

# WELL-SUITED FOR THE RED SUIT

*Playing Santa Claus comes naturally to this Trussville resident.*

By Nancy Dorman-Hickson  
Photos by Arthur Rutherford

The grandchildren of Alan Holmes can't help but dwell on the injustice of it all. Imagine. Their own personal grandfather serves as one of Santa Claus' special helpers, fully authorized to wear the red suit and stand in for the original, authentic St. Nick. Yet, despite their Grandpa Holmes' Christmas connections, not once has he scored them a ride on the Polar Express. Bah humbug!

Alan laughs as he recounts his grandkids' complaint. It's just one of the tricky situations that arise when one is both a granddad and Santa's Southern representative in Trussville.

Success as St. Nick often means letting the worlds of magic and reality gently overlap. Take, for instance, the reaction when Alan, a retired BellSouth claims investigator, goes for a walk, shops, or attends a football game. Children often peg the white-bearded Alan as their gift-giving hero even when he isn't wearing his Santa hat.

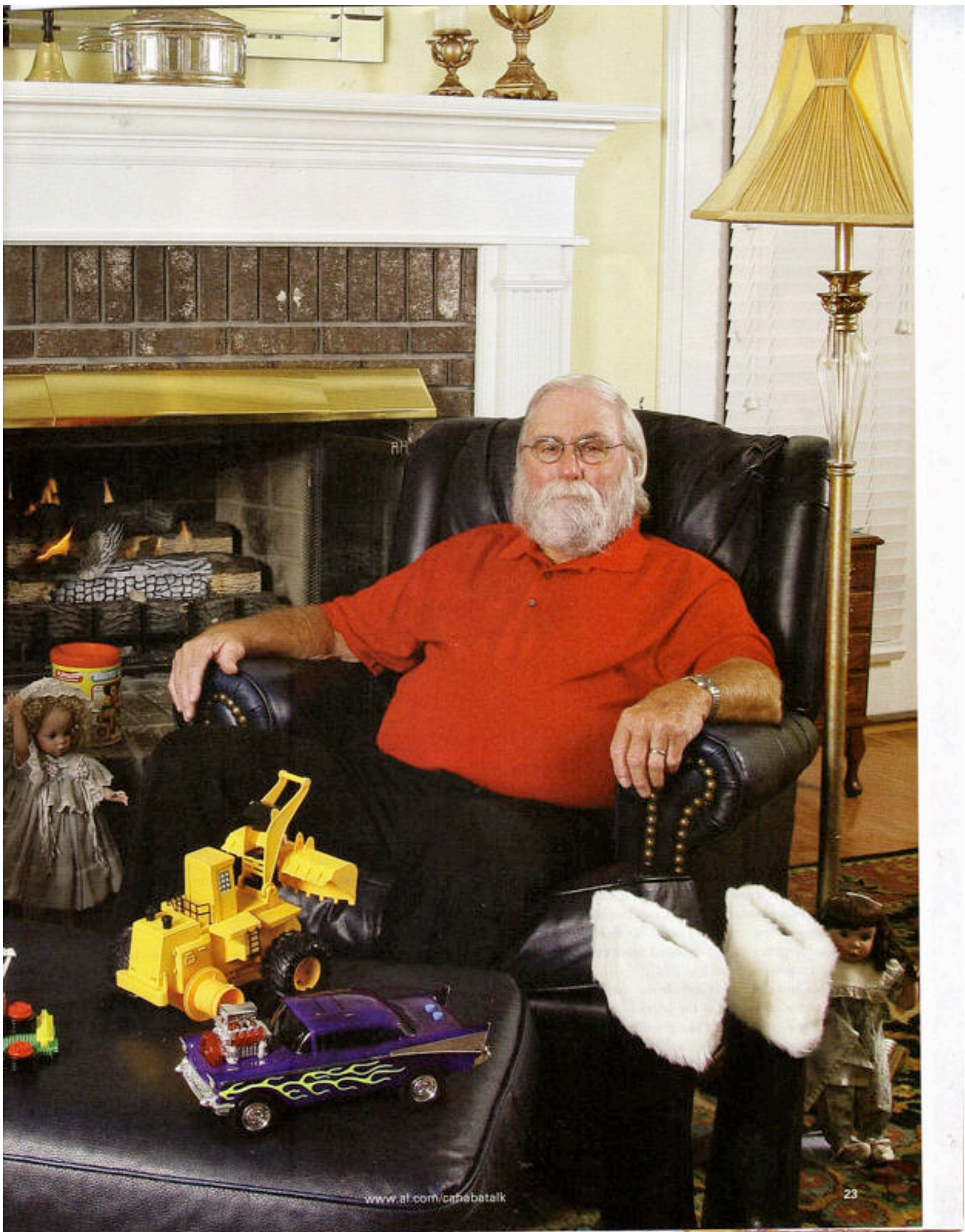
His wife Kathie recalls one such encounter at an area store that proved embarrassing for another erstwhile Kris Kringle. "I don't mean to be cruel, but he was pitiful looking," she says of the counterfeit Claus. "You know how some Santas are skinny? When we walked in the door—Alan wasn't even dressed up—the kids turned around and said, 'Look! There's Santa!'" Kind-hearted Alan was there only to shop, not deliver a coup de Claus on the bony St. Nick. But even the child already perched on the sad Santa's lap popped off and hurried over to greet the more convincing Claus.

Alan in full regalia impresses even more. His dark red suit includes white fur trim and the standard wide black belt. Tiny square-framed glasses that sit at the end of his nose add authenticity, although Alan admits he wears his regular reading glasses "when I want to see." Sometimes he omits the padding that gives his belly that bowl-full-of-jelly effect. "If I sit in the floor with the kids, the padding rides up to my chin," he explains. When he leaves off the extra girth, he says, "A lot of times people will say Santa must have been on a diet. I say, 'Yeah, me and Jeannie Craig, we're close.'"

Most of Alan's holiday work comes from word of mouth. "Mall jobs don't interest me because of the long hours," says the 71-year-



Arthur's Fine Photography





As his Santa demands have grown, so too did his commitment. Now he sports a beard "six months with and six months without.

old Santa. Instead, his clients include photography studios, hospitals, nursing homes, schools, and private parties. He also serves at the annual Christmas parade for the city of Clay.

For his Santa debut at his mother's nursing home back in 1990, he wore a fake beard. But as his Claus demands grew, so too did his commitment. Now he sports a beard "six months with and six months without. I keep my moustache but I shave the beard after Christmas. Then I start growing it back in July."

Alan's Claus credentials include the "business card" he always carries—a photo of himself as the jolly old elf. "I made a mistake one time," he says, showing an older version of the photo card with his phone number prominently displayed. "The kids began calling me," he says. "They would call me even in the summertime." He didn't mind so much chatting with his young admirers. "But then the teenagers would call me at 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning," he says. These older pranksters definitely ended up on his naughty list.

It's not all joy, this business of being Santa. Once, Alan agreed to pose for photos with pets at a veterinary clinic. "One lady brought her

dog," he recalls with a grimace, "and he wet all over me." That ended his desire to spread yuletide cheer to the animal kingdom.

He regularly contends with parents who force their terrified children to sit with the man in the red suit. "The kids will kick and claw and hit you," Alan says, shaking his head. "You're just making them afraid of Santa Claus."

Occasionally the candid little darlings feel compelled to tell Santa his breath stinks. To combat such honesty, Alan tucks breath mints into his fur-trimmed gloves.

Then there was the child who broke Santa's heart. The boy, about 10, said nothing when Alan asked him what he wanted for Christmas. "I know you want something," Santa insisted. Finally, the boy whispered his true heart's desire: "I want my mama and daddy to be back together." Alan quietly told the student's teacher, "This child needs somebody to talk to. He is suffering."

He still tears up at the recollection. "There's a lot of sadness out there," he says. "That's one reason I'm doing this—I can bring some gladness to kids." ❊