



Dear Santa,

My name is Gary Hodgson. I live in Brush, Colorado, which of course, you already know. I've been aware of that whole "He knows if you've been bad or good" thing since I was about 2 years old. I guess you probably know just about everything there is to know about me. In fact, before I get to the real reason for this letter I feel I should clear the air of a few things you know about me.

Regarding events that took place October 14, 1960, January 3, 1961, and February 24 that same year, it wasn't my fault! My little sister and the neighbor kid teamed up to pin those things on me. In reference to everything that I did from August 1971 through March of 1976, I sincerely apologize. It should be noted here, however, that you got even with me with those dorky presents you put under my tree during that same period. Come on now, Santa, who really needs five polyester leisure suits? They didn't even make good grease rags.

I hope this clears the air between us, because I have something extremely important to talk to you about today. What I have to tell you probably will come as a great shock. I'm really sorry I have to be the one to break this news to you. Writing you may not be the fastest way to get this information to you, but I couldn't find your cell phone number. Anyway, here goes. I hope you're sitting down.

Skeptics have always questioned how you get around to doing everything you do around Christmas. Sure, everyone knows it's your elves who actually make the presents, but you and only you can deliver them. Those of us who believe in you know it's really no big deal. You simply hook up Rudolph and his buddies and do it easily. Somehow you also manage to attend a parade or two, and I've personally seen you in several malls before Christmas.

Of course, I've also seen impostors from time to time. They are usually at stores where the people don't seem to believe in you. They just hired some old, fat guy off the street to sit around and do the "Ho Ho Ho" thing.

But that's not what I'm worried about. What I've come across are not bad impostors. These guys are good. That's why I believe someone has cloned you. Some sneaky soul

must have secretly gotten a sample of your DNA. By any chance did you drink from a glass while visiting my little sister's house? You can't trust her, believe me!

I stumbled across this revelation quite by accident the other day. A friend called and asked if I had seen a website called www.naturallysantainc.com. "Well no," I told her. "I'm usually looking for cattle price information or chatting with other old has-been, self-proclaimed rodeo stars." In truth, I was a little worried about her, but she did make me curious.

I decided to log on. Instantly I was greeted by a picture of not just one, two or three pretty good imitations of you, but about 30 cheery, rosy-cheeked, twinkly eyed Santa Clauses. I'm telling you, Santa, I about fell out of my chair. There you stood in full glory next to ... well, you and surrounded by ... you. It was creepy.

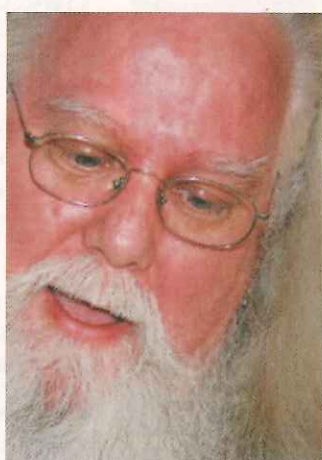
The printed material on the site described ... you! There's no other way to describe it and no other possible explanation. Someone has to have cloned Saint Nicholas. Even more revealing is the fact that these Santas, er, you, I guess, are available for hire with no mention of how many of them there are. The supply of ... you, seems to be endless.

I've contacted my lawyer on your behalf, but he never seems to be in when I call. Likewise the Colorado Bureau of Investigation won't return my calls. Now that I think about it, my friends have been a little distant lately, too. I guess they are all in shock, also. The only other thing I could do was to contact you directly. Maybe you can look into this and apply your special powers somehow.

It's www.naturallysantainc.com. Look at it and let me know what you think. I'm totally confused by it all.

Oh, one more thing. Would you not bring me any more neckties? I don't wear them anymore and you've brought me 43 over the years. Also, you might want to consider a lump of coal for my sister this year.

Thanks,
Gary



PHOTOS BY NATURALLY SANTA, INC.

Fifty of Naturally Santa, Inc.'s 79 Santas met in August to get ready for this year's holiday season.

Sharing the Magic of Santa

Listen closely and you just might believe **BY GARY HODGSON**

We have always known Santa Claus needs helpers to assist in spreading his magic during the holiday season. None do it better than the jolly folks at Naturally Santa, Inc.

Combing out their long, white beards and donning their Christmas shirts and red Santa trousers, 80 white-haired, twinkly eyed men span the country in the weeks before Christmas. These Naturally Santa helpers will visit with children, listen to wish lists and hear stories of dreams and desires.

They have all been recruited by Naturally Santa, Inc., which was established in 1992 in Colorado Springs by Billy Gooch and his wife, known by all who know and love her simply as "Mama Gooch."

My wife, Sue, and I were given an early Christmas present when Santa Billy Gooch, president of Naturally Santa, Inc., and a longtime Santa himself, invited us to the group's annual pre-Christmas preparation and coordination get-together near Colorado Springs in late August.

The group's motto, "Always Believe the Magic," was the theme for the day. And, within moments of arriving, we were totally swept away by the magic and charm of the 50 Old Saint Nicks who were waiting for us.

We met Santa Jeff. He's the group's events director who seemed endowed with magical powers as he coordinated the three days of events. Activities included training new Santa's helpers and meetings to deal with the business of getting just the right Santa to each location. Naturally Santa, Inc., specializes in magical visits to malls and shopping centers, where the Santas will encounter thousands of children of all ages.

A tremendous amount of planning goes into the six or seven weeks when each Santa is on duty. The goal is for each encounter with believers and the not-so-sure to become a memorable event.

Part of the magic of being Santa includes having all Naturally Santa, Inc., Santas appear in workshop attire, red overalls and a colorful Christmas shirt. Experience has proven children are



PHOTO BY NATURALLY SANTA, INC.

Santa Billy listens closely to everyone who visits him.

more comfortable with this relaxed Santa. The intimidating big red coat and hat hang nearby for those who want to see the Jolly Fellow in full attire.

Naturally Santa, Inc., takes great pride in every one of its Santas sporting a large natural beard and long hair. This means all of these Santas are easily recognizable year around. All seem to relish the constant identity.

To a man, they are ready to drop completely into character at the slightest urging. In fact, it was more than a little difficult to conduct interviews with 50 big bearded guys, all of whom claim to live at the North Pole, be 1,768 years old (the age of the original Saint Nicholas) and be on a first-name basis with Rudolph and a few hundred elves. Only at lunch and during the horseshoe pitching tournament that followed did the men leave their roles long enough so that I could learn a little about them personally.

Santa Jeff, at 43, is the youngest. He still has to chase a little color from his beard before appearances. At 82 years young, Santa Ed is the oldest and needs no artificial [continued on page 18]

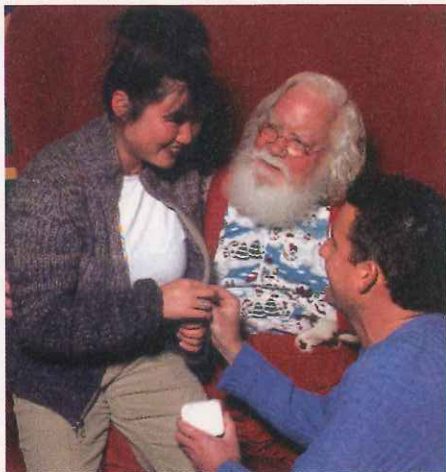


PHOTO BY NATURALLY SANTA, INC.

Santa seems to be right in the middle of things, as this man proposes to this young woman.

[continued from page 17]

help for his long white locks. Santa Ken is an extremely talented guitarist. When joined by the impressive singing voice of Santa Bob, a whole new world of magic opens.

Santa Ben, featured on this month's cover, spent years as a high school teacher and guidance counselor.

Santa Larry lives in Reno, Nevada, and rides an adopted mustang. Santa Dale was unable to travel from his South Dakota ranch for the get-together. He was too busy running his combine, cutting wheat.

Every single Santa was as delightful out of character as when he was "on." More accurately, these gentlemen never totally leave their roles as ambassadors of Christmas cheer. (Sue and her camera accompanied a group of Santas on a visit to a near-



PHOTO BY NATURALLY SANTA, INC.

Not all babies are excited to see Santa.



"Each Santa creates special memories every day. They give us hope, joy and love while touching our lives forever."

**BECKY RINGENBERG
"BETWEEN SANTA & ME"**

by nursing home. She was near tears when describing the compassion and caring each casually attired Santa had for the appreciative residents.)

The Santas do get some behind-the-scenes


help through the year. There is Mama Gooch and her constant support. And, many of the Santas are accompanied by their wives, who take on the role of Mrs. Santa with their own delightful charm.

Among the other supporters is Dorothy Moorefien, the official photographer for Naturally Santa, Inc. Her labors of love include the wonderful photos of each Santa found on the website. She can be reached by email at moorefien@msn.com.

Also lending support is Becky Ringenberg, who has compiled a collection of experiences and stories as told to her by numerous Naturally Santa, Inc., Santas. She has captured sometimes hilarious, other times heartfelt encounters between Santa Claus and others in her book *Between Santa & Me*. The 72-page hardcover edition may be ordered at betweensantaandme@comcast.net. The profits are donated to The Children's Hospital in Denver.

But this is a story about Santa and how these men, his helpers, bring us the magic of Christmas. In their familiar white beards, broad smiles and understanding faces, we can find the magic and wonder of the season. Merry Christmas.

Gary Hodgson and his wife, Sue, live in Brush. Gary writes humor and columns and presents a radio program. There are great hopes that Santa will drop in on the Hodgsons this year.

 **For more Santas' stories, visit our website at www.coloradocountrylife.coop**

TIPS FOR SANTA PHOTOS

You have an image in your mind of that perfect Santa photo, the one you can use on your Christmas cards, the one that makes all the recipients say, "Awww." So what do you do to get that perfect photograph of your child with Santa? One of Santa's helpers shared some tips with us:

- * First, get rid of that image in your mind. Your idea of the perfect picture isn't necessarily going to be the best picture.
- * Don't dress your children in red. Santa wears red, and in photographs, all that red has a tendency to run together. Surprisingly, orange is a good color with lots of contrast.
- * Don't say to your child "Tell Santa what you want." As Santa says, "I might want to talk to your child more. We're having a great conversation. I'll ask the child when I'm ready." Photographers know that Santa might need a little more time to make a fearful child ready for the photo.
- * Don't tell photographers what to do. They have been doing this a long time, and while they might not know your little elf, they know a thousand tricks of the trade that you haven't even thought of. Let them do the work. Trust the photographer.
- * Screaming children will not smile. No matter how much you say, "Smile for the picture," they're simply not going to do it. Take the picture. Years from now, you'll be glad you did. Trust the photographer.
- * Capture the awe. Most photographers get a great shot on the first try. It's when the child looks up and sees Santa for the first time. It's magic. And it's most often what parents complain about. Their little elf isn't looking at the camera, and so the parents demand another picture, which usually looks too posed and not as good as the natural wonder of a child. Again, trust the photographer.

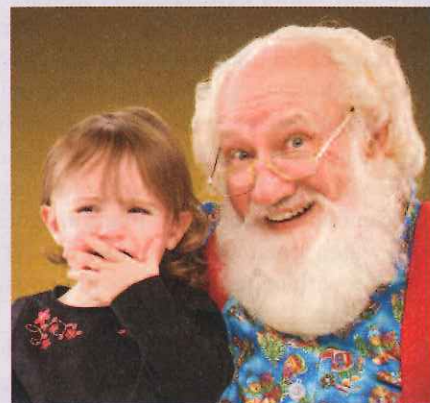


PHOTO BY BRENT WARD