

Santa arrives in the Wright fashion

By CHRISTINE WALDEN

Everyone loves a parade—especially Arthur Wright, director of what some believe to be the world's best parade—the Hudson's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

Every December, Wright, a Troy resident and director of Hudson's special events department, begins work on the 45-minute parade extravaganza that always delights observers.

And it takes the full 12 months to produce the spectacular parade.

Wright's been on the job since 1946, but the years haven't dulled the twinkle in his eye, the spark of his mind or pleasure of his job.

There's a lot of work and a lot of "trauma," he said. "But I love it!"

Besides, Wright confesses, he's still a kid at heart.

I decided when I came here in 1946 to do more spectacular kinds of floats, to do things by way of mechanization." But he gave up on the trend to put movie stars, politicians and celebrities in the parade—the best kept secret for the kids.

ALTHOUGH WRIGHT has handled the parade for the past 24 years, it dates back further than that.

It began 50 years ago with a quiet ramble of home-made floats.

The most action in those days was the parade of the horse or a wave of the hand.

This year, roller skaters will glide across a moving water wonderland. Gymnasts will jump for joy on a giant bed.

The parents will love us for that one! The familiar dragon will snake along, and all the characters from the parade's past will dance and a special 50th anniversary float.

It really, things would have changed. Wright said, but he sped up the process.

He figured if the method of pulling floats improved—from horses to men to cars—the floats themselves had to be more sophisticated. No more would it suffice to have a giant animal that didn't do anything.

Wright demanded action, and he got it—sometimes more than he wanted, but always with results that awe. Floats began having moving parts and fancy designs—which didn't always combine well.

"One rainy Thanksgiving morning we were all lined up. We had made this beautiful giant bird," he recalled. "Its wings flapped, its head moved up and down, its eyes rolled."

Well, we were using a new material on it. It was three dimensional in that it really did look like feathers.

"WE GLUED IT ON with weatherproof cement. And when we got out there, we started it, the wings started to flap, the head rolled—and the skin just slid down to the ground. All we had left was the metal frame."

The emergency repair crew, which always waits nearby for those kind of disasters, quickly dug up some copper wire and skillfully put the skin back in place.

"Not too many people commented," sighed Wright.

"You know, it's a one shot show, and you work on it all year. When the time comes, you make heaven and earth to get it right."

Wright recalled other mishaps—the fellow who lost all his eyebrows from the flash powder on a catfish, the time a giant nest came crashing down from atop a float, the flat tires, the broken wheels, the dragons.

"That thing the dragons was a hister from the start," he said. "You can't see anything under there. By the end of the parade, everyone had made bets in the side and as it rided down the street, you could see all these arms hanging out and waving. They always came out from under there saying, 'Never again!'"

The drag on now moves without human feet, so that problem is solved.

But, said Wright, "Something's bound to happen."

The beauty of it is that most people don't know what's supposed to be there.

ALSO AMONG Wright's memories are some special floats and ideas that have contributed to the parade all these years.

The buildings that drive those crazy little go-karts were Wright's idea.

"I really thought it would be fun to see the head of a great big build sitting in one of those little go-karts," he said.

Everyone who watched agreed.

"I can't remember all of the floats," he said. "A lot of them were pretty fine and sophisticated."

One however, remains the same, and to this day, Wright admits it's his favorite—Santa Claus, of course.

FOR ALL ITS boxy and fantasy, the Thanksgiving Day parade is much more. All year long, a crew of four or five workers, much the Hudson warehouse on Fort and Twelfth streets in Detroit, frantically build a float out of paint, others are finished and stored under yards of canvas.

Children could go wild with a in the warehouse, which seems a land of make believe.

For the men it is all very real. And as the big day approaches and there's still work to be done, a sort of panic sets in.

These men, you see, are not the city's night imagine. They simply work as hard at perfecting everything down to the last blade of grass on an Indian float or the lump of coal that makes the steam-train come alive.

It is a giant task but, when it is over, it's a damn good feeling, said Ben Mette, a float maker for the last 18 years.

"It's an achievement to think that you've done all this. Millions of people are watching. There is no trial run, no trying it out before hand. It has to work."

Mette, Wright and other Hudsonians work together to create the tiny book floats.

"We build strictly from concept," said Wright. "There are no drawings. We will decide on the scale and start to develop it. There must be action in each float, some way or another."

It's a super challenge. And it takes the participation of the entire staff. Without their knowledge, the whole thing wouldn't happen.

No one person can say that he personally did it all.

IN FACT, all of them turn an idea or two into the pot.

We keep them (the floats) in the kids category, the parade is for them," Mette said. "Some of these other parades have celebrities in them, but the kids don't know who they are."

Wright couldn't agree more and upholds that philosophy by inviting Detroit's school-children to enter a float design contest.

Every year, there's a winner and a float to prove it.

And even if a youngster's idea doesn't win, the entries help Wright determine what kind of floats the children want to see.

"We use all of them as a guide," he said. "When we went to the moon, 90 per cent of the drawings were about going to the moon. And there are always about 10 per cent of the kids who have Little Red Riding Hood or other tales. There's always a percentage of everything, a Pinocchio, a dragon, a brat."

THIS YEAR, there will be a Burger King float, a paddle boat with a French fry and tomato paddle wheel, McDonald's (Ronald's) land including do-eved ham-burgers and golden arches, and other company sponsored floats.

"Prices have skyrocketed," said Wright of parade costs. "Lumber, plastic have gone up as much as 50 to 100 per cent." Sponsored floats help defray costs.

ONCE THE FLOATS are completed, all that's left is the parade. Wright wishes it were that simple.

The line-up begins at 4 a.m. Two thousand participants, looking like ducks, geese, storks or babers, have to be put in order. Seventeen floats must be ready to roll, and 13 bands have to be sprinkled throughout the procession.

Then, the parade rolls. It must cover its 2 1/2 mile route in exactly 45 minutes—no more, no less—to accommodate the TV audience.

"The ideal is to have everything 100 feet apart—and they should never stop," says Wright. If the parade stops, he's had it.

If it doesn't get Santa Claus in, I'm in big trouble.

So far Santa has made his TV appearance right on time each year to the delight of those watching 219 TV stations in 41 states. The parade is a national event.

And while it rolls, Wright's dreams come true. The kids' heads and point to floats with longing eyes, and the parents watch the kids—that's what it's all about.

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