“Christmas Village,” an annual community project of Torrington, Connecticut, as recorded in watercolor by George Shellhase. (Story on page 2.)
Christmas Village

paintings by George Shellhase

You cannot be around Torrington, Connecticut, very long without believing in Santa Claus. For this is an exceedingly Christmas-conscious town, and even though you may reach an age when you no longer share in Santa’s largess of toys, you are never too old to help with “Christmas Village”—a community-wide project that makes Santa’s annual visit a sparkling, tinsel-covered success for every child in the city, plus a few more who stray in from neighboring towns.

It was several years ago that Carl Bozenski, the Special Events Director of the city’s Recreation Department, first invited Santa Claus to spend the two weeks just before Christmas in Torrington. Santa accepted, and now his annual sojourn there is an essential part of Christmas, as Torrington children know it.

The project of getting ready to entertain this celebrated visitor is a big one. The rustic shelter at Alvord Playground is converted into a replica of Santa’s famous North Pole residence. A magnificently spangled throne is provided for him to sit on when he welcomes the children into his tinsel-decked parlor, and a huge Christmas tree is set up, ready for him to decorate with lights and toys. And there are plenty of other jobs for all the able-bodied adults who can be pressed into service. Most of them are more than willing.

Because this is his busy season, Santa brings along several of the elves who are his toymakers. Their workshop is right next to his parlor. But Torrington people realize that even these industrious creatures can’t turn out all the toys needed if Santa is to give one to each child who visits him at Christmas Village. So the day before the Village opens is designated Toy Shower Day, when, with the help of newspaper and radio...
Children will stand fascinated for hours, watching the elf toymakers at work. There are actually three elves, but one was out to lunch when the artist painted this picture.

The first thing visitors see when they approach Christmas Village is a splendid outdoor Christmas tree, decorated with huge, lighted ornaments.
announcements, toys are literally showered on the Recreation Department by generous Torrington citizens.

At last, after weeks of preparation, there comes the wonderful afternoon when the shelter door is flung open, the lights from Santa’s tree stream out into the snowy winter afternoon, and the first children troop in to tell Santa what they want for Christmas, and receive the presents he has for them. Some of them are boisterous, some are shy, but all of them are enchanted with Christmas Village.

That’s because it is just exactly the way it should be, even to childhood’s uncompromising standards. Santa Claus is properly ruddy and chubby and bewhiskered. His Christmas tree is a towering mountain of lights and toys. The ceilings and walls are covered with toys, stuffed animals and birds. Behind Santa hang two books, one labeled “Santa’s Record Book—Good Boys and Girls,” and the other, “Bad Boys and Girls.” But there’s a rumor that the second book hasn’t any names in it. For certainly every child who comes to Christmas Village receives a worthwhile gift from Santa’s own hand—not just a trinket or a lollypop, but a real present. And of course it doesn’t cost his parents anything—for there is nothing commercial about Christmas village: no admission fee, nothing sold, no advertising of any kind.

The elves’ workshop is even more exciting, for it is crammed with toys—some of them finished, some half done, some barely started. There are electric trains running about on tracks, trucks at work, lots and lots of dolls, and small stuffed animals jumping up and down from the ceiling.
In the elves’ workshop, Santa Claus’ helpers manipulate hidden strings to keep the hanging toys constantly in motion (right).

The crèche, with its almost life-size figures, is beautiful and serene—a reminder of the deeper meaning of Christmas (below).
The elves are intent on their work—sawing or painting or carving or sewing. They wear funny floppy stocking caps, and the pointed green shoes with bells on the toes that elves are known to prefer.

It's all a story-book come true, and the youngsters stare with rapturous eyes, oblivious of their cumbersome snow suits, and of their dripping galoshes and dragging mittens. This is the room where a traffic jam develops, for the children would stand here fascinated for hours if it were not for their mothers' indulgent promptings, and the pressure of other children who want to see, too.

There's another Christmas tree outside, decorated with lights that turn the snow on its branches pink and green and purple and yellow. There's Santa's red sleigh—a child can climb into it and pretend he's riding with Santa Claus, exactly like "Up on the housetops, click, click, click—Down through the chimney with good Saint Nick!" Best of all there are the reindeer, who love to be petted and are perpetually hungry for popcorn or crackers or almost anything else a child might have in his pocket. Lest anyone doubt that these are indeed Santa's own reindeer, their well-known names are inscribed across the front of the shed where they are quartered: Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Cupid, Comet, Donder, Blitzen.

Just before leaving Christmas Village, visitors...
walk over to the crèche, where the baby Jesus lies in the manger, with Mary and Joseph nearby, while shepherds and wise men wait to do Him honor. Children who have been chortling in delight over the elves’ workshop grow thoughtful and interested and reverent in the December dusk, as the stars come out in the winter sky almost bright enough to match the big yellow one that hangs above the Christ-child’s head.

Santa Claus departs on Christmas Eve—lock, stock, reindeer, sleigh and elves. But he leaves a happier town behind him.

*Assorted species serve as Santa’s “reindeer.”*