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of The Sentinel Staff**

Santa Claus wasn't always a jolly old elf.

According to one of numerous legends, Santa Claus comes from a story about a Middle Ages gift-giver named Black Peter, who put fear into Dutch children's dreams about Christmas.

Black Peter was believed to be a devil who was controlled by St. Nicholas one day a year. On that night, called St. Nicholas Eve, Black Peter was forced to drop candy and gifts down chimneys and into shoes set in fireplaces by children.

Eventually, the legend evolved give Black Peter more say in the gift-giving. He was allowed to give coal and sticks to bad or lazy children, and he kidnapped some to be his slaves.

Black Peter's story was useful in getting Dutch children to behave. Now, that legend and dozens of other stories are the stuff of limited-edition collectors' sculptures.

Many Christmas-specialty stores specialize in collectibles, which can cost from \$50 to \$500 or more each because they generate customer loyalty as well as profits.

In addition to the numerous versions of Santa Claus, the stores carry Christmas village scenes, carolers, elves, wood gnomes, angels and angelic-looking children. The statues and figurines are made of ceramic, clay or pewter, hand-carved from resin, hand-sewn or delicately painted.

The collectibles business is unusual in that suppliers control the number of items available by producing specific editions in limited numbers, sometimes only a few hundred copies of each figure. After a year or two of production, each item is numbered, and the mold is broken.

Consequently, Christmas-specialty stores scramble each year to get an adequate supply. They are at the mercy of the artists, manufacturers and distributors who control who they sell to and how much they sell. "I have to beg for merchandise from these people," said Larry Lane, co-owner of Fibber Magee's Kountry Kottage, which operates a year-round Christmas store

in Orlando. "I'll place a \$5,000 or \$6,000 order and ask for it for tomorrow, and I'll be lucky if I get it four or five months down the road."

Limited production also means that retailers are reasonably sure of a 45 percent to 50 percent profit. Rarely do merchants have to discount or put a collectible on sale, Lane said.

"We're locked in to a price," he said. "You don't give it away when you know it will be hard to get back in stock."

The secondary market for collectibles also can translate into a big profit for customers, said Judy Lanphear, owner of The Christmas Collection in Altamonte Springs.

For example, a 2-foot-tall Annalee hand-sewn and hand-painted Santa Claus may retail for about \$75. Once discontinued, though, it could sell for \$300, she said. Annalee is the name of a member of the Thordike family in Meredith, N.H., which first designed the hand-sewn figures that feature gaily painted faces. Every year, Annalee discontinues some of its line, Lanphear said. "Some of the prices people get on these are unbelievable."

America's images of Santa have created masterpiece collectibles. One of them is the Nast Santa, the jolly old elf Thomas Nast drew in the early 19th century to illustrate the poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas," better known today as " 'Twas the Night before Christmas." A statue of that Santa sold for \$120 in recent years. But after production was halted last year, its value shot to \$3,500, Lanphear said.

The Soda Pop Santa, fashioned after the Santa in Prohibition-era Coca-Cola ads, also jumped in value after retirement -- from \$180 to \$500 to \$800, she said. Lane noted that not every Santa, caroler figurine or Christmas mouse can attain the value placed on true collectibles. The value is determined by the name of the artist, such as Annalee, Joyce Byers or Thomas Nast; the manufacturer, such as Duncan Royale or Goebel; and the rarity of the figure.

"But if you're a Santa Claus collector and, while you're in Orlando, you see one you haven't got yet, then the item becomes valuable to you," he said.