

SANTA MIKE AND THE SANTAMOBILE THAT STAYED

Every festival has its icons. For nearly four decades, one of the most beloved wore a red suit, rode in a red sleigh on wheels and had a laugh that could fill the Great Hall. His name was Mike Peppers; but to the Quad Cities he was simply Santa Mike.

Peppers' Santa Sleigh wasn't the department store kind. He built it — literally. His Davenport auto shop, Sergeant Peppers, became Santa's workshop year-round. He collected vintage sleighs, created holiday props and fine-tuned his "Santamobile" — a cherry-red custom designed automobile with white leather seats, jingle bells on the fenders and a license plate that read "SANTA."

Every November, the Santamobile rolled into Festival of Trees like clockwork, gleaming under the lights, carrying with it decades of joy. The Quad-City Times chronicled his story for years: the man who began his Santa career through a Jaycees project, delivering gifts to local kids in need.

The newspaper captured his patience with children, his warmth with parents and his sense of purpose. He made everyone near him feel like Christmas had arrived early each year.

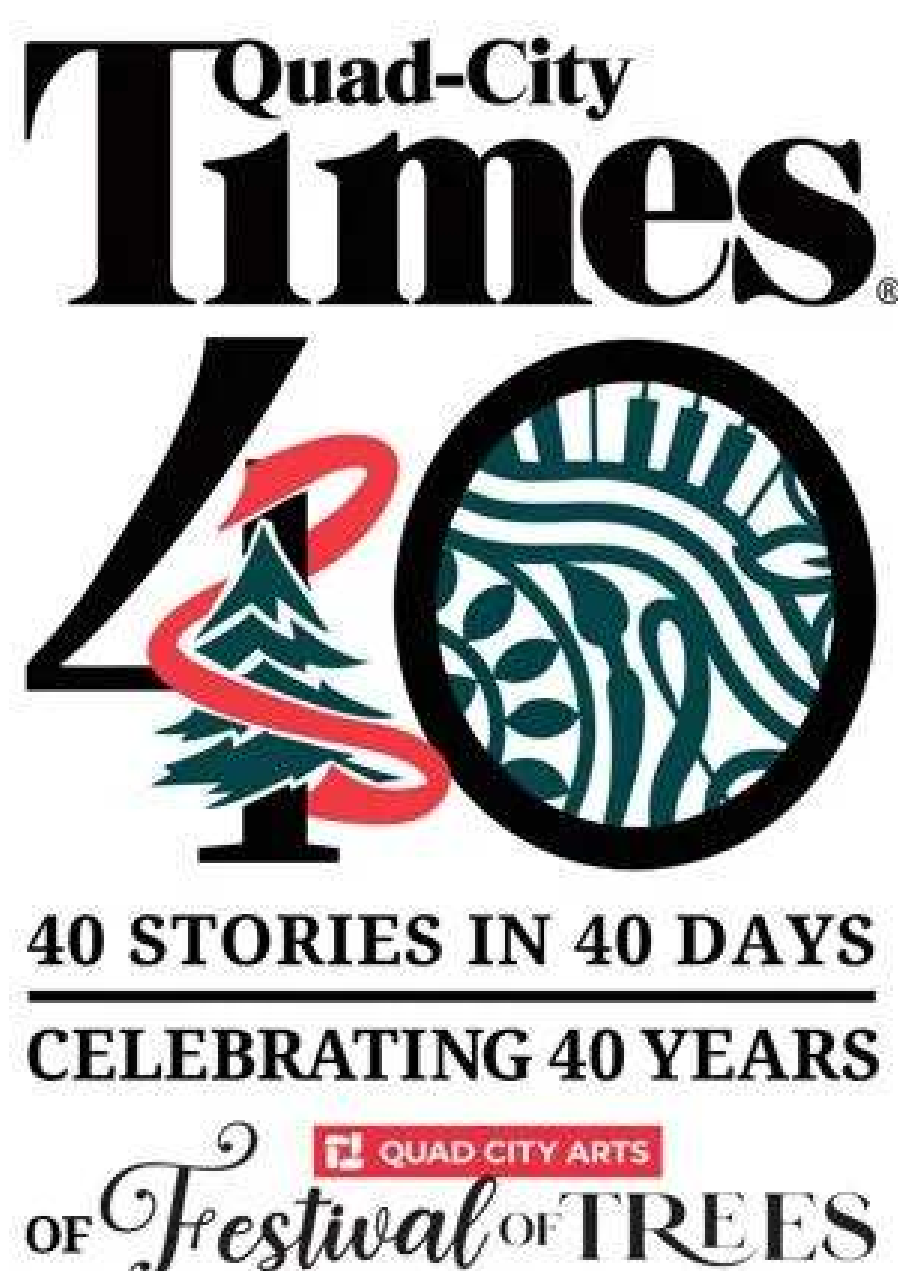


Over time, "Santa Mike" became a synonym for holiday spirit itself. Even after age and illness caught up with him, Peppers' commitment never faltered. He proudly made his last appearance in the 2023 festival parade.

Even near the end, he was thinking about Festival of Trees. He asked his sister and brother-in-law to make sure the Santamobile would be a part of the parade each year so the next generation could see, photograph and remember it. They are keeping their promise to him.

For festival organizers, the Santamobile has become a symbol. It isn't just about Santa anymore — it is about continuity, memory and the community that gathers each year to make magic happen again. Volunteers polish the chrome, children pose beside it and grandparents tell stories about the man who used to wave at the crowd.

Peppers' presence is still felt in the festival's rhythm: in the parade's first honk of the horn, in the twinkle of a child's belief, in the kindness exchanged between strangers. His legacy reminds us that joy isn't meant to be stored. It's meant to be shared, year after year.



The Cultural Trust carries forward that same idea — protecting the people and partnerships that give the Quad Cities its heart. Because the region's story isn't just written in ledgers or minutes.

It's told through lives like Peppers' — people who showed that when generosity is practiced over a lifetime, it becomes its own form of art. Every time the Santamobile's engine turns over, that art lives again. If you listen closely, between the laughter and music during festival week, you might just hear "HO HO HO" and his famous last words "and to all a goodnight." The familiar sound of a man who loved his community enough to make it believe in Christmas forever.

Because Culture Matters here, and thanks to Santa Mike it always will.