

BOULDER DAILY CAMERA: DEC 18, 2008

Pettem: Kate Alexander was Boulder's 'Miss Merry Christmas' 50 years ago

On the day after Thanksgiving in 1958, Boulder High School senior Kate Alexander rode from her home on University Hill to the Boulder County Courthouse -- crouched down in the back seat of her mother's Oldsmobile. Then she ran into the building with a coat over her head. A few minutes later, she walked out the front door with Santa Claus.

"My identity as Miss Merry Christmas had to be kept secret until the very last minute," said the Boulder resident, now Kate Crowder, in a recent interview, "but it was a dream I had for years."

From the late 1930s to the mid-1980s, the Boulder Chamber of Commerce sponsored the joint appearances of Santa Claus and his assistant in downtown Boulder. Santa and Miss Merry Christmas sat on a platform specially built for the occasion, set up on the sidewalk on Pearl Street directly in front of the courthouse.

A radio truck with a loudspeaker was parked on the street to broadcast Santa's and his assistant's conversations with each child as they received inexpensive gifts. Holiday shoppers also enjoyed Christmas music amplified from the building's fifth floor.

Kate knew what she was getting into. Her brother's wife, the former Nancy Rushing, had held the title in 1952. Kate also knew Santa, portrayed by the University of Colorado's assistant football coach, Marsh Wells, as he was a neighbor and family friend.

Several weeks before the event, high school girls were nominated and then voted on by their classmates. Only the school officials knew who Miss Merry Christmas would be, and they also knew that she needed time to figure out what to wear. The evening after the vote, Kate got a phone call saying that she had been chosen.

"The next day at school, all the nominated girls looked at each other very carefully," said Kate, "I walked around pretending to look dejected so that no one would suspect it was me."

Then she and a seamstress -- also sworn to secrecy -- hashed out the design of her custom-made outfit. They decided on a sleeveless red velvet dress, with a crinoline-lined full skirt and white rabbit fur trim along the hemline.

Over that was a lined jacket, with rabbit fur on the cuffs and velvet-covered buttons down the back. To top it off, Kate wore a rabbit-fur headband and muff.

Miss Merry Christmas' duties weren't over after the courthouse event. Kate got to wear her velvet-and-rabbit-fur outfit again when she and Santa rode a fire engine to the Boulder Day Nursery. Her final obligation came on Twelfth Night, when she thrust a burning broom into the branches of piled-up Christmas trees in the official city-sponsored bonfire, 12 days after Christmas.

Kate occasionally wore her Miss Merry Christmas clothing to holiday parties in the years to come, and the dress and jacket are still hanging in her closet. Soon, however, she will donate them to the Boulder History Museum so that the next generation will know a little more about its past.

E-mail Silvia Pettem at pettem@earthlink.net