

# The man... the myth... the legend

by Leslie Guy

## Santa Claus:

They look up to Superman or some hero," Abshier says.

As a child, Schwager's father was a captain in the Merchant

"When they first brought him up he was scared and ran

Eshenbaugh says. "A lot of them come up and say they

You see him in all the malls at Christmas time. He talks to kids, hands out candy canes and gives a cheery "Ho, Ho, Ho" to holiday shoppers. But who is the real man behind the beard and bright red suit? And why does he spend all his free time in the crowded shopping malls during the busiest season of the year as Santa Claus? No one can answer these questions better than the men from the North Pole themselves. One thing is

certain. The Santas in Bryan and College Station are definitely doing it for a very special reason — they love children. Billy Abshier, a civil engineer, is one of four Santas at the Post Oak Mall in College Station. This is his first year to be the man in the red suit. His wife manages the Santa booth in the mall and when there was a shortage of Santas this year, Abshier filled in. He loves children and enjoys

being around them, so this job is good for him. He has worked with children behind the camera as a photographer, but believes there are advantages to being Santa Claus. "By being Santa you have a little more freedom," he says. "You can talk to the children and they don't know who you are. You can get away with murder." Usually children do not distinguish between the different Santas. They don't look at the person behind the suit, but instead at the make-up and costume, he says. "They don't distinguish the fact that there are four Santas,

Abshier says. "We all look totally different, but they don't see that." Bobby Schwager, a junior Russian major at Texas A&M, is also a Santa at Post Oak Mall. Although this is his eighth year to play Santa, it is only his first year at the mall. Seeing the children smile and wave makes the job enjoyable to Schwager. He says now that he is older, he does not really want material gifts for Christmas, but only to do well in school. "That is something no one can give me," Schwager says. "Christmas is a time, not to receive, but to give of yourself from within. I enjoy seeing the reactions (of children) and will keep doing it as long as I can."

Schwager got his start as St. Nick when he played Santa Claus in a Christmas play in the ninth grade. He then started playing Santa for cousins and friends on Christmas Eve, and is planning to visit about 10 to 15 houses this year.

He will make arrangements ahead of time with the parents who will tell him the children's names, give him a list of both good and bad things they have done throughout the year and leave a bag of presents on the porch for him to bring inside. This way Santa can come to their house, know everything about them and give them gifts. "It's great to know that in this cruel world with all the imperfections, there is still something the kids can believe in," Schwager says. "You really have to believe in yourself, because you are Santa."

Visitors at the Manor East Mall in Bryan won't encounter the problem of a different Santas every day, because Tom Eshenbaugh is the only one there. A former laundry company employee in the process of moving to North Carolina, he is just beginning his stint as Santa Claus. And because he is between jobs, he decided to fulfill a dream of the past 15 years and become a Santa. "It is a pleasure to see (the children) smiling and happy,"

