

# THE WAY WE WERE

By John Sedgwick

## Some Enchanted Village



A portly fellow sprawls across a table, staring at the ceiling. A little girl with braids slouches, her back to him, and sticks out her tongue at a gray-striped cat. The cat cringes. A crowd of starchy elders stand around in their Sunday best, with plastic bags over their heads. In the middle of them is a blubbery old gent with a large stomach, rosy cheeks, and a bushy white beard. He is wearing nothing except a red flannel nightcap and a broad grin. But his hat gives him away.

It's merry old St. Nick, a.k.a. Santa Claus; his clothes are in the wash. Somewhere around here are a dozen of his elves. His reindeer are in a back room. Who are the civilians? They are residents of Santa's village, officially called the Enchanted Village of Saint Nicholas, whose population of several hundred practically life-size, practically lifelike, semi-automated figurines are resting up for the Christmas season in the basement of Peabody's North Shore Shopping Center.

True Bostonians may wonder what the Enchanted Village is doing in a North Shore basement. They know it belongs on the top floor of Boston's Jordan Marsh. Jordan's, after all, had the village built by expert craftsmen in Rodach, West Germany, around 1950. The elaborate constructions of plaster, plastic, cardboard,

and wood had cost the company somewhere in the neighborhood of \$50,000. For years, the department store gave over a 10,000-square-foot auditorium to display the old-time village scenes—thirty-four in all, from barber shop to barnyard—complete with all manner of men, women, children, dogs, cats, cows, horses, sheep, pigs, piglets, chickens, and mice (among other creatures), as well as Santa and his friends. Thanks to some 16,000 mechanical parts and 200 electric motors, all of the figures do something: bakers knead, cobblers pound, children play, cats scratch, piglets wiggle, and good St. Nick, for some reason, plays the piano.

Every Christmas, for more than two decades, all this activity captivated youngsters by the thousand. "The numbers were astronomical," recalls Jordan's promotion director Leon Slayton. After visiting the Enchanted Village, the tots would take the escalator to the toy department, where playthings were stacked from floor to ceiling, and get down to business. Profitable as it must have been, this Christmas tradition ended in 1974, when Jordan's began a renovation that would transform the Enchanted Village's auditorium into executive offices. The villagers took up year-round residence in Jordan's Harrison Avenue warehouse

until last year. That's when they relocated to the suburbs.

But why to quarters among the Holiday Lanes Snack Bars, Carmelite Chapels, and Earring Trees of a hangarlike shopping center off Route 128 in Peabody? The North Shore Shopping Center's promotion director, a spry, fiftyish woman named Vickey Gallant, had taken her children to the exhibit back in the fifties, and she knew that the Enchanted Village had more than mere nostalgic value. So when she heard it was for sale, she made Jordan's an offer. The bid was ridiculously low, she says now—so low that she won't even disclose what it was. But it was accepted, partly because Allied Stores, owner of Jordan Marsh, also owns the North Shore Shopping Center. They wanted to keep the old-world display in the family—and in one piece, more or less, instead of selling the scenes separately. So, in March, 1977, the Enchanted Village headed north in twelve truckloads. Easy.

After the village was unloaded in the basement under Thom McAn, Gloria Stevens, and their neighbors, problems arose. When Vickey Gallant finally unpacked her purchase that March, she was horrified to find thirty-four wooden platforms, each with a different pattern of

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little holes for securing the villagers, a large pile of siding, three hundred plastic figures packed cheek by jowl in nearly a hundred crates—and no instruction manual to show what and who went where.

She hired a young workman named Steve Nickerson to sort it out. All that spring and all that summer and all that fall, Nickerson tried the tall skinny guy here and the fat girl there, then the fat girl here and the skinny guy there. In the process, he became quite attached to the

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hollow plastic people and began to think of them, actually, as his children. "How are your children coming?" Gallant would ask whenever she saw Nickerson in the mall. "Oh, fine," he would reply. "I screwed in ten more today." Shoppers must have found that peculiar.

When Gallant started working on the villagers, she too started getting emotionally involved. She took it upon herself to wash all their clothes in her washing machine and then sew them back on. If she accidentally plunged her needle too deep, she'd blurt out, "Oooh, did that hurt?" But it never did.

A dozen carpenters and electricians joined in that August to assemble the villagers' houses for their mid-November debut. At Jordan's they had been arranged side by side around one large room. But since the mall didn't have that kind of wall space, the carpenters had to break up the long interlocking row and fit the houses back to back in little clusters that would be scattered around the mall.

Meanwhile, upstairs, the real world was vying with fantasy. A much larger team of workmen was finishing up a project to roof over most of the several-acre, ninety-two-store mall. Men were installing planters so that tropical trees and shrubs could grow along the corridors. While the outdoors was becoming indoors, the North Shore Shopping Center was becoming an Enchanted Village.

Finally, in November, all the village houses were erected and their occupants in place. The show was on. Shoppers had always flocked to the mall at Christmastime at about twice the rate of other times of year, but that Christmas the numbers were up in the millions—triple those of the year before. While the shopping center's new roof had something to do with it, most of the credit went to the

Enchanted Village. The children were slightly less enchanted by the village blacksmith shop, candy shop, and story teller's house, than by the barnyard. There they stood, ten toddlers deep, watching the piglets squirming for their mother's milk, the cow swishing its tail, the chickens laying their eggs, and the geese making quacking motions, although they emitted no sound. ("They don't make any noise," says Gallant, "because we don't want to frighten the children.")

The villagers themselves are wearing out, and Gallant has found replacements hard to come by. An arm that went up and out now just goes up. A head no longer moves.

Adults liked the village too. "It reminds them of the old-fashioned New England Christmas," Gallant says, "when the whole family—aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters, everyone—went to grandmother's house for Christmas dinner. They'd cut down the Christmas tree themselves and decorate it with ornaments they'd made instead of just buying them the way we do now."

As they approach their fourth decade, the Enchanted Villagers are beginning to show signs of age. The all-natural materials of the villagers' delightful old-fashioned costumes—the brocaded silk dresses, the 100 percent cotton pajamas—are wearing out. To her dismay, Gallant has found replacements mighty hard to come by. The villagers themselves are wearing out. When the electricians examined their motors, they found that the mechanical cams responsible for the figures' movements had been ground down so badly that the characters simply couldn't get around as well as they used to. An arm that once went up and out now can just go up: a head that nodded can't move at all. And the electricians don't know how to reconstruct them.

Yet, though the villagers are worn and crippled, Jordan's promotion director, Leon Slayton is sorry they couldn't stay in Boston, and not just because he misses the business they used to attract. As he says, "Edward Mitton, our late president, felt very strongly that the village was our gift to the children of Boston. That's why we never charged admission. Our biggest reward was to see the glee on those children's faces." Now the village has gone to light up the facades of Thom McAn, J. J. Newberry, and Gloria Stevens. Sadly, for all their adorable brushing and stitching, yawning and scratching, the three hundred little darlings are now lost among the pedestrians of New England's largest shopping center. □

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