



Sleepy-eyed turtles are the leaders of the heads stored in the Poletown warehouse back, so to speak, of parade costumes and tween Thanksgiving Day parades.

Santa Claus, Woodward Ave. and the parade

By Jill Hamilton
Special writer

The tradition has been going on for 64 years now. Every Thanksgiving Day around 9 million people gather on the streets of Detroit (or around their television sets) to watch the "big" parade.

To young eyes, the parade is a giant and magical event. That's because the Michigan Thanksgiving Day Parade is giant. This year there will be 31 floats, 19 inflatable figures, 19 marching bands and seven two-minute production numbers.

And, heck, it's pretty magical, too.

"I know adults that cry when Santa comes down the street," said Bruce Lantto of Livonia.

Bruce Lantto was one of those millions of people who watched the parade every year. It was a tradition for Lantto and his eight brothers and sister to spend every Thanksgiving morning watching the parade.

"It was the thing to do," Lantto said. "Beside there's not much else to do on Thanksgiving."

Now, all of the Lantto children have grown up and all of them but one have become parade volunteers. Lantto has the weighty title of supervisor of march replacements. In layman's terms, he monitors the hundreds of costumed people marching in the parade. . . . and it's no small task.

LANTTO IS one of 1,200 volunteers who give of their time each year to make the parade possible.

After a visit to the huge workshop in Poletown where the floats are created, built and stored, it's easy to see why volunteers like Lantto get hooked.

To the casual observer, the outside of the Poletown workshop looks like any other factory in the area — serious, industrial-looking and business-like. Inside, however, is a different story. The closest comparison is to Santa's workshop.

Ridiculously huge floats with figures on top like smiling Cinderella's, furry cats and even the Vlasie pickle stork stand silently in the warehouse waiting for the big day.

There's a bit of excitement in the room over the Chrysler float. It features a real working air bag and workers are anxious to show it off.

Actually, all of the workers in the warehouse seem excited. Everyone is busy, happy and generally acting as industrious as elves. It's easy to see why. After all, who could be grumpy while putting the finishing touches on Hobnobble Gobbie, the large, happy turkey?

In the corner of the large warehouse is a section filled with giant heads. Pirate heads, Indians heads, dog heads, monkey heads, horse heads, a Diana Ross head, a Tom Selleck head, a Gerald Ford head and any other sort of head you could dream up, sit in orderly lines, smiling and waiting to be donned.

THE HEADS LOOK pretty darned big in the parade, but up close, they look even bigger. Some of them stand more than seven feet tall. Their size becomes even more amazing when you realize what the heads are for. Individual marches actually wear these giant heads during the long parade trek.

This year, parade volunteers won't have to make heads for at least two prominent Detroiters. Carole Gist, Miss USA, will make a personal appearance as this year's grand marshal. And Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul, will serve as the music grand marshal.

The other 800 marchers in the parade get to explore the costume room. Here, hundreds of colorful costumes hang on racks. Volunteers can choose from such proper parade attire as clown costumes and monkey costumes.

"Everyone that's involved with this is here to have fun," said Lantto, a funeral director by day. He got involved with the parade six years ago through a friend who worked for Hudson's. In those days, you had to have connections to participate in the parade.

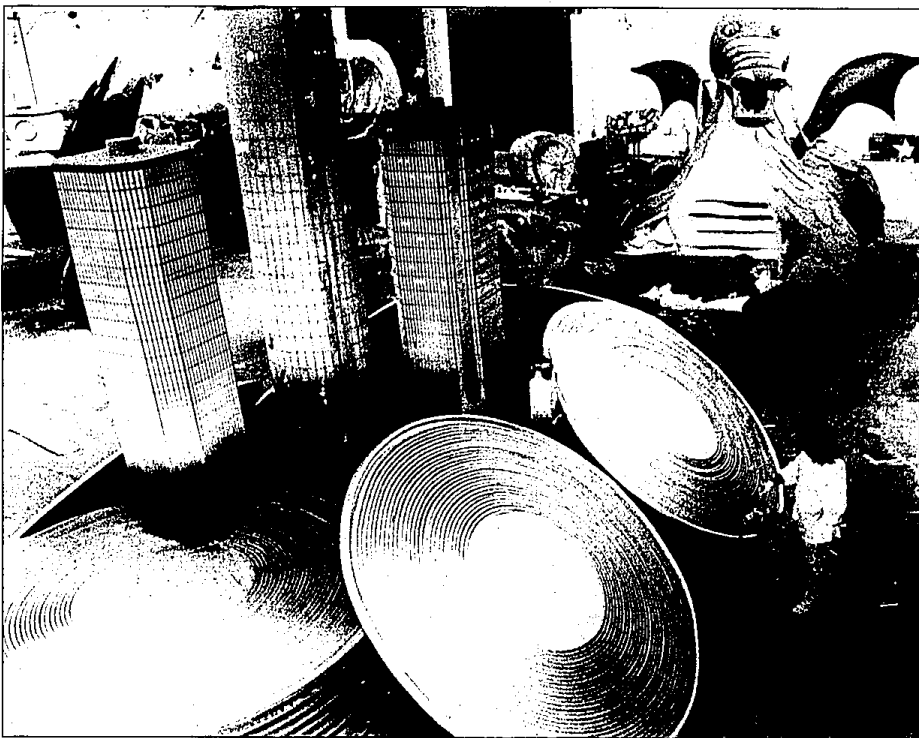
"The first year I wore a head," Lantto said, "I was a head dog."

Since then, Lantto has tried his hand at "every side" of behind-the-scenes parade work.

Why does he keep coming back every year, often working six days a week?

"The most important part of the parade is that it's an institution," Lantto said. "I really get worked up seeing the reaction of the kids. When you see that, you know it's something special."

"Besides, we're all big kids in some way."



photos by BILL HANSEN

Joie Martin adds some touches of gold to the records decorating the float for parade music grand marshal Aretha Franklin.



Mary Kelly, 8, of Troy does some tension testing on a trampoline-equipped parade float.



Bernie Farbrother of Madison Heights does some rough cutting on a Styrofoam head intended for one of the parade floats.