



NORTH POLE OR BUST — Santa Claus (who mysteriously looks like a Gazette reporter in Santa skins) hitchhikes along Garrison

Boulevard seeking a ride and a reaction from surprised Gastonians. (Gazette photo by Larry Grayam)

When Santa Claus thumbs, the rides are easy to get

By GARY GREEN
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It's a long walk from Gastonia to the North Pole. But thanks to 11 carloads of Gaston County people, Santa didn't have to walk all the way.

He hitchhiked. Santa (who underneath his rented suit and beard looked a lot like a Gazette reporter) claimed he had been camping at his winter home near Miami and was on his way back to the pole for the big Wednesday night run.

Donder, Blitzen and the rest of the gang would have flown Santa back to his headquarters but Mrs. Claus wouldn't let them out because she was afraid they would catch cold before Wednesday.

So the jolly old bearded elf came ho-hoing through Gaston County with his thumb asking for a northbound ride.

While in town he checked his list twice to find out who had been naughty and nice. To do this he thumbed east, west, north and south through Gastonia.

Starting toward town in front of Dixie Village on West Franklin Boulevard, the red-clad saint put his thumb to the road.

FIRST PICK-UP

In less than a minute, Cindy Carpenter and Jean Carole Falls, both 17 years old, stopped to give the old man a ride.

Both girls promised that they had been good all during the year. Both told Santa that they wanted a new car for Christmas.

"We usually follow boys and police cars, but we decided to follow Santa. We're crazy," one of the girls said.

"Can I pull your beard and hug you?" the other asked.

So quick as the flash of Rudolph's bright nose, the world's best known Volkswagen sprang from the girls' orange Volkswagen on Garrison Boulevard, headed south.

Santa walked less than two blocks before Ila Roberts and her two children, Bobby, 7, and Dana, 5, gave him a ride.

"I never pick up hitchhikers, but I had to give Santa a ride," Mrs. Roberts explained.

"Do you know who that is?" the mother asked the children.

Bobby and Dana in wonderment, just stared.

Near Ashley Junior High School, Santa put his finger beside his nose, exclaimed, "Merry Christmas to all," and slipped from the Roberts car.

Steve and Terri Melton gave him his next ride. They said they did it just because he was Santa Claus.

Santa said it is nice to have a well-known face.

He left the Meltons near Lineberger Park and walked two blocks before Steve Taylor picked him up.

Steve said that he often picks up hitchhikers, but it depends on what they look like to him.

"I'VE SEEN YOU BEFORE"

"I thought I recognized you. I'd seen the face, anyway," he told the laughing old man.

Taylor gave the happy elf a ride to Laurel Lane, where Joe DiBruno of Belmont stopped for him.

"Anybody with Christmas spirit in them would pick you up or pick up anybody that had anything to do with Christmas," he told Santa.

"I don't know what you are doing out hitchhiking but I know that since it is you it must be for a good cause," he said.

Santa ended this ride at Grier Junior High School.

Gary and Shelly Steel picked him up and drove him to New Hope Road.

"I bet it is a long walk back to the north pole, but you're headed south," Steel told Santa.

The elf just smiled.

Not every passer-by stopped to pick up Santa. Many blew their horns and called to him. All smiled.

This time he walked almost five blocks before getting a ride.

Several cars full of laughing people slowed and waved.

One of the passing, but not stopping,

people was Gazette Reporter Carolyn Hull-Kyde.

Another non-stopper was Mrs. J. E. Green, this Santa's mother.

Near the cemetery on South New Hope Road, traffic stopped for a passing funeral.

Santa stopped, too.

Even some of the members of the funeral motorcade slowed down to tap their horns and wave at Santa.

In front of the Orthopedic hospital, Cindy Stowe, driving a car with Lisa Painter, 6, Alice Painter, 17, and Anna Painter, 16, as passengers, stopped alongside.

All four girls were laughing, almost to tears.

"How 'bout a ride for a tired old Santa?" he called to the girls through their open window.

"You're really hitchhiking? Where do you want to go?" answered one.

"Near the high school," Santa replied.

Back at The Gazette office, the old man started walking west on Franklin Boulevard.

As he passed Gaston Mall, a horde of children pulled away from their parents and rushed toward the modern piper.

SANTA IS SAVED

Santa was saved from the children by Mr. and Mrs. Keith Spencer and their 10-month-old son, Michael. The Spencers gave Santa a triumphal ride to the City Hall.



"This is great. That's all right," said Spencer, poking his fist into Saint Nick's pillow-stuffed belly.

Spencer began pulling his car alongside other cars on the highway and sharply tooting his horn to see the surprise on drivers' faces at finding Santa sitting in the car beside them.

One man dropped his pipe from his mouth into his lap.

Another almost lost control of his car as he waved with both hands.

Several carloads of children called out the brand names of toys they wanted for Christmas.

"That's really all right. Merry Christmas to you," Spencer said, still laughing as Santa stepped out.

At City Hall, just as Santa turned to put his thumb to the air, a hot rodding car full of naughties blew the horn,

called something unkind to the old man, and attempted to run him over.

Without a harsh word or even a harsh thought, the scrambling Santa pulled his big book from his hip pocket and put black x's beside the names of the four boys in the car.

After that a couple of good boys, Phillip McDonald and Keith Grayson, stopped for the old man.

"I thought I was going crazy when I saw you standing there in the road. I had to give you a ride," McDonald said.

"How about a couple of new cars?" the two asked Santa.

"Full of new girls?" Santa asked.

Santa stepped from their car in front of Akers Center where he was picked up by Buddy Stiles.

"I saw you up the road before you got into that car, and I circled the blocks a couple of times to wait until you got out and started again. I just had to see what you were up to," he told Santa.

Near East Club Drive, Santa was picked up by Charles, Rusty, and Sheila Padget.

"We figured it out just as soon as we saw you. What a gimmick! This time of year anybody will pick up and you can probably thumb anywhere in the country that you want to go. It's a great idea to travel around. No kidding, just as soon as we saw you we said, 'This guy has a great idea,'" said Rusty.

"You're right, it is great for travel. And it's not a bad pick-up line either," said Santa.