

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

Local filmmaker looks at history of former Santa Claus Lane icon



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Jody Nelson spends every day thinking about Santa Claus.

It's not just because it's December and the jolly bearded fellow is due to make an appearance in a few days.

Santa Claus is a year-round obsession for her — she's spent every day for the past five years or so thinking about Santa Claus, talking to people about Santa Claus and delving into the long life and journeys of Santa.

But it's not the personification of Old St. Nick at the North Pole that fascinates her. Instead, it's much more localized — her focus is on the well-known five-ton, 22-foot-tall torso and head of Santa who graced a rooftop on Santa Claus Lane near Carpinteria from 1947 to 2003.

Ms. Nelson, a documentary filmmaker who was reared in Santa Barbara, became fascinated with the history of the plaster-and-chicken wire Santa who for a half-century saluted motorists on Highway 101 with a smile and twinkle in his eye.

She has tracked down everyone from Jeri Mckee Spencer and JeanL Rollins — the two remaining children of the founders of Santa Claus Lane — to the waitresses who worked at its restaurants, the men who drove its kiddie train to people who routinely drove by it every day — all of whom have nostalgic memories of the mammoth St. Nick.

Depending on her ability to secure more funding, she hopes to premier her documentary film called "Roadside Santa" at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival in 2012.

The documentary is more than just people's memories of the iconic structure. Ms. Nelson plans to begin and end the story on the lane, weaving a tale of the history of the storied stopping point and its birth as a commercial roadside attraction in a post-World War II era. For decades, the Santa statue stood as an icon to American entrepreneurialism, until the new owners of the property opted to have it removed, she explained.

But luckily for the hard work and determination of a group of people in an area called Nyeland Acres in Oxnard, Santa's removal from his longtime home did not mean his demise.

What Ms. Nelson discovered in the course of her work was that Santa not only got a new life a little further south, he also has reinvigorated and united an economically impoverished, largely Oaxacan/Mexican neighborhood, whose residents have come to believe in the spirit of Santa.

It is that story that she intends to tell in her film.

"Now Santa is rejuvenating and regenerating a new community and generation," she said.

On Saturday, Ms. Nelson arranged to have Mrs. Spencer and Mrs. Rollins filmed as they drove to Oxnard to see the new life given to Santa Claus — the key fixture in the dream their parents created and eventually lost to financial ruin and fraud.

It is an amazing transformation, said Ms. Nelson, who speaks passionately about the structure.

Six years ago, Mike Barber, of the Garden Acres Mutual Water Co., took in Santa when it was evicted. Since then, he's created the "Santa to the Sea" half-marathon, to raise money to buy toys for more than 1,500 needy children in the area. Those toys were distributed amid downpours on Saturday.

And not only are toys given away annually, Ms. Nelson said the community has taken Santa in as its own, sponsoring other events that provide food and clothing for the people who live nearby.

"You can save a building, but if you save something that takes on a new purpose, to rejuvenate a community, that takes preservation to the next level," said Ms. Nelson, who in recent years has worked as a camera operator for the Travel Channel and was director of photography for the Santa Barbara Triathlon in 2005.

She said she became fascinated by the way Santa's allure now attracts an entirely different community than the one that existed at Santa Claus Lane for so long.

"Both stories are about people creating community," Ms. Nelson said. "You think about this Santa who was once so commercial. Now he's a hero."

Ms. Nelson's film will showcase the heyday of Santa Claus Lane, a two-lane road parallel to the southside of Highway 101, which was a collection of stores, restaurants, motels, a post office that stamped letters "Santa Claus, CA" and numerous attractions that included a ride-atop train and a zoo.

More than two dozen people lived there and more worked in its stores, which started as the idea of Pat and June Mckeen.

"It was such a strange novelty that there was this Santa by the beach," explained Ms.

Nelson.

The documentary emerged from an idea Ms. Nelson had while taking a documentary film

class taught by Candace Schermerhorn at Santa Barbara City College.

"I thought, there's going to be no story here," she recalled. "But there was."

As she began delving into resources, including the Carpinteria Valley Historical Museum and architectural historians at Post Hazeltine Associates, she was given names and contacts of people with some connection to the area.

With a small grant from the Pearl Chase Society, she began collecting "Santa Stories" on film, aided by Rincon Productions camerawoman Celinda Valeur and sound/lighting technician J.P. Montalvo.

Eventually, the film "Roadside Santa" emerged from her idea of making a historical linear preservation film into something much grander, she said.

"It's been an eye-opening experience as a filmmaker, to meet all these people and hear their stories," explained Ms. Nelson, who has several other finished short films and documentaries. "It's a piece of history."

Through an odd turn of events, she was put in touch with the Mckeen sisters.

"When I got the two daughters, that's when I got the emotional punch," she noted. "This was their parent's dream."

Sitting in Ms. Spencer's Orcutt home last week, the sisters spoke about how their parents attended what was then called Santa Barbara State College, and married at 19. Mrs. Mckeen was a waitress at the Harbor restaurant at the time, and her husband parked cars. They saved their tip money to start a juice stand at Santa Claus Lane, buying culled oranges from orchards in Southern California. Eventually, they expanded to offer date shakes, and branched out to peanut brittle and eventually a small shopping mecca. The figurehead Santa came from the offer of an itinerant artist looking to make a little money.

"It was a little oasis," Mrs. Rollins says of her childhood home. "It was beautiful. You were totally in another world. You'd go out into this summer day with all the tourists," and there was Santa.

Both girls, as well as their now deceased brother, Daniel all worked on the lane as young children. Mrs. Rollins, a Paso Robles resident, remembers being able to stamp "Santa Claus Lane" on envelopes that came into the post office, while Mrs. Spencer recalls a job in the toy store, as soon as she could see over the counter.

The Mckeons were married 25 years, but the marriage ended in divorce in 1966, just around the time they lost ownership of Santa Claus Lane to what the daughters recall as dealings with a con artist.

"What makes them so relevant today is that even though they started as a waitress and valet car parker, they made something out of nothing," said Mrs. Spencer, who as the older daughter has the most vivid memories. "They were entrepreneurs. He knew how to swing a hammer and she was the creative one. Their shortcoming was they couldn't manage money."

Mrs. Mckeon remarried and went on to open the Big Yellow House restaurant in Summerland, and Mr. Mckeon had a number of business ventures before becoming the founder of Topa Construction in Santa Barbara.

The nuggets from the sisters' past are the gold Ms. Nelson sought for her film.

"Some of it is hard," Mrs. Spencer said, of recalling old times for filming. "It didn't have a typical happy ending. So it is kind of emotional. As it worked out, Santa is the center of this little community now and has given so much joy to this poor neighborhood. My parents would have loved this. They're up there looking down, going 'Right on.' "

Their parents were, she continued, "possibility thinkers," having turned a vacant lot into something historic and well-loved.

"It's all happening again," Mrs. Spencer said. "They're making something out of nothing (in Nyeland Acres). That's the thread that's going on. It's the spirit of Santa — give, give, give. They would have loved it."

Though the Mckeon sisters have proven a treasure trove of insight, what Ms. Nelson still needs to complete her film is a bit of help from the community. She's hopeful people will look into attics and photo albums for items she still seeks to record, including old photographs or film or video footage of the lane and surrounding area and memorabilia including post cards, mugs, hats, stickers from the lane.

She's also hoping to attract funding, and if she does, will complete the documentary portion of the film as well as continue filming people's "Santa Stories" to include in the documentary.

On Saturday, Ms. Nelson wanted to allow the daughters of Santa Claus Lane to have a sense of closure about how the main fixture from their childhood home had evolved. It is a key element of her film — to show how a community, and its people — have come full circle.

"We get to experience Santa in a whole new way," Mrs. Spencer said. "It's a wonderful, wonderful experience of Santa's spirit continuing to give joy to little kids and grown-ups. And that is a wonderful ending."

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