

Original Santa's back in town

By CRAIG PIECHURA

crass commercialism usually associated with Christmas sales.

The face is familiar but the voice is forgettable.

Unless you just moved here from Angola you'll recognize Rubin Weiss' voice as the current pitchman for Here and Now pant stores, AMCO transmission shops and Elias Bros. restaurants. Or maybe you remember him as the staff announcer at Channel 7 and Channel 4, or the shifty Mr. Muggs in an old Detroit radio drama.

But if you're between the ages of 3 and 30 you probably know Weiss best as the "real" Santa Claus.

Back in 1958 Weiss first donned the red velvet suit and a white beard made from yak's hair for the premiere showing of "Santa's Christmas Party" on Channel 9.

The program came on the day after Thanksgiving and ran through the day before Christmas when Santa had to head up north.

The show was sponsored by S.S. Kresge department stores. A little elf, whose name escapes Weiss and the current staff at Channel 9, served as his sidekick.

That was the beginning of a local legend.

In 1961 Weiss was called into service as the official Santa in the Hudson's Thanksgiving Day Parade. For 15 years Weiss sat in the sleigh and waved to youngsters lining Woodward.

"I tried to look every child right in the eye," Weiss said. Although both the TV show and the parade were sponsored by department stores, Weiss seemed to transcend

PARENTS EVEN explained to their children that the "real" Santa went to Hudson's and all the others were his "helpers." Quite a coup for Hudson's.

After all, everyone who went to the parade or watched it on TV saw Santa get off his sled in front of the downtown department store and climb up an enchanted castle's facade to accept "the keys to the hearts of all the good boys and girls" from whomver was mayor at the time.

And Weiss received the key from four different Detroit mayors—from Louis Miriani to Coleman Young.

"It's always the same script," Weiss said. "Santa, you get a lot of keys to a lot of cities. But this key is a special key. It's the key to the hearts of all the good boys and girls of the Detroit area."

By the way, Weiss never gets to take the gold key home.

"As soon as I step inside, somebody's there waiting for it."

Weiss' status as local legend was interrupted in 1977 when major surgery caused him to miss the parade. This year he was still recuperating and declined an offer to man the reins behind Donner and Blitzen and company.

If health permits and Hudson's invites him, Weiss said he'd love to star in the Santa parade again next year.

"IT'S THE BEST experience you could have as an actor, doing a parade where, to thousands of youngsters, you're not playing Santa Claus, you



RUBIN WEISS

are Santa Claus," Weiss said.

"Why did they pick me? I think I sounded friendly and had a rapport with children."

The most common question posed by wide-eyed youngsters "always was 'where are your reindeers, Santa?'" Weiss didn't let that question faze him, though.

"I'd say, 'Listen, and you'll hear them up in the air.' They'd strain and they'd hear them. Imagination is a wonderful thing in a child."

What children didn't ask him is how a nice Jewish boy named Rubin Weiss grew up to epitomize Santa Claus in a Christian holiday like Christmas. Children don't make those kind of distinctions.

Today Weiss is a freelance actor and voice-over announcer much in demand all over the country.

If you live in the Detroit area, chances are you hear his voice at least once every day.

If you shop at Cunningham Drug stores you hear his voice over the public address system informing shoppers of the latest bargains.

ON TV he's the voice in the ad for Elias Bros. restaurants that claims the service there is so close to Mom's that they make you finish your milk before you can leave.

If you sell Chryslers you've probably seen Weiss in an industrial film to instruct salesmen in salesmanship.

And it was Weiss who did the first dragstrip commercials that told listeners in no uncertain terms that racing was "SUNDAY, SUNDAY" at Detroit Dragway while "What'd I Say" by Ray Charles played in the background.

Thought you'd remember.

Weiss spends most of his time at an office in the Heritage Plaza Building in Southfield as president of the Detroit local of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA).

The Oak Park resident is also on the national board of AFTRA and the Screen Actors Guild.

Weiss is busy. But he still yearns for the golden days of Detroit radio and television drama. Radio shows such as the Green Hornet, Challenge of the Yukon and the Lone Ranger often featured Weiss. He directed and appeared on locally-produced TV shows such as WXYZ's "Soupy's On," starring Soupy Sales.

But most of all Weiss misses the yak beard, the red velvet suit and the cardboard key to the kid's hearts.



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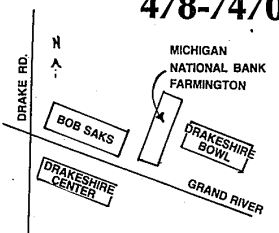
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