



A registered antique Model A fire engine used by the Brandon Fire Department brought Santa to his Oakland Mall home on Sesame Street. The engine was staffed by firemen from both the Brandon and Troy fire departments.

Santa's already checkin' his list

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

IT'S TRADITION. Santa comes to town Thanksgiving Day and begins the holiday shopping season.

He may get the key to the hearts of Detroit children tomorrow, but the jolly old gent has already begun collecting Christmas lists from suburban kids.

Most large malls welcomed Santa and his helpers last week with parades and entertainment designed to attract crowds.

All feature holiday displays billed as "exclusive" with animated animals or TV characters. One even has computer graphics.

"More and more in recent years, people have begun the Christmas excitement before Thanksgiving," said Nimrod Rosenthal, marketing director for Northland Center in Southfield. Santa arrived there Nov. 19 at the Snoopy Toy Factory, which is made up of seven major displays.

"We bring Santa when we sense the customer is ready for him."

Suburban malls have been getting the jump on downtown Detroit stores for the past few Christmases.

"It's interesting that people always say Santa comes earlier — but he doesn't," said Joy Powell of Troy's Oakland Mall.

BUT AS EACH holiday approaches, the decorations do go up slightly earlier. And Christmas displays are more elaborate and more expensive.

One factor is the slow economy, which is forcing malls to compete for fewer dollars during their most important selling season.

Oakland Mall brought in its Sesame Street display because of the tight economic situation and incomplete mall renovation.

"We felt we needed something strong last year," said Powell. The mall this year features Big Bird for the first time.

"Detroit loves celebrities. And we know licensed programs really have pulling power here."

Livonia Mall marketing director Mary McDonnell thinks early arrivals let shopping centers "come on board" before the downtown stores. Shoppers can enjoy both their hometown and the Detroit parades.

"With the economy, it gives people a chance to start early and give more thought to how they are able to afford their gifts. Shopping isn't a last-minute thing."

The Livonia mall — determined to lead Santa to his forest setting with live reindeer — pushed his arrival up to Nov. 13 instead of the traditional week before Thanksgiving to make that possible.

"It was the only date we could get the reindeer," explained McDonnell. She received fewer than 10 complaints about starting the shopping season so soon.

"I guess that proves it doesn't make a difference."

DESPITE THE ECONOMY, there is also a firm commitment by shopping centers to offer something special for steady customers — not just to attract new shoppers.

The feeling seems even more intense this year because 1982 is downtown Hudson's last "Santa World."

"Everyone remembers growing up in Detroit and their parents taking them to see the wonderful downtown display," said Rosenthal. "We wanted to present a gift to the children of Detroit."

"We think it's always nice to have something special at Christmas because it's such a special time of the year," added Sheila Armstrong, sales

promotion director for Twelve Oaks Mall.

"It's a time of good will." Area malls proudly tout their displays as either "one-of-a-kind" or "exclusive" to this area.

Twelve Oaks Mall in Novi claims the nation's only computerized Christmas, offering satellite communications with the North Pole.

NORTHLAND FEATURES Snoopy and Oakland Mall has Sesame Street — both bought from Becker Corp. of Baltimore, Md. The firm also offers Hubble, Yogi Bear and Walt Disney Christmas decoors.

Meadowbrook Village Mall in Avon Township stuck with its Nov. 26 Santa arrival, but brought in Stubby the Elf two weeks ahead to prepare his way.

"No one wants to do Christmas the same way," said Jim Westcott, assistant marketing director. Westcott believes it's "pushing the season" for the jolly old gent to arrive before Thanksgiving. But he had no qualms about bringing in Stubby.

"It's more of an entertainment thing for the kids. It's like any event designed

to bring people into the mall," he said.

Many malls carefully research the offerings before committing themselves to holiday displays.

"We called our store buyers because they're closest to what the public wants. There are lots of choices, but everyone said 'Muppets,'" said Powell, whose mall leased Sesame Street through 1983.

"And we thought it would stay popular."

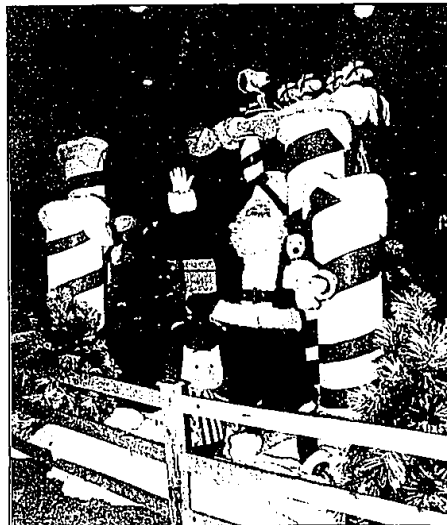
Northland selected Snoopy's Toy Factory because "He is the most loved character. Everyone loves Snoopy."

TWELVE OAKS is offering the "Classic Christmas of the '80's," with computer graphics and educational holiday computer games and a computer elf who helps Santa out.

The exhibit was put together by the mall staff with the Detroit Science Center and Texas Instruments.

"We wanted to offer a traditional Christmas but also wanted to respond to what's happening with kids and computers," explained Armstrong.

"What kid doesn't have a computer on his Christmas list?"



Santa's Northland Center home this year will be a new Snoopy Toy Factory, which is made up of seven major displays around the Southfield mall.



Trying hard to get a glimpse of Santa arriving at Oakland Mall were Kathy McCracken, 5, (perched on her father Jim's shoulders) and Bonnie McCracken lifted up by her mother Gayle.



While Santa arrives Friday as usual at Meadowbrook Village Mall, Stubby the Elf was on the scene two weeks early to prepare his way.