

History of Howard Gale:

'Tis the season for nostalgia: a time to reminisce about Christmases past and beloved holiday traditions.

Many Kansas Citians have fond memories of the brightly lit [Christmas Crowns](#) that once illuminated the downtown shopping district and warmly recall festive department store displays. Shiny new toys under beautifully decorated Christmas trees, model trains chugging through snowy townscapes, and mechanical elves, reindeer, and carolers were hallmarks of the holiday shopping experience.

But when it came to Yuletide displays, jolly old St. Nick took center stage.

For more than four decades, a Kansas City company helped make Christmases more merry and bright. Beginning as a home business in the 1940s, Harold Gale Displays became one of the largest manufacturers and distributors of Santa Claus display figures in the U.S.

So, who was Harold Gale and how did he make a name for himself selling Santas? That was the question submitted to [What's Your KCQ?](#), a community reference partnership between the Kansas City Public Library and *The Kansas City Star*.

It's a Kansas City Christmas story we think you'll enjoy.

The husband-and-wife team of Harold and Viola Gale began making Santa Claus figures out of their midtown apartment around 1946. Harold had worked as a display manager for the Woolf Brothers clothing store, where he designed custom Santas for holiday window displays. When other Woolf store locations sought his services for their Christmas displays, Gale and his wife were inspired to fill a market niche by starting their own business.

The Gale home was a veritable Santa's workshop as, nights and weekends, they assembled wire-framed figures by hand, painted composite faces, and sewed Santa suits. As sales grew, the couple saved enough to rent a room inside the Manhattan building at 728 Main Street. Soon, the operation expanded to 18 rooms.



*Harold and Viola Gale pictured in an article spotlighting their Santa-making business.
The Kansas City Star, August 31, 1958.*

With their business turning a profit, the Gales were also able to purchase a small house in the Westwood neighborhood near the Country Club Plaza.

Like a child's Christmas wish list, their company continued to grow. By 1957, the Gales had relocated the factory six blocks south to a four-story warehouse at 13th and Main streets. The larger space was needed to house thousands of square feet of lumber, wire, plastic molds, rolls of velvet, and corrugated boxes – essential components in their successful Santa-making enterprise.

As many as 40 employees worked in the plant assembling the Santas and other holiday figures. Viola Gale had a hands-on role in production, overseeing the design, sewing, and cutting of fabric and sculpting of plastic molds.



*A Harold Gale designer putting the finishing touches on a 6-foot Santa Claus.
The Kansas City Star, June 26, 1960.*

The post-World War II Baby Boom era brought a high demand for children's toys to be placed under Christmas trees and in stockings. Santa dolls were especially popular gifts. The Gale company was well positioned to enter the burgeoning retail doll market, but not without competition from other manufacturers.

The New York-based Knickerbocker Toy Co., which owned lucrative licenses for Raggedy Ann and Hollie Hobbie rag dolls, produced a best-selling line of 9 and 11-inch, baby-faced Santas in the mid-1950s. And in 1957, the Rushton Company of Atlanta, Georgia, partnered with the hometown Coca-Cola Company to develop a popular 17-inch Santa doll that clutched a miniature bottle of, what else, Coca-Cola.

That same year, Harold Gale introduced a 15-inch Santa doll specifically for retail consumers. It was first available through Sears and Roebuck and as a premium for purchasing 7-Up, Tupperware, and other products, but was later sold in department stores. The company also released a line of Santa dolls ranging in size from 14 to 26 inches. The popular 14-inch version sold for \$3 was commonly outfitted in a traditional red velvet suit with white trim and boots. Alternate versions—now prized by collectors—were outfitted in gold, silver, white, pink, and green.



Harold Gale Santas, ca. 1960s. The promotional figure on the right was for Teem lemon-lime soda, which was introduced by the Pepsi-Cola Company in 1960. From the collection of Mary and John Mullinax.

In 1958, the Gales expanded operations yet again with the intent of boosting production from 65,000 to more than 100,000 units annually. They moved into a 30,000-square-foot warehouse at 2012-2018 Baltimore Avenue and increased their workforce to 60 employees.

The company continued to thrive in the 1960s. It produced a full line of Santa Claus figures, from a few inches tall up to 7-foot store displays, as well as assorted elves, angels, gnomes, snow babies, and animal figures. Christmas-themed products accounted for 95% of the company's business, which also included Easter display figures.

Everything is
Sale Priced!
 in our **BIG Christmas Section**
DON'T WAIT! SAVE NOW...

Our Stacks of Ready-Made and Do-It-Yourself Christmas Creations are Complete—Shop Now—Get Exactly What You Want in Time To Make Money for Your Organization or Church Bazaars! Make Gorgeous Items for Gift-Giving and Decorating!

BIG, READY-MADE "SANTA" ON SALE! Now in 3 Colors

NEW! Our bewitching 14" Santa is made of heavy vinyl with a soft, plush face and a sturdy body. He's ready-made—just hang him up and he's ready to go! He's made of heavy vinyl with a soft, plush face and a sturdy body. He's ready-made—just hang him up and he's ready to go! He's made of heavy vinyl with a soft, plush face and a sturdy body. He's ready-made—just hang him up and he's ready to go!

NEW 8" "CHRISTMAS TWINS" ON SALE!

NEW! Our bewitching 8" Christmas Twins are made of heavy vinyl with a soft, plush face and a sturdy body. They're ready-made—just hang them up and they're ready to go! They're made of heavy vinyl with a soft, plush face and a sturdy body. They're ready-made—just hang them up and they're ready to go!



INFLATABLE REINDEER MADE OF NEW, STRONGER VINYL
COMPARE—
SALE PRICED NOW!



3-Pc. Set \$189
 Each 21-inch
 29-inch
 21-inch



\$7 Value
Ready-Made 14" Santa \$2.99
 Each

\$2.98 Values! Now on Sale!

Ready Made "Christmas Twins"

\$1.49
 Each



Mr. & Mrs. Santa Door Hanger Kits ON SALE NOW!

\$1.28
 Each

15" Tall

NEW! Our bewitching 15" Mr. & Mrs. Santa Door Hanger Kits are made of heavy vinyl with a soft, plush face and a sturdy body. They're ready-made—just hang them up and they're ready to go! They're made of heavy vinyl with a soft, plush face and a sturdy body. They're ready-made—just hang them up and they're ready to go!

18" FILMY NYLON NET TREE KIT

Choice of 3 Colored Lowest Price Ever!

Would Cost \$116
\$5.80 Made Up \$116

NEW! Our bewitching 18" Filmy Nylon Net Tree Kit is made of heavy vinyl with a soft, plush face and a sturdy body. It's ready-made—just hang it up and it's ready to go! It's made of heavy vinyl with a soft, plush face and a sturdy body. It's ready-made—just hang it up and it's ready to go!

1963 Leeward Creative Crafts catalog advertising 14-inch Harold Gale Santas for \$2.99. Courtesy of Polly Hackett-Morey.

Like their elven counterparts in the North Pole, Harold Gale employees worked year-round in preparation for the Christmas season. When business slowed in December and all completed orders were shipped to stores, the entire staff would take a much-deserved vacation.

The Gales sold the family business to another display firm in 1966, but Harold stayed on as general manager. At the time of the sale, he estimated that more than 3 million Santas had been produced since the company's founding.

Harold Gale Displays changed hands again in 1970. Not long after, the Gales moved to California where they lived out their retirement years. Under new ownership, the firm diversified its product line and made custom designs for large companies. However, Santa Claus and other Christmas-themed characters remained top sellers.



25-inch animated

store display by Harold Gale.

From the collection of Mary and John Mullinax.

The company also specialized in creating elaborate shopping mall displays for clients throughout the U.S. and Japan and designed custom figures for some notable clients. A life-size Santa was created for Kansas City jazz legend Count Basie as a gift for his wife, and an animated Santa driving a Ford Model T was made for President Jimmy Carter's daughter, Amy.



14-inch Kansas

City Royals Santa Claus produced for the Kauffman Foundation in the 1980s, possibly after the World Series victory in 1985. Courtesy of Glenn Waters.

It seemed that Christmas would never end for the Gale company but, alas, the Santa factory on Baltimore Avenue closed in 1986-87 and the facility was vacated. Another Kansas City company, Superior Display, carried the Gale tradition into the 1990s by producing elaborate Christmas displays for Crown Center and other shopping malls throughout the country.

Today, the Harold Gale legacy endures in the numerous display figures and dolls found in private collections and sought by collectors. The next time you unpack your Christmas

decorations for the holiday, check to see if a Santa Claus doll is among them. It might very well be a Harold Gale Displays original made right here in Kansas City.

David Hamberger



A SENSE OF ELF: Worker at David Hamberger Inc. puts some finishing touches on Christmas elf as faceless characters wait their turn.

Work takes a holiday

Company makes decorations for season

By **SURABHI AVASTHI**
Special to The News

Legend has it that Santa's workshop is on the North Pole, but one peek inside an unassuming red-brick building in Cobble Hill, and you begin to wonder.

Amid stuffed reindeer, potbellied elves and giant sprigs of holly, craftsmen at David Hamberger Inc., a holiday design and display company, are hard at work to bring Christmas scenes to life.

About 75 workers at the Hicksville company have spent months building animated sculptures — such as dancing toy soldiers or Santa waving from his sleigh — and this week the fruits of their labor are popping up in shopping malls, toy stores and restaurants.

"It's like Disneyland to a great extent. It's fun. Where else in the world can you get a small group of talented people who are constantly creating like this?" said Jerry Hamberger, who runs the family business with his brother Marty, his son Michael and his wife, Iris.

Founded in 1922 by David Hamberger, father of Jerry and Marty, the company originally made artificial flowers. During the mid-60s, however, overseas manufacturers began taking over the trade. To sidestep the competition, the Hamberger clan ventured into the Christmas business.

Today producing customized Christmas, Chanukah and Kwanzaa scenes accounts for more than 85% of its business. Hamberger and his crew get a rough sense of a client's decoration needs, then invent a scene to match.

"We start with a sketch and end up with a huge, mechanical Christmas scene," Hamberger said.

Display figures, made from cast rubber or paper mâché, can be picked from their catalogue or specified. This year, for example, replicas of Barney, the Power Rangers and jungle backdrops worthy of "The Lion King" were hot items. Trimmed trees and Nativity scenes are also available for companies that want more subdued ways to deck their halls.

"It's difficult to predict what retailers will want from year to year, but that also keeps it interesting. There's no such thing as an average display," Hamberger said.

It used to be that there were thousands of individual storeowners. Now, you have giant chains and shopping centers. We don't do as many shop windows as we used to.

Changes in the retail industry have taken a toll on the company, and, once again, it faces competition from overseas manufacturers. Hamberger admits that he is concerned.

"We are starting to feel the squeeze, and I've even been forced to make some lay-offs. But we'll reconfigure things. Our temperament has always been to go out and expand into new areas."

One possibility may be foreign markets. This year, about 15% of the company's business came from abroad, especially South American countries and Korea.

Since retailers' holiday budgets vary, the company gets orders as small as \$50

for a simple wreath to upward of \$150,000 for elaborate mall packages. The cost for complete animated scenes with nearly life-size figures hover around \$5,000.

Hamberger said that sustaining a seasonal business is tough because almost all the profits come from a three-week period.

"We do 10 times the amount of business in November that we do in January. It's hard to keep a business strong on a once-a-year industry," he explained.

"Since most of our work is customized, we have a very short time frame to produce these scenes because everyone wants their displays to be up by Thanksgiving."

Though the company handles Easter and Halloween projects, business is virtually nonexistent from January until midsummer, when the first Christmas orders roll in.

The early months of the year are mostly spent contacting shopping malls, attending trade shows and preparing for the frenzied fall months. Once the busy season begins, employees often pull 12-hour shifts, six days a week, said Hamberger.

But employees, who are just putting the finishing touches on this year's displays, don't seem to mind their erratic work schedule.

It's Christmas. It's the spirit that makes this fun," said George Ivens, a designer who has worked at the company for four years. "We have something to work toward. That spirit can really take

Photo by AP