There Really Is A Mrs. Santa Claus

By ELEANOR YOUNT
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Oui, Jeanne Marie, there really is a Mme. Santa Claus.

But she doesn’t live in the North Pole. She lives in Scott and her name is Mrs. Emerite Hebert. And for the past 26 years she has brightened the lives of thousands throughout Acadiana.

A vivacious little lady who speaks French and English with a distinct Cajun accent, Mrs. Hebert delights in bringing joy and happiness to the less fortunate, young and old.

“I was never blessed with any children of my own,” she says, with an infectious smile. “Now, I have a big family.”

The idea of Mrs. Santa Claus began back in 1953 following a Christmas party for the Busy Homemakers Home Demonstration Club. The members, who were all expert cooks, prepared too many refreshments for the party. At the suggestion of Mrs. Hebert, who was then married to the late Dennis Verot, they decided to give the cookies and other goodies to the residents of Norte Maison de Repos, a nursing home on East Vermilion Street. On a whim, Mrs. Verot dressed as Mrs. Santa Claus to deliver the refreshments. It was the beginning of a beautiful tradition.

She only visited the one nursing home that year, but since then her visits are looked forward to by all of the nursing homes, St. Mary’s Learning Center, Acadiana Mental Health Center and numerous civic and church organizations. Last year, alone, she visited with 7,000 people. Her ability to speak French is an invaluable asset.

“I just love them,” says the real-life Mrs. Santa Claus. “We dance, sing, play games and have a wonderful time. I have never left that they have not said ‘thank you.’”

The former Emerite LaVouvier, Mrs. Hebert was born at Grande Mare (Big Pond) near New Iberia and the family moved to New Iberia when she was seven months old. She dropped out of school early because of illness and went to work with the telephone company at the early age of 14. Her work with the telephone company spanned both world wars and she recalls with pride her handling of calls from Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Gen. George Patton and Gen. Omar Bradley while working in Leesville, the site of several large army camps.

She never really regretted having to leave school, because, as she explains, “I think I learned more from life than I could ever have learned at school.”

And perhaps she did, for at 83 she is still very active and her mind is quicker than those of many people many years her junior.

Mrs. Hebert is often joined by her husband, Claude, 84, a widower whom she married seven years ago, and who plays Santa Claus. During the parties, Mrs. Hebert plays the kazoo, a tube-like toy one hums or sings through, while Mr. Hebert plays the gourd.

“It’s more fun when you go together,” she explains.

In 1976, the year of the Centennial, they dressed as Uncle Sam and Betsy Ross for some of their visits. Sometimes Mr. and Mrs. Lucien Dominigue join them on the accordion and guitar. The foursome also visits the nursing homes and other groups at Easter and other special occasions.

The Hebert yard contains more than 200 fruit trees and one of the couple’s favorite Christmas treats is fresh-frozen figs from their own orchard. And anyone lucky enough to visit the Heberts at Christmas or anytime of the year will leave laden with fresh fruits and vegetables or some of Mrs. Hebert’s delicious baked goods and preserves.

Over the years, tributes have poured into Mrs. Hebert and her memoirs now fill four scrapbooks. There are also numerous plaques of appreciation. Her most treasured rewards are not the tangible ones, however, but the unforgettable smiles of happiness.

A KISS FOR SANTA — Mrs. Santa Claus, who is really Mrs. Emerite Hebert of Scott, has a kiss for Santa, her husband, Claude, under the mistletoe. Mrs. Santa Claus has entertained nursing home residents for 26 years, bringing joy and happiness to thousands. (Photo by P.C. Piazza)