

Santa's historians

Son of Santa's Workshop founder works with Wilmington Historical Society to preserve, catalogue archival items from theme park's earliest days

Story by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, July 14, 2006
Archival photos courtesy Wilmington Historical Society and Santa's Workshop

NORTH POLE — The history of one of Wilmington's most significant businesses, Santa's Workshop, was the subject of an hour-long talk and slide show delivered by Bob Reiss last Friday evening at Mother Hubbard's, the theme park's restaurant.

Santa's Workshop was founded by Lake Placid businessman Julian Reiss and two colleagues in 1949. After Julian Reiss died of cancer in 1959, son Bob Reiss started becoming active in the business. In 1964, Bob became Santa's general manager, guiding the theme park's operations and development until 2001, when Doug Waterbury took over Bob's responsibilities as he prepared to purchase Santa's Workshop.

The evening's program was organized by Karen Peters, president of the Wilmington Historical Society.

"Karen came to me in January," Reiss recalled, "and said that we [the Wilmington Historical Society] would like to get a little about Santa's Workshop into the town records.

"I told her that would suit us just fine, since we were just starting to look at our own history and digging stuff out of attics and files and trying to figure out what to do with all this.

"Karen said, 'We have some

people who can help you do that,'" Reiss told his SRO audience last Friday.

Santa's history helpers, Reiss said, were Peter Yuro, Nancy Gonyea, Merri Carol Peck, Jane Newman, and Bob and Karen Peters of the Wilmington Historical Society.

"We dug into boxes and musty files and put together the material that we're going to show you tonight," Reiss said.

Because of the sheer volume of the archival material to be processed, Reiss's program last week covered only the first few years of the theme park's operations, up to about 1953.

It started with a story

"We're going to start this where all stories should begin," Reiss said, "at the beginning."

Bob Reiss talked about his father Julian's involvement in New York's State Commission Against Discrimination in the mid-1940s, which took him all over the state from the family's second home in Bay Shore, L.I.

Just before Christmas 1945, Julian Reiss took the family on a car trip from Bay Shore up to Lake Placid. To help pass the time, he told a story to daughter Patty.

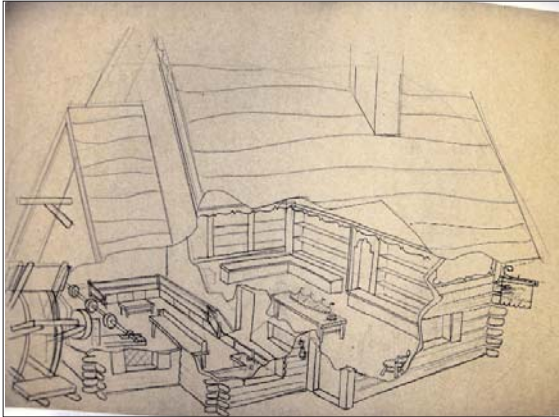
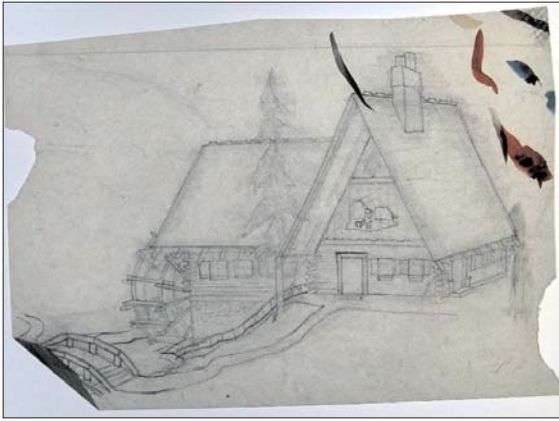
The story was about one of Patty's favorite characters, Baby Bear, who had gotten lost in the woods.

"In the course of time, he happened to stray across a little village where there were a whole lot of people busy working," Reiss said, "happy, singing, and they were making toys and things."

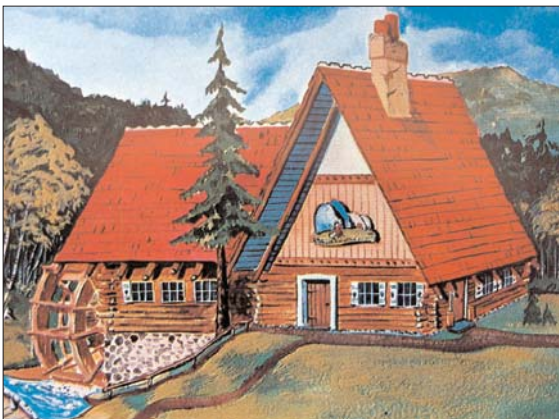
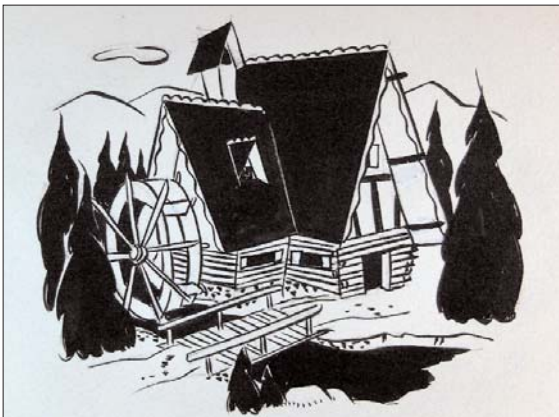
Baby Bear was taken in and cared for by the villagers, who turned out to be Santa's elves. The youngster had stumbled upon



Santa takes a load off his feet on the front porch of his original home at Santa's Workshop, waiting for the very first visitors to arrive in opening day, July 1, 1949.



These drawings show the development of Arto Monaco's conception of one of the buildings he designed for Santa's Workshop, a mill house.



Saint Nick's mountain workshop.

"My sister said, 'I want to go see that, too,'" Reiss said.

"My father had to tell her that there were no roads up there, no planes — there was no way to get her there.

"After a while, my sister fell asleep, but my father kept on thinking about the story. 'Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing if there were a place where parents could take their children and relive the fantasies of Santa Claus for themselves as well as their children?'"

"And that's where the idea for Santa's Workshop came from," said Reiss.

Enter Arto Monaco

"Now, my father had a great imagination, but he was no artist," Reiss acknowledged. "He had to find some way to take this dream that he had in his mind and put it down on paper. What would it look like, so that it would be believable but also a fantasy?"

By chance, someone introduced Julian Reiss to a young artist in Upper Jay who had worked for Disney before the war and had returned home to start a toy factory: Arto Monaco.

Reiss said that, though his father owned the Northland Auto dealership at the time, he drove around in a beat-up jalopy and wore a baggy suit with frayed cuffs and scuffed-up shoes.

Julian Reiss described the

concept of Santa's village to Monaco.

"Arto, being a little bit cautious," Reiss recalled, "looked at my father and said, 'I like your dream, but I'm a little concerned. This is going to cost quite a bit of money. Where will you get it from?'"

Julian Reiss told Monaco that if he would sketch out some drawings of the kind of buildings he had envisioned for Santa's Workshop, Julian would show them to his father, who would provide the cash.

What Julian Reiss didn't tell Monaco was that his father was a banker and a shipping magnate.

Thanks to the work of the Wilmington Historical Society, Reiss's slide show included many of Arto Monaco's original 1948 sketches of the buildings to be constructed at Santa's Workshop.

"Right from the beginning, we were talking logs and steep roofs," Reiss said.

The building drawn on one sketch was obscured by maybe 30 experimental brush strokes, each with a different color.

"He was trying to figure out what color went with which and where it belonged," Reiss said. "That was the third part of what Arto could do. It took the shapes, it took the styles, but it also took the colors, all blended in together, to make this place what it is today."

Finding site for North Pole

Bob Reiss talked about the process of finding a site where Julian Reiss and Arto Monaco could build their new attraction.

“The first idea was that they would build where the Charcoal Pit restaurant is now, on Saranac Avenue, where Old MacDonald’s Farm was later built,” Reiss said.

“They had already decided that they were going to use logs in the building, so they needed someone who was familiar with logs. That led them to Harold Fortune who, at that time, was building the cabins at Whiteface Inn on the shore of Lake Placid with his nephew Fred.”

Reiss said that Arto and Julian went over to see the cabins and talk with Harold Fortune.

“Harold got very enthusiastic about the idea,” Reiss recalled, “but he said, ‘The place you want to do this is down on Whiteface Mountain, because you already have the [Whiteface Veterans Memorial] Highway there [to the summit], which attracts so many tourists. Also, they’re going to build the ski center there [on Marble Mountain, the predecessor of the Whiteface ski center], and that’s going to be a big thing. There’s going to be a year-round resort with hotels all over the place at the base of the ski center; this would be the place to be.”

“Also, being up in the mountains, in the woods,” Reiss added, “would be a more believable place to find Santa than on Saranac Avenue, on the edge of the village of Lake Placid.”

The three partners selected the particular location where Santa’s Workshop stands today because of its brook, which they envisioned

flowing through the heart of Santa’s village.

Walking it off

Reiss said that, other than the sketches and watercolors Arto Monaco had created, there were no blueprints, no designs of any sort for the buildings at Santa’s Workshop. The partners simply went up to the site, looked around, and started walking off the dimensions.

“They said, ‘This is where the pond will be ... We’ll put the North Pole here ... Now, where’s Santa’s house going to be? Let’s put that over there,’” Reiss said.

“They went over and put a stake in the ground, and that was Santa’s house.

“But how big is it going to be?”

Reiss stepped off several paces, demonstrating the “design procedure” for his audience.

“There; that looks about right,” he said.

“The story is, there was never a blueprint for one of these buildings. They were all built, ‘Well, this would make a good size. Here’s Arto’s drawing of what it ought to look like. Go ahead and build it!’

“Arto was on the site the whole time. The workmen would come to him and say, ‘What am I supposed to do here?’ Arto would dash off a sketch and say, ‘Make it like that.’

“That’s how the village was built,” Reiss said.

“It was a wonderful way to do it, but we wouldn’t do it like that today. You didn’t need an environmental impact study or any zoning plans; you just did what you wanted to do!”

Opening the park

Workers started building at Santa’s Workshop early in the spring of 1948 and worked until late in the year, when they couldn’t work any more, Reiss said. Early the next spring, as soon as the ice was out of the way, they started again. By opening day — July 1, 1949 — they had completed most of the lower village.

In words reminiscent of those used to open the Olympic Games, the poster announcing the theme park’s opening read, “This man-made fairyland now open for the children of the world.”

In sharp contrast to today’s visitors, the first bunch of guests on opening day at Santa’s Workshop were mostly adults.

It wouldn’t be until a little advertising, a slew of newspaper stories, and a lot of word-of-mouth started circulating the story of Saint Nick’s village in the Adirondacks that families would start planning their summer vacation trips to include the Wilmington attraction.

No cash registers

Initially, Santa’s Workshop was set up so that guests didn’t buy an entry ticket — they paid the 76-cent fee, as well as any charges for whatever they bought or ate inside the park, on their way out.

“Our original idea was that we didn’t want any cash registers in the park,” Reiss said. “You would come in and just be able to enjoy yourself.

“You were given a shopping card when you came in. Whatever you buy is written down, and when you leave it’s all tallied up, including the entrance fee.

“The only thing is, the goats



Kate Smith, the legendary songstress who made her summer home on Placid Lake, was also a great lover of the animals at Santa's Workshop.

[wandering the grounds at Santa's Workshop] discovered the shopping cards, and they liked the way they tasted. Many of our guests got to the check-out register without their shopping cards."

Marketing Santa's village

Like the "construction plans" for Santa's Workshop, the business model for Julian Reiss's brand-new theme park was rudimentary.

"We had no major marketing strategy, no business plan," said

Bob Reiss. "Our promotions were centered around three areas.

"First, we plastered bumper signs on anything we could.

"Second, we had posters that read, 'Come see Santa at the North Pole.' I was home that first summer on my first leave from the Navy, just before the park opened, and my father gave me this big stack of posters and told me to put them up wherever I could.

"The third thing we had that really worked well for us," Reiss

said, "was the public relations and the press business."

Almost from Day One, an unexpected torrent of syndicated stories and photos began flowing out of Santa's Workshop, material that was published in newspapers and magazines all across North America. The idea of a children's park where fantasies came to life seemed to fascinate America's journalists.

The first photo-story about Santa's Workshop, by Pat Patricof, hit the newspaper wires on July 5, 1949 — just four days after the park first opened. Patricof's photo showed Santa standing at the refrigerated column dubbed "the North Pole," in the middle of the theme park, presenting toys to a pair of girls from Au Sable Forks, Sarah Richards and Carol Lagoy.

Patricof's picture ran in more than 700 newspapers across the continent.

Within two months of the opening of Santa's Workshop, stories and photos had been run in newspapers with a combined circulation of more than 10 million copies, with a potential readership of 100 million people — at a time when the total population of the United States was about 150 million.

"We found that everybody really wants to be friendly with Santa Claus," Reiss said. "There's hardly anybody that doesn't."

After all, what journalist wants to be put on the Naughty List?

Extraordinary early success

The flood of free publicity drew thousands of visitors to Santa's Workshop — many, many more than the park's founders had

expected.

“When we did our first figuring,” said Reiss, pointing to a slide image of an early ledger sheet, “we thought that maybe we could get 300 visitors in a day.

“On opening day, we got 212 visitors, and we thought that was okay.

“But later that season,” Reiss said, pointing to another page from Santa’s ledger book, “I see a day when we had 972.

“Here we are in the first year of operation, on the Sunday of Labor Day weekend — 4,348 visitors. ...

“A year later, on Sept. 2, 1950, we had 8,719 people — and remember, children under 10 and over 90 aren’t paying, so the number actually coming into the park that day was probably more like 14,000 people.

“Automobiles were backed up all the way down the hill [into Wilmington hamlet], all the way to Jay [5 miles away] and to Lake Placid [12 miles],” said Reiss.

Operation Toylift

“The success of the park went beyond all expectation,” Reiss recalled. “As a result, we decided that we wanted to reach out to some of the children who couldn’t come to the park — children in homes, handicapped, orphans. In December 1949, we instituted Santa’s Operation Toylift.”

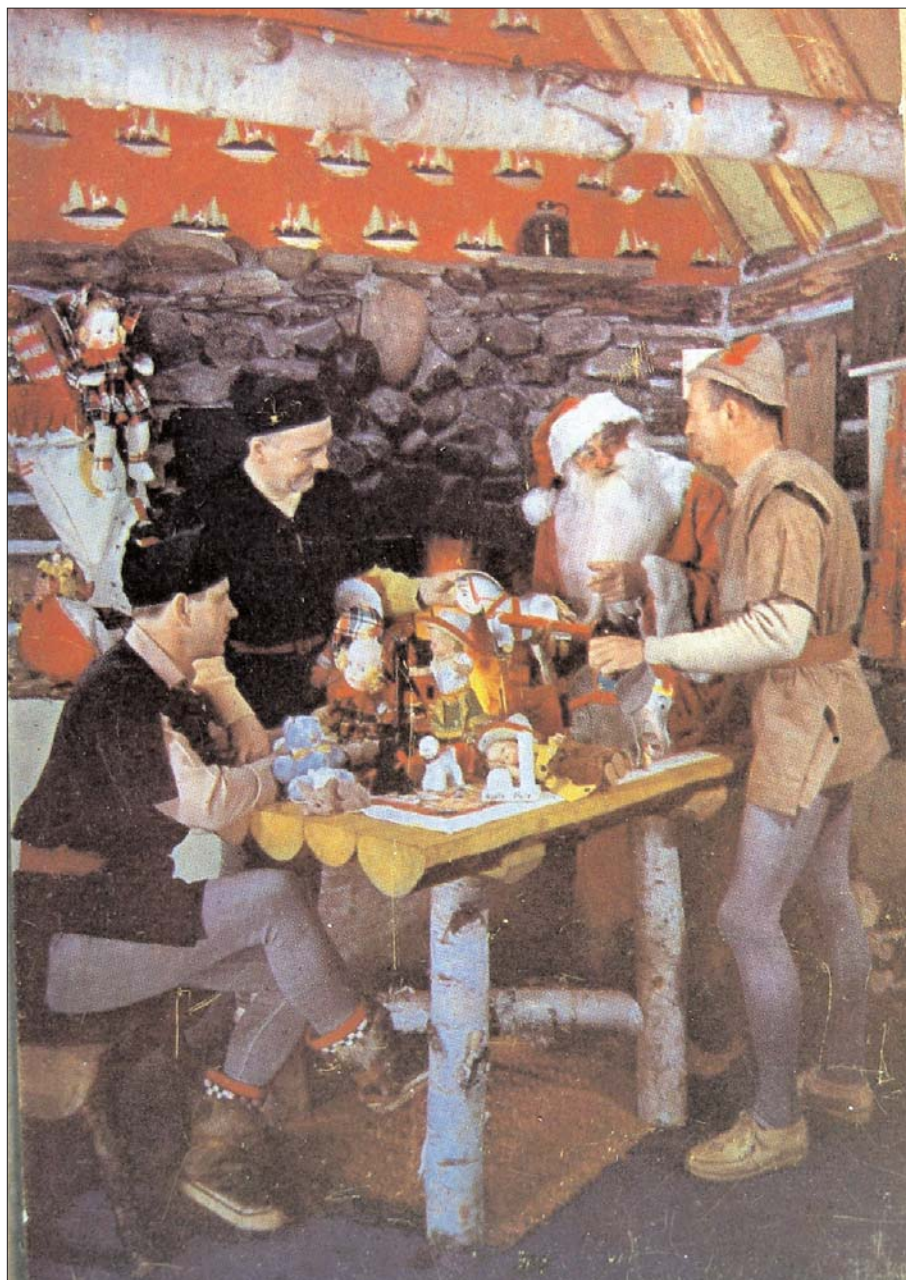
The program bought and distributed Christmas presents to institutionalized children.

Julian Reiss himself flew his own Stinson 150 that first year to inaugurate Operation Toylift, visiting Watertown, Glens Falls, Malone and Plattsburgh, bringing Christmas toys and gifts to chil-

dren who might not otherwise have had any.

In later years, sponsorship of Operation Toylift was picked up by Esso Oil, which contributed the use of one of its corporate planes for the project. The Esso plane, Reiss said, made it possible to expand the program’s coverage to cities throughout the Northeast.

REISS CLOSED his presentation last Friday evening having covered the beginnings and early success of Santa’s Workshop, up until 1953. Additional archiving would be done over the coming year, Reiss said, with the help of the Wilmington Historical Society, and he would deliver a second installment on the history of Santa’s Workshop in 2007.



The founders of Santa’s Workshop are dressed up as elves for an early promotional shot, taken with Saint Nick. From left to right: Arto Monaco (seated), Julian Reiss, “Santa,” and Harold Fortune.