up as Santa for an event. She knew her husband would be perfect. The only problem? Fred didn't have a beard.

He did have a fake beard though, and that did the trick for his St. Nick debut. But after that 1998 holiday season, Fred got serious about Santa-ing. "I just wanted to be a *real* Santa," he says. "I had the real belly and the real white, curly beard to do so. I did a home visit for my family eye doctor, and after

the visit he said he thought this was my calling. I realized he was right." So Fred grew out his beard and has been bringing holiday cheer to Saratoga Springs and beyond ever since.

Now known throughout the region simply as The Saratoga Santa, Fred is starting to see children of the children he

first met 20-plus years ago. "The best part about that is that I see the same happiness and smile on the moms' and dads' faces, just like 25 years ago when they were kids themselves," he says.

"It doesn't matter the year or the century that Christmas has been celebrated. Santa is timeless."

beard league In the first year Fred Clark played Santa, he wore a fake beard; (INSET) after that, he grew out his beard for a more authentic look that he's maintained for 24 holiday seasons.

(recent photo) MATT RAMOS