

## **Christmas Fairy Made Holidays Happy for Depression Children**

By Kathy Jordan

The headline read – “Sub for Santa – Adopt a Christmas Thrill” followed by a picture of a young girl about seven years old. She was wearing a ragged dress and scuffed shoes and was holding a squirring puppy.

The story made it clear she wasn't going to have Christmas. Her parents couldn't afford it.

This was 1938, when American was in a deep depression. Her family like many others in “shanty town” needed to be adopted through the Sub for Santa program. The mission of Sub for Santa was to provide as many needy families as possible with warm clothing, shoes, blankets, food, and other essentials.

In an oral history for the Museum of Western Colorado, Mildred Hart Shaw, a former Daily Sentinel reporter and editorial page editor, said the program had been her brain child. She said that she had gotten the idea in Seattle from a similar program with which she became familiar while attending the University of Washington.

Mildred said that she didn't have time or know her way around Mesa County well enough to pull this off, so she recruited Fairy Ryan who was the Mesa County nurse. Captain Carl of the Salvation Army joined Mildred and Fairy in this endeavor.

Mildred recalled that Fairy Ryan was a “fantastic person” who saw to it that all school children in Mesa County were immunized. Mesa County was the only county in the United State with complete immunity, thanks to Fairy. She could talk to parents who didn't want their children immunized and get them to agree to immunizations.

Mildred approached Walter Walker, publisher of The Daily Sentinel, and even though the Sentinel was sponsoring Al Look's Soupeaters Christmas program for the needy, he agreed to support the Sub for Santa program too.

Fairy had a great deal of contact with needy families because she visited all the schools in Mesa County. Once when she visited the school in Gateway she found a boy who had nothing to eat. She supplied the food, and the teacher cooked it for him. She then began a similar program at several other schools in Mesa County.

Cash was short, and people couldn't pay their property taxes or many other bills. So, instead of cash, they gave her eggs, fruit, vegetables, and other produce, which she then distributed to families without food.

She was soon supplying the names and descriptions of the families to the Sentinel, and once a week the paper would run a list of families for adoption. Once a family had been adopted the Sentinel would give the sponsoring family the names, ages, gender and number of family members. She also asked the adopting families to do more than supply the necessities. She wanted them to go out and check on their adoptees two or three times a week and to become involved with them to make sure their needs were being met.

The first year of Sub for Santa, 347 people were helped, including 62 families with 234 children.

The Sentinel described the living conditions of these families as down south and west of the river, in shacks made of tar paper, bits of packing boxes, cardboard boxes and pieces of lumber salvaged from the river,. There were some 50 families.

Mildred said one memorable gift was that of a farmer who called Fairy to donate seven chickens. Fairy then phoned Mildred, telling her she would be by to pick her up, and off they went to fetch the chickens. To their surprise, they left the farm with live chickens in a threadbare gunnysack in the back seat of the car. In no time, the thrashing chickens had destroyed the bag and escaped.

What a sight that must have been --two women driving down the road with chickens loose in the car, a couple of which ended up on the front dashboard. They dropped the chickens off with Captain Carl at the Salvation Army the minute they got to town.

When Fairy retired from her position as Mesa County nurse in the early 1940s a committee took over the program, and eventually the Salvation Army was organizing the annual event.

The Palisade Chamber of Commerce awarded Fairy the annual service award Palisade Outstanding Citizen in 1961, and in 1965 the Grand Junction Chamber of Commerce gave her the Citizen of the Year award. She died in May 1967.

Fairy was a perfect name for this woman – she was a “Christmas Fairy” who, along with Mildred and Captain Carl, made Christmas possible for large numbers of children in Mesa County for many years.