

Yes, West Virginia, There *Is* a Santa Claus

YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T KNOW that Santa Claus—when he's not delivering presents—lives in West Virginia, grows potatoes and drives a Massey Ferguson tractor. At least, this Santa does. Donald Tharp is known to kids in Erbacon, W. Va., as the Christmas icon. This Santa's "ashes and soot," though, come courtesy of the Mingo Logan Coal Company mines where he works. Mingo Logan raises money year-round to give needy kids in the area a nice Christmas and Tharp gets to deliver the goods.

After hours, he farms potatoes with an old-fashioned digger that runs on his tractor's pto. His Salem potatoes, a white variety known for their high sugar content, are "great for anything," says Tharp. He digs them in mid-October, and neighbors say they keep in the cellar until the next summer.

Tharp first wore the Santa beard as a senior in high school and has done it every year since. These days, the beard is real. "Unfortunately," he says, "so is the belly." He takes his work as Santa seriously. In fact, when he bought his new Massey Ferguson from Nettles Equipment in Duck, W. Va., he asked to be invoiced as Santa Claus. Will he be ditching the sleigh this year and using the tractor, so he can write it off as a business expense? "I wish I'd thought of that," says Tharp.

And while he's busy fulfilling the wishes of West Virginia kids, this Santa has a wish, too. He says his dream is to take part in the Santa Train (teamsantatrain.com), a program that delivers tons of toys to kids throughout Appalachia. Sounds like this Santa's heart is bigger than his belly. —*Jamie Cole*

