

How long has Santa been visiting Cranford?

By Vic Bary



(Author, age 5, with Department Store Santa)

No I'm not referring to Santa's December 24th nighttime visit (which we all know has been going on *for just about forever*); I'm referring to his earlier in the month visit by fire truck which I first witnessed upon moving to Cranford in 1986. For a number of years thereafter, my wife and I accompanied nieces and nephews who (usually) patiently waited their turn to sit on Santa's lap and breathlessly informed him of their gift wishes. But remembering those annual pre-Christmas visits by the Great Man Himself, I got to wondering just how long this important event had been observed here in Cranford.

To try and answer my own question, I began rummaging through the Public Library's digital newspaper archives. While I can't vouch that what follows captures all the truths there are to be known about this annual event, it does capture every relevant local newspaper article I was able to find about this Township-sponsored event.

I say "township-sponsored event", because the newspapers document countless school, PTA, church, social and political club Christmas celebrations, concerts, and fund drives for the needy which preceded (and succeed) any recorded township-sponsored events.

The December 10, 1925 issue of *The Cranford Citizen and Chronicle* notes that "It has been decided this year to use money in the treasury to assist some of the most worthy cases in town *and also to provide a Community Christmas Tree and maintain the lighting of same between Christmas and New Years as usual instead of giving an entertainment for children as has been customary*" (*italics added*). ... "The Committee desires to again thank all the kind friends who have contributed so well and so cheerfully to the fund during the past years, which enabled the Committee to carry on its work. F. Montencourt, Chairman". The "Committee" seems to be a committee of local businesses which appears to have been doing something for the Township and its children previously, but what that was doesn't seem to have been documented in the local papers.

The next mention of quasi-township sponsored Christmas activities appears in the December 11, 1930 issue of *The Cranford Citizen and Chronicle* which reported that the "Executive Committee of

the Cranford Christmas Carol Service” had met and planned a half hour program of instrumental music and caroling 8:30 PM at “the tree”, which was to be preceded by the Girl Scouts caroling through town.

One of the Christmastime events of yore was the Cranford Benevolent Associations annual Christmas Decoration Contest. An entry blank appears in the December 12, 1940 issue of *The Cranford Citizen and Chronicle*. There was a category for General Decorations and another for Entrance Decorations.

Santa seems to have marched off to War in 1941, and his activities in Cranford remained undocumented until the December 11, 1947 issue of the *Cranford Chronicle* which noted that “Santa”, in the person of Cranford High School Senior Dick Morwarth, would be present at the Cranford Cycle and Toy Company daily from 3:00 to 5:00 PM. Seeing 30-40 children a day, it was estimated that he would see up to 2,500 children by Christmas. (Editor’s note: the math doesn’t compute but it’s what the newspaper reported the store owner to have said.) Not yet Santa on a fire truck, but we were getting closer.

The December 8, 1949 issue of the *Cranford Chronicle* documents that Mayor Osterheldt threw the switch to light the Christmas Tree at the triangle in front of the Post Office. It was the first holiday street lighting sponsored by the Cranford Business Association. The following year, the *Chronicle* reported a repeat of the event, with lights in the forms of bells, stars and wreathes found throughout the central streets and lit from dark until near midnight, funded by local merchants through the CBA. No mention was made of Santa being present.

The December 11, 1952 *Cranford Chronicle* recorded that Cranford American Legion Post 212 would hold a Christmas party December 21 where “Santa”, portrayed by Cranford Police Sgt. William Gassmann would distribute gifts to members’ children. Remember the Sgt’s name; you’ll see it again in this history.

The following year (1953), “Santa” Gassmann did the honors again, but this time for Cranford’s VFW Post 335, where he distributed gifts to about 300 children attending a party. A motion picture was screened and ice cream and cookies served.

Finally, on Saturday December 12, 1954, the township-sponsored Santa visits seem to have begun. The December 9, 1954 issue of the *Cranford Chronicle* announced that at 9:40 AM Saturday morning at the Jersey Central Rail Road Station Santa would arrive aboard “a modern Budd car.” “Santa” was to be portrayed by – you guessed it! – Sgt. Gassmann. Santa was a very multi-modal kind of guy, because immediately after debarking from the train car, he was to hop into a limousine with the mayor to tour the town, ending at a heated trailer at the Post Office where he would interview local children about their Christmas wishes from 10:00 AM until noon. He would repeat the process at varying hours December 13, 15, 17, 18, 20 and 22. So it looks like **1954** was the year the Santa visits as we know them began. The process was repeated again in 1955.

1957 is the first mention of Santa touring Cranford by **fire truck**. The December 12, 1957 *Cranford Chronicle* reported that “Santa Claus arrived in town Sunday under the sponsorship of the Cranford Business Association and will continue to hold an open house for his friends in the trailer at Warner Plaza opposite the Cranford Diner at specified hours from now through Saturday, December 21.”

“Despite inclement weather, Santa put in his appearance *on a fire engine as scheduled...* (*italics added*). Following a tour of Cranford, he set up holiday headquarters in the usual trailer and began entertaining visits by the town’s children.”

At least through 1960, Santa continued to arrive in Cranford by train, and his tour of Cranford by fire truck, in order to assure himself of where each good little boy and girl lived, was set in stone, and continues through to the present. We wouldn't want it any other way.