

These real McCoy Men in Red won't let the passing of Christmas stop them from channeling the spirit of St. Nick year-round.



PHOTOS BY TOMAS OVALLE/THE FRESNO BEE

Santa Gordon Bailey wanted to stand out so he got some aviator goggles to wear for the group picture of more than 130 Santas on the rear deck of the Queen Mary during the Amalgamated Order of Real Bearded Santas Convention luncheon a week ago today in Long Beach.

By Diana Marcum
The Fresno Bee

Summit of Santas

LONG BEACH — Isn't this a little like leaving your Christmas lights up until February?

Barry and Lesa Walzberg of Clovis are on the promenade deck of the Queen Mary in late January dressed as Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus. They aren't the only ones.

Attendees of a luncheon for the Amalgamated Order of Real Bearded Santas are arriving in droves, costumed and chattering. It's like a "Star Trek" convention dipped in peppermint and hot cocoa. These folks must surely send out Christmas cards "wishing you the spirit of the season all year long."

The Amalgamated is an organization — a brotherhood, if you will — of independent Clauses. There is not an organization that hires and pimps Santas to malls and such. They are the freelancers, the entrepreneurs, the mom and pop of the Mother and Father Christmas trade.

Other than the commonality of genuine facial hair, the 132 Santas at the Long Beach luncheon cover a wide range of styles

See **SANTAS**, Page A8



Santa Barry of Clovis shares a tender moment with Mrs. Claus during the Santa convention luncheon aboard the Queen Mary.



This Santa's T-shirt bears a message that made him a real standout.



PHOTOS BY TOMAS DVALLE/THE FRESNO BEE

Clad in his Superman costume, 3-year-old Matthew Lerner of London is astounded at the sight of something he rarely sees back home in in England: Santa after Santa walking the deck of the Queen Mary.

Santas: Being a jolly icon is a full-year responsibility

Continued from Page A1

— just like the Elvis impersonators who represent young Elvis and old Elvis and Elvis if he were Japanese. There are rock 'n' roll Santas, workshop Santas, fur-trimmed-coat Santas, a bevy of Hawaiian-shirt Santas, and even a Santa wearing World War I Snoopy Flying Ace goggles.

They have come together in a network and share insider tips on their calling — such as how Paul Mitchell Freese and Shine hair spray can make a beard sparkle.

Barry Walzberg sports a low-key, natural Santa look, dependent mostly upon his blue eyes, beard (real, of course) and role-appropriate pomace.

At only 48, he has to work at keeping his hair white, and it's taken on a Billy Idol punk-yellow cast at the bleached roots.

"The hat covers that part up," says Walzberg, who works for the Clovis Parks and Recreation department and was Santa last month at Clovis' Christmas parade.

Walzberg says that for him, being Santa is a full-year responsibility.

For instance, when someone cuts him off in traffic and he wants to swear, he doesn't, because what if a child is watching and notices he looks like Santa?

Wife Lessa Walzberg helps keep him mindful of his position as an icon.

"Sometimes in traffic, I'll just touch him on the elbow and say, 'Now, Santa doesn't act like that.'"

Fred Selinsky, 57, of Sun City tells Walzberg he feels the same year-round standard. The former Navy man doesn't drink or smoke or curse since taking on the Santa persona.

"You can be wearing a black shirt, black pants and black cowboy hat, and some child will still spot you as Santa. You're a symbol. If someone sees Santa drunk and smoking, their whole perception of Christmas could be changed and I don't want to be responsible for that," he says.

"You know those bumper stickers that say, 'What Would Jesus Do?' I've thought of getting one that says, 'What Would Santa Do?'"

The luncheon is held in January to help brighten post-Santa-season slumps — and because hotel rooms are cheaper off-season.

Santas Lowell Hendrickson, 66, of the San Fernando Valley and Joe McKiernan, 58, of Phoenix sit on a ship's bench in the sunshine, ommiserating about their Christmas-is-over blues.

"I hate to see it go. It's a let-down," says Hendrickson. "My family's all gone. My sister died five months ago. I do believe in the spirit of Santa, and I enjoy sharing that with people."

McKiernan, a former school bus driver and truck driver, nods in



Most of the 132 Santas who came together at the Long Beach luncheon to network and share insider tips on their calling had business cards.

Visit fresnobee.com for a gallery of more Santas and audio of their greetings.

agreement that being Santa can help ward off loneliness.

"In July, I was in a Hooters watching the young ladies, and someone recognized me as Santa," he says. "Everyone was, 'Hi, Santa!'"

Roy Sarge, the "captain" of the Queen Mary — a ship that doesn't sail and is used as a hotel — comes down from the bridge to take a look at the Santa luncheon.

"This is a little unusual," he says. "Just the word 'amalgamated' is enough to intrigue a person, but then you add the real beards."

Sarge greets the Santas straggling out the door to get their group photo taken.

"Look at you, the real McCoy!" says the man in a gold-eroped captain's uniform to the man in Santa suits.

Matthew Lerner, 3, wearing a Superman costume, walks past. He's not part of my convention. He just likes his Superman suit. He looks wide-eyed at the plethora of Santas, but he won't know any of their jolly hellos.

Reactions to mass Santas vary. A group of tourists from Costa Rica grin and snap pictures.

But when Matthew Powell, 37, of Columbus, Ohio, sticks his head into the ballroom for a peek, his eyes widen in horror and his jaw drops lower than an overloaded Christmas stocking. Some people have clown phobias, some people get unnerved by too many Santas.

Powell shudders at the myth-debasing potential of such a multiplicity of Santas. How would a child know which lap to sit on? "That's a kid's worst nightmare!" he says.

The Santas and Mrs. Clauses have come from all over the West for this get-together.

Santa Benny Prestun of Brista, wearing red shorts, jokes that his legs are white because he lives at the North Pole. Connie Wingren — Mother Christmas, draped in velvet and brocade — says, "Oh, but have you been to the North Pole? It's nice there in the summer." Wingren is from Kotchikan, Alaska.

The largest Santa contingent is from Phoenix.

This "Santa Crew" includes 17 real-bearded Santas, eight dwarfs and two Mrs. Clauses. The founder, Paul Raines, 58, and beard dwarf Gary Hicks, 57, have been friends for 25 years. But most of the time, they call each other "Santa" and "Snappy."

Last year when Hicks was undergoing hip replacement surgery, Raines was by his side as he was about to be rolled into the

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— Fred Selinsky,
a Santa from Sun City

operating room.

"I looked at those nurses and said, 'Ladies, you better treat my elf right, because Santa knows.' And I told my friend here, 'Snappy, I'll be waiting for you. When you look up, who are you going to see? Santa,'" Raines says.

Onstage, a bearded Santa is announcing the Pledge of Allegiance. Santas get to their feet, placing red berets, and red fodoras, and red fur-trimmed Santa hats over their hearts.

The Amalgamated Real Bearded Santas, as a group, are a patriotic bunch.

"Most of us are retired military. Did you notice Santa Gansmy over there?" Raines asks.

The Santas who do not hail from a military background are probably counter-culture Clauses, says "Santa Crew" member Igor Glenn, a one-time member of the '60s folk group The New Christy Minstrels.

"It's an upbeat message of peace and love. I suspect a lot of Santas are ex-hippies. We're all that age. The Vietnam era," he says.

"Instead of the Summer of Love, it's the Winter of Love."

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Santa Dave of La Habra leaves the Queen Mary after the Amalgamated Order of Real Bearded Santas Convention luncheon. Santa Dave was one of more than 130 Santas who came from across the United States for the convention. The largest Santa contingent attending the convention came from Phoenix. This "Santa Crew" included 17 real-bearded Santas, eight dwarfs and two Mrs. Clauses.