



In 2023, Mesa is celebrating its 145th anniversary. Over the years, it is remembered for many accomplishments.

But, in all that time, there is one incident that stands out from the rest. Publicized internationally, it is one that Mesa would just as soon forget.

It begins at Christmastime 1932 in the midst of the Great Depression. Obviously, the country was not in a good mood.



Even before the Great Depression Santa Claus made regular holiday visits to downtown Mesa. In this 1913 photo in front of the Toggery department store, Santa attracted a large cluster of youngsters.

Locally, Mesa merchants were in the doldrums, wondering how bad holiday sales were going to be.

Enter **John McPhee**, the popular 26-year-old editor of the **Mesa-Journal Tribune** – a predecessor of this paper – and chief cheerleader for the town of about 4000.

McPhee knew the secret to bringing Mesa out of its malaise was through children: Happy kids make happy parents, whose spending, in turn, makes happy merchants.

And what better way to generate excitement than to have Santa Claus pay a visit?

So, McPhee devised a novel scheme to fill downtown Mesa with shoppers. Over the years Saint Nick had visited Mesa, but never arrived in this spectacular way.

By the 1930's aviation had come into its own. Barnstormers and aerial acrobats were thrilling crowds all across the country. McPhee's plan was assured to take the town out of its gloom.

“SANTA CLAUS COMING IN AN AIRPLANE,” proclaimed the headline. “Saint Nick Will Drop From Plane In Parachute.”

“Santa has consented to come to Mesa in his airplane at the request of the...merchants who will celebrate the event with two big bargain-giving day,” the paper reported.

“The generous old gentleman isn't coming in the conventional style and he isn't going to wait until the airplane lands to get out,” McPhee informed readers. “He is going to drop right down into the center of Mesa on a parachute.”

To enhance the drama, McPhee teased, Santa's “pilot will circle...over Mesa housetops and...put the plane through a few difficult stunts.

ONLY IN SHOPPING DAYS TILL CHRISTMAS BUY THAT SIFT NOW

Mesa Journal-Tribune

FOR THE YEAR PAST Prior Five Cents Mesa, Arizona, Friday, December 9, 1932 Published Every Friday Morning

SANTA CLAUS COMING IN AIRPLANE

WHEN SANTA PHONED MESA



EMPIRE BUILDERS
By EARL AMERMAN

Daring Robbery Committed In One-Half Hour
IVler Busy On Week-End Burglary Attempts In City

St. Nick Will Drop From Plane In Parachute
Mesa Merchants To Celebrate Coming Of General Of Civilians With Two Great Sales Days, December 1 and 17; Gifts To Be Provided For All

Broken Toys Needed By Santa; Will You Help Worthy Cause?

New Directors Elected Today

Election Meet Called Tuesday

Board Accepts Mrs. L. Morris

Closets Reveal Skeletons

... Then Santa will step out on the wing and with his special parachute firmly attached to his body, he will step off to land in the arms of the awaiting multitudes... with a greeting and a present for every Mesa kiddie who is downtown to see him.

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Ever the promoter, McPhee declared “Thousands of shoppers from all parts of the Southside are expected to be (at)... the Mesa Merchants Christmas Party... while their children entertain Santa Claus and the elders take advantage of the big Christmas gift bargains to be on sale at all Mesa stores.”

McPhee knew exactly how he was going to achieve this feat.

Recruiting a barnstormer to fly the plane and buzz the town, was no big deal. Next, he would employ a daredevil, dress him in a Santa suit, then fly over the alfalfa field on the site of the former Tri City Mall near Main Street and Dobson Road.

Santa would exit the plane, walk out on the wing, then parachute to the ground – finally ceremoniously emerging to ride into downtown filled with excited children, on the hood of the Marshal’s car.

All was going well according to McPhee’s ambitious plan.

At the appointed time, the plane was ready to take off...only to discover the daredevil Santa was AWOL.

After scouring the town, McPhee discovered the aerobic Santa fortifying himself at a local “watering hole,” so inebriated, he wouldn’t even be able to make it to the flying field.

The quick-thinking McPhee developed a Plan B. Pick up a mannequin from a downtown shop. Dress it in the Santa outfit. Load it into the plane, when at the appropriate time, the pilot would push the dummy Santa out of the plane, which would then drop by parachute gently to earth.

With no one the wiser, McPhee, hiding in the field, would jump out dressed as Santa and lead the parade into town. John McPhee, the 26-year-old editor of the Mesa Journal/Tribune, became known as “**The man who killed Santa Claus,**” after his failed attempt to boost holiday business in Mesa.



The day was warm and sunny. Spectators lined Main Street all the way from downtown to Santa’s landing spot near Dobson Road.

At the appointed hour, the open-cockpit, bi-wing plane appeared overhead. After some breathtaking aerobatics, just as planned, “Santa” exited the plane at about 3000 feet, his bright red suit contrasted against a brilliantly blue sky. The crowd roared their approval.

Looking upward they breathlessly awaited the billowing of a big, white parachute.

But it never came.

Instead, “Santa” was careering down - tumbling head-over-feet while falling at an ever-increasing speed.

Fearing the inevitable, distraught parents started shielding their youngsters’ eyes. A few seconds later, “Santa” quietly disappeared into the alfalfa field. His landing spot punctuated by a rising puff of dust.

Excitement quickly turned to shock. Parents hurried their crying kids away from the horrific scene.

Meanwhile, unaware of what has happening around him, McPhee clad in a Santa suit and long white beard, sprung out of the alfalfa field with a loud “Ho-Ho-Ho.” And made his way toward the Marshal’s car ready to lead the parade into downtown.

But there was something dreadfully wrong.

Instead of waving and cheering crowds, there was an eerie silence. Virtually everyone had disappeared.

What was intended to be the best business day in an otherwise very depressed year, had turned into disaster. Hundreds had just witnessed the unbelievable “death” of Santa Claus in Mesa, Arizona.

News that didn’t go unnoticed.

Word spread around the world. The once popular John McPhee was vilified in screaming headlines as the “Man Who Killed Santa Claus.”

The residents of Mesa were due an explanation. Being an editor with the power of the pen, McPhee used his paper to devise a lame excuse that could salvage Christmas.

But because it was published on Friday, just two days before the holiday, subscribers had to wait an agonizing four days before reading his specious account.

“Santa’s Sagacity Saves Skin,” the headline declared.

“Faith explains all things. Mesa children demonstrated Monday even Santa Claus’ who miraculously leaps from airplanes, ...astraddle the city police car... rode through town waving cheerily to children unhurt by the narrowness of recent escape from death.

“Many hearts mentally removed the traditional stocking from the fireplace mantle Monday afternoon when the jolly old gentleman leaped from his plane high above Mesa,” McPhee described “and his only apparent insurance against death failed, the parachute did not open.

“Two minutes later Santa was seen riding through town on the hood of the city police car driven by Marshall Roy Merrill, bidding the thousands of friends (to) return Tuesday and receive a gift bag of nuts and candy from him.”

“A bit of explanation soon satisfied one traumatized youngster...(who) rather doubtfully, ...asked (Marshal) Roy Merrill how Santa could leap through space and remain unhurt. Merrill reminded the young man of Santa’s years of practice coming down large and small chimneys and the similarity of leaping into space and coming down an extra-large chimney.”

That didn’t do much to appease angry parents who had to explain the tragedy to their traumatized youngsters.

The only wise thing that McPhee could do was make a quick retreat for a week or so until things died down.

The 26-year-old editor did return to the newspaper for seven more years. The animosity eventually died down. But was never forgotten.

After his time at the Journal Tribune, the ambitious McPhee went on to a distinguished career that included press secretary to Gov. B.B. Moeur, editor of Arizona Highways Magazine, public relations director for the U.S. Brewers Foundation in Phoenix, and administrative assistant to the chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council.

By 1950, four years after putting KARV-AM on the air in Mesa, the first post WWII radio station in the Valley, Mesa had sufficiently forgiven its most illustrious citizen by honoring McPhee with the city’s highest award: “Man of the Year.”

In 1962, he left Arizona for Telluride, Colorado, where he founded the Telluride Times.

Nine years before McPhee’s death in 1968, noted journalist and novelist Oren Arnold summed up McPhee this way: “Few men are as gentle and kind as John C. McPhee, and each Christmas for 29 years his friends have felt a very special sympathy for him in his unique plight.

“It dates from an event that should have been forgotten, but may never be. Only a short time ago,” Arnold recalled, “a mature young woman walked into (McPhee’s) office near Phoenix, Ariz., glared in response to his friendly greeting, and said, ‘I just wanted to see the face of the man who killed Santa Claus.’”

And now you know “the rest of the story.”