

V. SKP
New York

FALSE SANTAS HO-HO PUBLIC FOR FUNDS

Con Men Are Taking Advantage of the Unwary by Illegally Soliciting Contributions

By FRANCES CERRA

Six-year-old Julian Babian had just given some of his mother's loose change to a cheerful young Santa Claus who had followed them down Fifth Avenue, offering them a small candy cane and hearty wishes for the holiday season.

"No, I don't know who that Santa Claus represents," said his mother, Setlan Babian, when asked if she knew where her money would be going. "He mentioned something about children, and I wanted Julian to think about other children. I didn't make a judgment. It was just a few pennies."

Mrs. Babian, a New Yorker who was just out strolling and taking in the Christmas sights in the heart of the Fifth Avenue shopping area, was one of many New Yorkers who gave money yesterday to street solicitors, without much thought—often only as a lesson in charity to the children they had in tow. Unfortunately, according to officials of the Metropolitan New York Better Business Bureau, much of their donations will not end up helping the needy.

Donations Kept By the Imposters

These officials warn that anyone can dress up like a Santa Claus or even a nun and solicit money on the street. The only beneficiary of donations is the imposter.

False solicitations for contributions can also come through the mail on behalf of nonexistent charitable organizations and even for organizations supposedly connected with reputable policemen's and firefighters' groups. Such solicitations are illegal unless the organizations are registered with the state as bona fide charitable or religious organizations.

The Santa Claus who had approached the Babians was named Gokula Chandra, and he was carrying a metal collection can marked with the initials "ISKON." He explained later that the initials stood for International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

According to Ruth Atchison, the assistant Director of the Council of Better Business Bureaus' philanthropic advisory service, the society does not meet acceptable standards for charitable solicitations, mainly because it has never submitted an audited financial statement despite repeated requests for one.

Society Explains Stand

In a recent letter to the council explaining why the society had not complied, William H. Simpel 3d, the executive secretary, maintained that the society was not "engaged in charitable solicitations." He wrote:

"We are a religious organization, and about 98 percent of our gross income is derived from the sale of religious literature which we publish and distribute through our book trust."

The society is recognized, by the Internal Revenue Service as a nonprofit religious organization, and according to a spokesman for the New York City Police Department, may legally place Santa on the street.



The New York Times/John Solo

Bucket in hand, a man dressed in a Santa Claus outfit solicited donations from passers-by yesterday on Fifth Avenue near 57th Street.

James J. Lack, president of the Metropolitan New York Better Business Bureau, advises, however, that people who wish to give this season should donate only to street solicitors for the Salvation Army and the Volunteers of America. The Volunteers station Santas at chimneys marked with a sign, and the Santas do not follow pedestrians down the street.

Mr. Lack also urged caution about giving money to women dressed as nuns. A spokesman for the Archdiocese of New York said that there is no way of distinguishing by dress real nuns from false ones. Neighborhood solicitors who claim to be nuns or priests should be checked out with the local parish, he said.

Other Frauds Described

Other "con artists," according to Mr. Lack, send their solicitations through the mails. An investigation by the bureau recently prompted postal authorities to close post office box of a New Yorker who had begun soliciting in the name of the United Way. He had no connection whatsoever with Tri-State United Way.

Another common fraud, Mr. Lack said, primarily affects businessmen who are concerned about keeping good relations with the Police and Fire Department. They are frequently gulled into buying advertising space in journals of organizations that actually have no connection to the Police and Fire Departments.

"Our motto is, 'Give, but give wisely,'" Mr. Lack said. He urged the public to check the credentials of any philanthropic organization with a local office of the bureau before making a donation.