



Cleveland's Thanksgiving Santa

The Story of George Dallas

By: Bette Lou Higgins

CLEVELAND'S THANKSGIVING SANTA

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Outside St. John's Cathedral in downtown Cleveland stood a frightened little boy shivering with cold and hunger trying to get up the courage to go inside and get warm. It was Thanksgiving Day, 1895, but to the ten year old it was just another day on the streets – homeless and alone.

Just one year ago, George was in Greece. His life changed dramatically when his father died and his uncle in Cleveland sent him money for passage to Ohio. George was starting to feel at home in this new city when his uncle died leaving him alone again. And that's how George came to be standing outside the Cathedral on that cold November Day.

As people began streaming out of the doors after the Thanksgiving service, the little boy ran down to the curb and stood watching. A man and a woman were coming down toward him. "Mornin', young fella," the man said. George backed away. "Hey there son, just a minute! We won't hurt you!"

"Oh Henry, you frightened him!" Exclaimed the woman. "The poor little thing looks starved to death!"

"Are you going to church?" Henry asked.

The little boy got up enough courage to answer a meek, "No."

The lady looked at him shivering. “You’d better get home before you catch your death of cold,” she told him.

“Have you got a home to go to, Young Man?” Henry asked.

Again came a meek, “No.”

When Henry insisted he must live somewhere, George explained that he lived down by the railroad tracks because his family had died.

“Agnes, we can’t let this poor boy starve here on the steps! You come with us, Young Man! How would you like a real Thanksgiving Dinner?”

So George Dallas went home that night with Henry and Agnes. He never forgot that meal, he never forgot the lesson they taught him, and never forgot what it felt like to be hungry.

George grew up in a railroad camp working for a dollar a day seven days a week as a water boy. When he was fourteen years old he took the money he had saved and opened a one-man restaurant on Payne Avenue in Cleveland. He worked 18 hours a day and slept on a cot in the back room at night.

In a few years he managed to open a bigger place in a better location. He moved over near the Old Stone Church on Ontario St. and after that opened a Dallas Restaurant at Prospect and 18th St.

By 1924 the homeless boy had grown up and had a family of his own, a comfortable house and a restaurant in the Hawley House on West Third St. with thirty five employees.

One night shortly before Thanksgiving, George had a dream. He told his wife, “Last night I dream ... I am standing again outside the Cathedral of St. John and I am very cold. Hungry people are coming into my restaurant. It is Thanksgiving and I am saying you must pay for your dinner. And then the old lady and the old man from the Cathedral come into my restaurant. They are hungry, too.”

They think about this dream and what it could mean. Finally they decide that anyone who comes into their restaurant hungry on Thanksgiving shall eat for free.

George told a newspaperman who used to eat at the restaurant about his plan and he put the story in the paper. That Thanksgiving, two thousand people came to George Dallas' restaurant and George fed them all! The ones who couldn't get into the dining room were given hot coffee and a box lunch to take home with them.

The next year, George fed four thousand people on Thanksgiving Day and in 1926 people stood in line for nearly a mile to get a dinner from George Dallas. The count was eight thousand people that year – but the cost of those dinners was more than George’s profits for the year! And word got out that George would feed anyone who was down and out all year round.

Soon his generosity was costing him more than he could really afford. Though George never complained or told anyone about his financial problems, a banker friend figured it out. He tried to talk George into stopping his Free Food program. “You’ll be out in a food line yourself in a couple of years,” his friend warned. “Perhaps,” George replied, “but in my heart I will know that I did right.”

When Thanksgiving 1931 arrived, the Cleveland Press called George “Cleveland’s Thanksgiving Santa Claus.” Photographers came to take pictures and the mayor came to visit.

The free food went on through the Depression. George lost his restaurant and then his home. Eventually, he opened a smaller place where he was still good for a meal when a fella was down on his luck.

Eventually George Dallas lost everything including his health. Hospital bills for him and his wife piled up. By the time he was 63 years old he had moved in with his daughter in

Brooklyn. Though his health returned, there was no more money left for to open another restaurant.

But those people that George helped – they never forgot the Thanksgiving Santa Claus! Notes and card filled up George’s scrapbooks – “God bless you, Mr. Dallas!” and “I’ll never forget that you gave me a meal when I was down and out.” and “Someday I’ll make it square with you.” – and hundreds of others full of gratitude. George was thankful for every single one of those cards and letters. George knew the real meaning of the Season – he was grateful for the kindness that was shown to him that first Thanksgiving Day on the steps of St. John’s and he was happy to have spent his life as Cleveland’s Thanksgiving Santa Claus.

Source: “Thanksgiving on Third Street”; Frank Siedel, et. al.; The Ohio Story; WTAM, broadcast #140; November 26, 1947.



The Thanksgiving Santa Claus is from EVE's storytelling program *STORIES FROM A CHRISTMAS PAST*. Other stories of the season are available in its companion book with the same name.

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