

# 'Tis Always the Season

By Melissa Gaskill  
Santa Claus lives in Texas. Actually, hundreds of Santa Clauses do, and they spread cheer all year long through a group called Lone Star Santas.

"It's a calling," says Gene Goetz of San Antonio, a member of Pedernales Electric Cooperative. He got his first Santa gig in 1981 for a twins club where his boys participated. "I bought a suit and a fake beard, and it was a lot of fun," he says. "I did that for a few years and then started doing a lot of charity work." In 2014, Goetz took his first role as a professional Santa Claus at San Antonio's Ingram Park Mall. That's when he heard about Lone Star Santas.

One of the organization's co-founders, Jim Fletcher of Cypress - whose voicemail says, "Apparently, I'm off feeding the reindeer or packing toys or helping Mrs. Claus bake cookies" - became a Santa somewhat by accident. "My then-fiancée, Madge, invited me to a homeowners association meeting, where we learned that their usual Santa was ill," Fletcher says. "I didn't have a beard then, but I did have the girth. They asked me if I could be Santa, and I said sure, why not? I bought a suit and a book on how to be a Santa, dressed up, did the gig and fell in love with it."

When Fletcher and Madge married the following June, Madge walked down the aisle to the tune of Here Comes Santa Claus rather than the traditional Here Comes the Bride. In 2007 Fletcher and fellow Santa Gene Clayton decided to start Lone Star Santas. They welcome any Santa, Mrs. Claus, elf, reindeer herder or other Texan with the spirit - counting more than 400 members today.

After an EF5 tornado hit Joplin, Missouri, in 2011, Fletcher rounded up a bunch of members, collected toy donations and drove to Joplin to hand them out. The expedition inspired the group's ongoing mission, Convoy of Toys.

"When disaster strikes, we bring love, hope and joy, and a big Santa hug along with trailers full of toys," Goetz says. "We go wherever houses get destroyed and kids are displaced and lose their toys. After the [Hurricane] Harvey flood in Houston, we went into the shelters. Everyone is sad, then a few Santas walk in and the entire mood changes."

The group also participates in the Belton Fourth of July parade each year, with many Santas wearing country-western-style suits. They attend a dinner with the Temple Elks Lodge and visit the area children's hospital and veterans facility. "The vets love us," Fletcher says. "We give them a stuffed toy and an American flag, and it brightens their day.

And it brightens our day to see their reaction."

Karen Stagner, who works with the Elks Lodge to arrange the Fourth of July parade, says the Lone Star Santas are a hit wherever they go. "It's just a tremendous group," she says, "and some of the most caring people I've ever met."

Goetz says it takes a special heart to be a Santa. "You can go to all the classes and conventions you want, but if being a good Santa isn't in your heart, it isn't going to matter," he says. "People think it is easy, but you have to know how to talk to kids."

Even though 8 in 10 Santas bleach their hair white, Goetz's is naturally that way. His beard and belly are real, too. "The more you look real," he says, "the more you have kids saying they met the real Santa."

That reality is not an inexpensive proposition, says member Dennis Queen. "I have about \$4,000 in each suit and have three or four of them," he says. Queen and his wife, Jane, a Mrs. Claus, relocate from Kerrville to San Antonio in a motor home each Christmas season.

All Lone Star Santas are volunteers. They pay for their own gas, hotel stays and meals on convoys. "Every penny donated

to Lone Star Santas stays in it; none of it goes to our members," Goetz says.

Why go to all the trouble? "It's important for kids to believe in Santa, to have something to believe in," he says. "We try to make kids grow up too quick now. A lot of people say it is a calling, and I'm starting to believe it. I'll probably be buried in my Santa suit."

The organization sponsors at least one "Santa school" in Texas every year to help teach members the ropes.

Jane Queen says she and Dennis also learn a lot from other participants. "Santas are so smart and willing to share their craft," she says.

"This is who I've become, all year long," Dennis Queen says. "I think I've become a different person because of it. Our Christmas tree is up all year long."

Jane Queen says that when the couple goes out, people regularly call them Santa and Mrs. Claus. "We wouldn't trade it for anything - meeting the other Santas, the friendships we've developed," she says.

Fletcher agrees that being Santa is a calling. "Once I put on the red suit and walk into a store or restaurant, invariably someone stops me and wants to get a picture with Santa," he says. When a child says "Hi," Fletcher explains, all of the attention goes to that child. He

appreciates the smiles on every face when he leaves a restaurant because those smiles mean that the people forget about things that are going on and just enjoy a moment.

"I can't get over what we can do," he says, "Our brand is love, hope and joy. There's just a joy to being Santa."

[Editor's Note: This article was originally published in Texas Co-Op Power magazine and online at [www.texascooppower.com](http://www.texascooppower.com).]

## On This Day in Texas History

December 18

On this day in 1860, Texas Rangers under the command of Lawrence S. Ross attacked a Comanche hunting camp at Mule Creek. During this raid the rangers were surprised to find that one of their captives had blue eyes; it was a non-English-speaking white woman

with her infant daughter. She was Cynthia Ann Parker, captured by Comanche warriors on May 19, 1836, at Fort Parker in Limestone County. She was with the Indians for almost twenty-five years and had become thoroughly assimilated to Comanche life. After her "rescue" she was never reconciled to living in white society and made several unsuccessful attempts to flee to her Comanche family. After three months at Birdville, her brother Silas took her to his Van Zandt County home. She afterward moved to her sister's place near the boundary of Anderson and Henderson counties. She died there, probably after 1870. Her son Quanah, a noted Comanche chief, later moved her body to Post Oak Cemetery, near Cache, Oklahoma. After his death her body was again reinterred near him at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

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