

# Let it rain on his parade— show will still go on

By KATIE KERWIN

If you wonder tomorrow why the Three Wise Men in Detroit's Thanksgiving Day parade are riding down Woodward backwards, Dennis Sibthorpe will understand.

"When I tell people, they all look at me like I'm out of my skull," said Sibthorpe, Hudson's events studio manager. He's responsible for creating and maintaining all the parade floats, including the Wise Men, who pull the Nativity float.

"Tell me where in the Bible it says the Wise Men walked away from the Christ Child," he demanded, smiling. The Wise Men walk backwards, facing the nativity scene.

Sibthorpe, a Troy resident, works in a studio that resembles every child's dream fantasyland. Giant cupcakes and frothy milkshakes — the new Sweet Dreams float — dominate one corner of the warehouse. A dragon rears his head from amid a cluster of Christmas trees and gingerbread.

Bumblebees, women riding giant white swans and several walruses are suspended from the high ceiling. Portions of the Santa Claus float — graceful reindeer soaring above sparkling snow — are swathed in protective plastic, awaiting the big moment.

Hundreds of paper mache heads sit in rows in the loft, ready to be donned by parade marchers Thursday morning.

"These heads weigh from 15 pounds to 55-65 pounds," Sibthorpe said. The latter, heavier heads can be difficult to manage on windy days, he said, pointing out some mammoth stork heads.

"I've seen them caught in a crosswind at an intersection, turned over like a turtle," he said. "They've got their hands at their sides, so they can't move. They just lay there until somebody came to pick them up."

THE PARADE, sponsored by Hudson's since 1924, features 2,500 marchers, 20 floats, 14 marching bands, 18 clown troupes, Detroit's largest parade and several specialty groups, like the Shriners.

The parade route is 2½ miles. The cavalcade takes 45 minutes to pass — and every moment is carefully timed.

"We start at Woodward and Putnam at 9:20. We have to hit the TV cameras downtown at 10:15," Sibthorpe said.

"They drop us at 10:59. We have to have Santa down there by 10:59, otherwise the star of the show

doesn't get on TV," he continued. "We can be 30 seconds late and they won't pick us up. We're timed right down to the second."

Parade marshals ride on every float, he said. They carry timing cards, indicating where they should be at specific times. Sibthorpe and other parade officials ride motorcycles around the parade route, making sure each float is in the right place at the right time.

"If it isn't there, that's when I start flying backwards and forwards," Sibthorpe said.

But even the best-laid plans occasionally go awry. Last year, the Santa float got hung up on a temporary fence along the way. Crews hastily untangled St. Nick's sleigh, but he arrived at the foot of Woodward too late for the television cameras.

But the parade staff is prepared for most emergencies.

"We have a complete mechanic crew on the street, equipped with a crash truck, wreckers and welders," Sibthorpe said.

POLICE HAVE a hard time restraining the eager crowds when Santa debarks from his sleigh in front of Hudson's, Sibthorpe said.

"The police can only hold them so long — we have to get that float out of there," he said. "We have to make sure we don't crush anybody in the process."

The Franklin Band, which traditionally trails Santa at the end of the parade, rides a float to avoid being run over by the parade-watchers mobbing the streets after Santa passes.

"We used to put a high school band back there," Sibthorpe said. "The kids got annihilated."

The four giant helium balloons are also tricky to work with, he said. The largest stands 4½ stories high and 26 feet across. It takes almost 1½ hours to inflate.

"Naturally, sharp objects are a problem," Sibthorpe said. So are strong winds.

BUT DETROIT'S parade is basically weather-proof.

"We design more with the weather in mind than most of these other parades," he said. Sibthorpe said he visited the Elton's parade in Toronto one time and was shocked to see that the floats were covered in spongelike material.

"My first question was 'What happens when it rains?' Since Toronto has only had rain for two parades in 27 years, they can play the odds, he was told.

"But when we construct we never know what kind of weather we'll have — high winds, torrential rain or snow."

He remembers when a parade worker asked Arthur Wright, special events director, how the floats would get through if the snow was too deep.

"Mr. Wright told him, 'then we'll pick 'em up and carry 'em.'"

The show must go on, Sibthorpe said, no matter what the catastrophe.

"Five or six years ago, one of the drivers went to make a turn with the Santa Claus float," he recalled. The driver forgot that when he turned the front of the long float one way, the back section went in the opposite direction.

"He caught the rear section on a lamp post. It tore the whole back of the float right out."

At 6:30 a.m. Sibthorpe and the staff went to work, patching it up with muslin and white paint. The float was ready by parade time, and probably no one ever noticed, he said.

"Nothing stops us," he said. "We go on regardless."

ALTHOUGH SIBTHORPE has always enjoyed parades, he said he never dreamed they would become his career.

"I never even gave it any thought that that kind of thing existed," he said. Sibthorpe, born in Sussex, England, emigrated in 1957 and went to work in Hudson's maintenance division. It wasn't until he was laid off that he went to work at an independent studio, making display fixtures.

He returned to Hudson's 21 years ago, to work in

the studio preparing floats and store displays. Four years ago, he was promoted to managing the studio.

"It's funny the way things happen," he commented.

Sibthorpe heads a crew of seven which works year-round preparing for the parade. A week before the event, workers were busy dusting off floats, re-assembling some and making last-minute repairs.

Sibthorpe looked around the deceptively-quiet warehouse.

"It's nerve-wracking when it's busy, but it's even more nerve-wracking when it's quiet," he said.

But as soon as the parade is over, they'll be busy repairing damaged units, covering floats to be used again next year and dismantling those which have seen their last parade.

Plans are already under way for construction of new floats for Thanksgiving 1980, he said. The whole staff participates in brainstorming new designs, he added.

THE PARADE HAS become more sophisticated through the years, Sibthorpe said. The caterpillar used to unroll down Woodward on parade marchers' shoulders, he said.

Humans were used to power the floats after runaway horses caused a problem at one early parade.

"They used to build floats on milk carts with iron rims until one year, it was so cold, the rims froze to the street," Sibthorpe said.

He remembers the Hatching Egg float, which cracked in two, spilling people dressed as chicks into the nest.

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