

Playing Santa Claus at the Freeman Store

FL: I played Santa Claus for a number of years. I enjoyed that. The nice thing about playing Santa Claus...It started, Maud got me started, I had no plans to do this. I used to do this for my children and then several of the grandchildren came along then the neighbors found out about it. They used to always invite me over to their houses. Pretty soon I was running all over the place. Then Maud heard about it. Maud said, 'Why don't you come down, we can have a Santa Claus down at the Freeman Store?' So they set it up. Then I had my granddaughter. They were Santa Claus's helper.

I had one of my grandchildren in back of me, to try and keep an eye on things, make sure my beard wasn't slipping, or if you had a baby, they'd kind of adjust around. But all the children were really nice. We had a good group. The parents were local people. You didn't have any brats. Some of them would act up, but typical kids. But they were always well-behaved. All the years, I had real good kids, real good parents. I remember a couple of interesting stories on that. Anybody who plays Santa Claus has a lot of stories. Every year, it seemed, this would happen. I'd start off. I'd say, 'Have you been good for Mommy and Daddy?' Occasionally, they'd say, 'My Daddy got killed...my mommy just died.' You'd have to kind of suck it up and say, 'Ohh, oh, that's too bad. I'm sure you're helping Mommy or Daddy.' And then I'd go into the things—'how are you helping? Are you taking out the trash, keeping the floors clean, helping with the dishes...' You know, those things. And then I'd always try to bring the library books in. 'Are you reading? Is Santa Claus going to bring you some library books? What do you want from Santa Claus?' I was kind of geared to that ahead of time. I knew which items were popular with the girls and boys. A lot of times, they'd give you a list. I remember Jane Seeman, the mayor. She said, 'Frank, we're trying to break (her) grandson of a teether.' What do you call these things they suck on?

VH: A pacifier?

FL: Yeah, a pacifier. Anyway, I think that was what they were trying. She said, 'Now, when you go and see Santa Claus, why don't you give Santa Claus your pacifier and he might have a special gift for you?' They slipped a special gift up there. I saw them in line. I saw Jane. I nodded to him. I said, 'Hey, tell me, are you still—I think it was a pacifier—are you still using that? I'll tell you what. Why don't you give it to Santa Claus. Let me put it down here, and I have a special gift for you.' That worked. I'd have to ask Jane, I don't know whether it worked. That was kind of interesting!

We had candy canes that we would give the kids. This I had to be careful of, because you might have a diabetic. I'd always ask the mom. I'd say, 'Is it okay if he has it?' And the second thing. If they asked for a pony or something, I'd say, 'Oh, I don't know if Santa Claus can get you a pony, but what else would you like?' I'd watch; the parent would be watching closely. They'd kind of shake their head. I'd say, 'Okay, maybe Santa Claus can get that for you.' You'd kind of read the kids.

One time, I remember, this lady called and wondered if at the end if they could bring the dog in and have Santa Claus's picture. I said sure. It didn't bother me. I think some of them didn't like the idea of a dog being in the store but it worked out real good.

There were always a couple of things that you never got used to—handicapped children, couldn't get up the stairs. I would meet them downstairs. Things like that. Real interesting stories. Good memories.

CG: You were on the upper level of Freeman?

FL: One time we had it on the front porch. But it was so cold and there were so many children. They were lighting Christmas trees and all. It was hard to keep control. Upstairs, we had the chair in the visiting room, you know, the one with the couch and all. We had the couch blocked off so the kids wouldn't get on it. They would come up the stairs. This worked out real good, especially on Sunday afternoons. I think they have it only a couple of times now. It started off in November, seemingly, right up to Christmas. Then I had my grandson do it. We were always riding the fire-truck in. We had the antique fire-truck. Talk about cold, getting on the fire-truck. You had to get up early. All the cars would line up tooting. Even going up to the Fire Hall, the place, you'd really be popular. Everyone hollering at you. You'd have to wave to the kids and all. I said, I'm really a ham. Living it up.