

So where does Santa hang his boots?

'Santa Will' considers Suntimee to be his winter home

BY MARK KOOPMANS
Staff writer

It is a question asked at least once by maybe all children and probably a few adults: Where does Santa Claus live in the off-season?

Well, for one Santa in particular, home away from the North Pole is in the heart of Suntimee.

Will Davis is an alumnus of the Amalgamated Order of Real Bearded Santa's, an international organization that, according to its Web site, has more than 1,000 "real bearded" gentlemen who are dedicated to the joy of being Santa.

"As a child in Cincinnati, Ohio, the holidays were always special events for me," said Mr. Davis, who will start regrowing his white beard for Christmas 2007 on March 1.

A retired first sergeant in the U.S. Air Force who now works as a weapons safety manager at Patrick Air Force Base, Mr. Davis said his boss has no problems allowing him to grow his beard.

"The only problem would be if I was ever deployed because the long beard wouldn't allow me to fit a gas mask on properly, but that hasn't happened yet."

He said he never got to meet Santa Claus in person until he was about five years old, when his mother took him to a large downtown store.

"I was so impressed with

Santa's beard that I got one of my hands all tangled in his beard and couldn't get it out," Mr. Davis said. "I became really upset and started crying, especially when staff called someone down from the beauty shop to come cut my hand out of dear Santa's beard."

Years later, and with that trauma behind him, Mr. Davis was in Okinawa, Japan in 1981, when he realized none of the Japanese children knew about Santa Claus.

"I talked to my wife, Sachi, who checked with a local elementary school to see if they would like a visit from Santa," he said. "They agreed, and we were all set — I had ordered a costume from the States — when I was involved in a motorcycle accident."

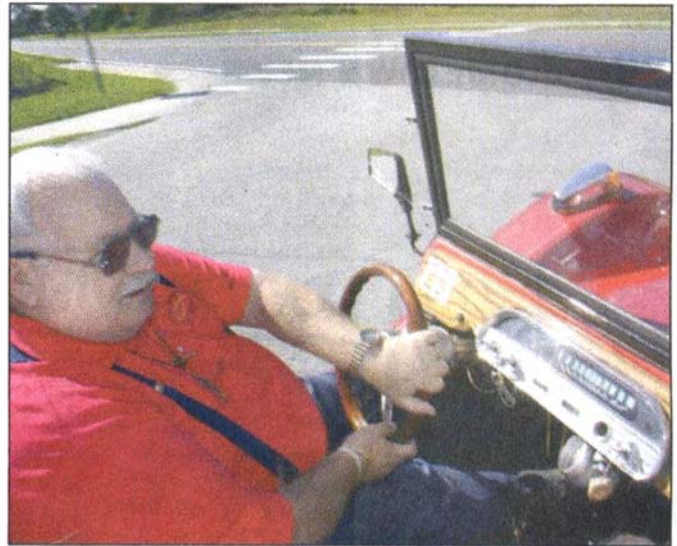
Luckily, he said, a Jesuit priest from a nearby base was able to fill Santa's boots and the children were not disappointed.

However, Mr. Davis was determined not to give up and, in 1983, he was stationed at Myrtle Beach Air Force Base when the Officer's Wives Club came up with an idea.

"Rent-A-Santa. People could call in and have Santa deliver a present to a loved one," he said. "Since most of the visits were to military offices, both officers and enlisted personnel were embarrassed to have to sit on Santa's lap, but it was hilarious for everyone else."

On one memorable occasion, he said, an enlisted airman turned the tables on his girlfriend.

"After a visit from me, the young man contracted me to go to his girlfriend's office, where he followed me in," said Mr. Davis. "As



Jennifer Tyler/staff photographer
Suntimee resident Will Davis, member of the 'Amalgamated order of Real Bearded Santas', takes his newly restored his Dixie-T Roadster out for a spin. Mr. Davis will use his antique car for future Santa visits and parades.

his girlfriend sat mortified on Santa's lap, he went down on one knee and proposed to her."

Since moving to Suntimee in 1997, "Santa Will," as many know him, has discovered a whole new world for his talents.

After an initial quiet Christmas season, he said, things have changed and he now has an extensive schedule of events during December. His busiest day, of course, is Dec. 24.

"This past Christmas Eve, I left at 10:30 a.m. and arrived back home at 2:30 a.m. Christmas morning," he said. "I'm a diabetic, so I don't drink milk anymore, but I definitely ate a lot of cookies that day."

He also visits local schools and participates in the Festival of Trees, where he said one of his joys in being Santa is helping children who live with disabilities.

"I have a soft spot for

special needs kids," Mr. Davis said. "I never rush them, and when they, for whatever reason, cannot come up to Santa's chair, well, then Santa goes to where they are."

He said the history of secret gift giving could be traced back to St. Nicholas, who died in 343 A.D.

"St. Nicholas started the tradition when he saw three sisters in need and provided gold for each of their dowries," he said. "But, you know, we all have it in our hearts to be a Santa. If you see a need and you can provide a solution, why not do just that. Even if it's in the form of an anonymous gift, we should help others less fortunate. There is so much pleasure from giving rather than receiving."

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