

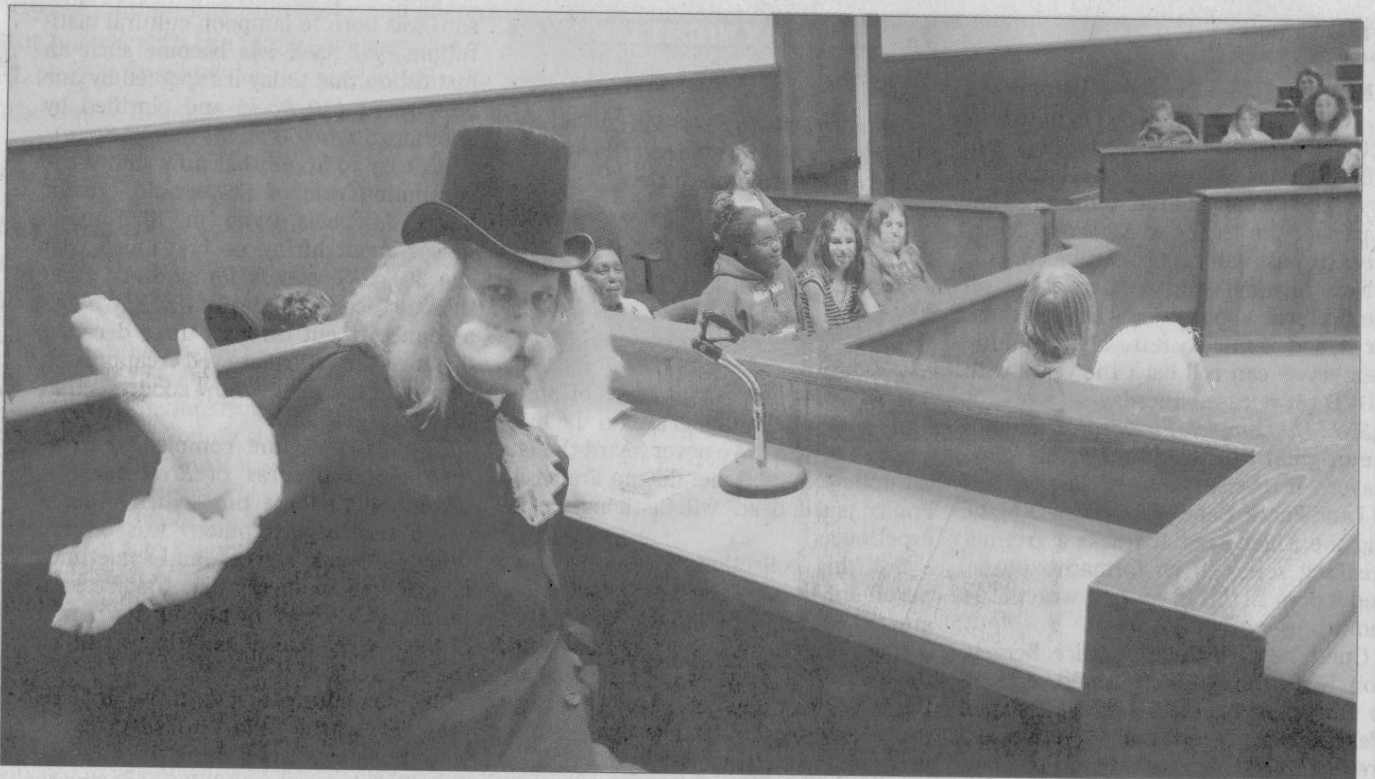
# Santa, what the dickens?

At a mock trial, Ebenezer Scrooge claims the Jolly Old Elf pilfered playthings from his home.



JOSEPH GARNETT JR. | Times

**Santa Claus, dressed as a typical Floridian, stands accused of theft Tuesday. Beneath the suit is Hillsborough State Attorney Mark Ober.**



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**Ebenezer Scrooge — lawyer Wayne Thomas in real life — tells the court Tuesday how Santa Claus stole several toys from his home. Thomas was participating in a mock trial at the Tampa Law Center to teach students how a courtroom works. Scrooge said Claus had no right coming into his home because he and his wife don't celebrate Christmas.**

**BY CARRIE WEIMAR**  
*Times Staff Writer*

TAMPA — Santa Claus: jolly old elf or armed burglar?

On Tuesday, a prosecutor accused the man known to millions as Father Christmas of breaking into the home of Ebenezer Scrooge and stealing toys while packing a BB gun.

But don't worry, kids. None of it was real. It was all part of teaching students about how a courtroom works by letting them participate firsthand.

"Kids learn best by doing,"

said Judge Chris Altenbernd of Tampa, who sits on the 2nd District Court of Appeal and organized the mock trial. "This is a way for them to learn about the criminal justice system."

The 6:30 p.m. event, held at the Tampa Law Center, was sponsored by several local legal mentoring groups.

Stetson University College of Law taped the trial to use as a teaching tool at local schools.

Because Santa was too busy to participate, Hillsborough

County State Attorney Mark Ober pretended to be him for the event. Other roles were played by lawyers and student volunteers from Hillsborough and Pinellas middle schools. U.S. District Judge Susan Buckley presided.

Here are the facts:

Claus, a.k.a. Kris Kringle, was accused of breaking into Scrooge's home early Christmas morning. He was alleged to have swiped a BB gun, a Razor Scooter, a Tickle Me Elmo and a baseball signed by

Babe Ruth.

"Mr. Kringle needs to check his list twice, members of the jury," Assistant State Attorney Thomas Palermo said. "His actions have earned him a place in the naughty column — and a Florida prison."

Claus admitted to taking only Elmo. His attorney said Scrooge's 13-year-old daughter, Susie Q, left it for Claus to give to a needy child.

"This wasn't theft, ladies and gentlemen," said his attorney. **» See TRIAL, 7B**

» TRIAL from 1B

## Claus case will teach students about courts

ney, played by Assistant State Attorney Chinwe Fossett. "And it surely wasn't burglary. Santa did not enter the Scrooge home as an evil man to take — he entered out of kindness to give."

Scrooge and his wife, Paris Holiday Inn Scrooge, were the prosecution's star witnesses. They said Santa didn't have permission to come into their house

because they don't celebrate Christmas.

"I never let that old coot in my home," growled Scrooge, played by lawyer Wayne Thomas. "He shoved his own way in and took my things. I hope he gets what's coming."

But Susie Q told jurors that she wrote to Santa asking him to bring her a video iPod. She never

accused him of taking her doll.

Defense attorneys noted that there was no physical evidence linking Claus to the burglary — just a lot of missing milk and cookies.

In the end, jurors acquitted Santa of grand theft but did find him guilty of simple theft, a lesser charge.

Bucklew said she would allow

Santa to remain free on bond because it was such a busy time of year for him.

"Ho, ho, ho! What do you want for Christmas?" Ober asked, as the crowd laughed.

With that, court adjourned.

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