

Travel



O&E Thursday, January 30, 1986

St. Paul winter carnival provides hot time for all

ST. PAUL, MINN. — There is a will as strong as Vulcanus Rex and his sooty crew turn the corner of Rice Park in an ancient red fire engine.

The crowd along the parade route leans forward past a rank of red and blue and yellow winter caps to catch sight of them — the Prince of Soot, the Baron de Sparkus and the king of fir himself. The wind chill factor is 11 below zero, but nobody seems to notice.

Boreas Rex, king of the winter winds and reigning monarch of the 100th Street Paul Winter Carnival, has long ago passed the reviewing stand with the Queen of Snows at his side. The official cars and the marching bands are disappearing down Fifth Street, along with the huge floats bearing snow princesses and carved ice palaces.

Now the Vulcans are here, terrors of the town in their red costumes and masks, capes flying behind as they grab laughing women from the crowd and plant black greasy kisses on their cheeks. A greasy-smiled face is a sign of honor during the wild ten days of the carnival.

THE ST. PAUL Winter Carnival is the oldest and one of the largest festivals in the country. Some say that the founders of New Orleans Mardi Gras festival learned their ropes here. It all started 100 years ago when a New York City reporter declared that St. Paul in winter was a frozen Siberia, unfit for human habitation.

The planners set out to show that damned Easterner how much fun a St. Paul winter could be. In 1886 they held their first carnival and built their first ice palace. There was no legend quite good enough for them so they created their own.

According to the legend, King Boreas wandered through paradise until he found the seven hills of St. Paul, where he settled with the princes of the four



The ice sculpture contest is one of 120 events. Other attractions: fireworks, parades, dog sled races and hot-air balloons.

winds, who dominated the four corners of the world.

Boreas, King of Winter, is crowned every year at the beginning of the carnival, which began this year on Jan. 22 and will end Feb. 9.

Every good legend needs a villain, so of course the gods sent Vulcanus Rex, King of Fire, to torment the good King Boreas and delight the citizens of the realm with his antics.

THE SOOTY KING appears unexpectedly with his sooty krewes every year in city bars, in shopping centers, wherever the princes with their greasy black cheeks can leave their mark on passing faces.

At the end of the carnival, the disreputable Vulcanus deposes the proper, elegant Boreas, warning the way to spring.

Psychologists say that crazy winter carnivals are exactly what we need to get through a long winter and this one is crazy in all the right ways. There are 120 events in parks around the city and on nearby Lake Phalen — dog sled races, hot-air balloons, ice sculpture contests and Klondike Kate's casino. And fireworks, parades and rides on the Vulcan fire engines.

This year, to celebrate the hundredth

anniversary of the carnival, the city planned the biggest ice castle ever built in the world, 155 feet of sparkling splendor scheduled to open with fanfare and fireworks on the opening day of the carnival.

IT WOULD have worked if Vulcanus Rex hadn't breathed too much fire and created a January thaw. The palace was only half built when the parade began. They still hope to finish the ice palace by Jan. 31, so that it can shine the last week of the festival.

There have been 17 ice palaces in a century of carnivals, but this year's fantasy would be the only one to equal the palaces built during the first three years. In 1886, it was a huge medieval castle.

In 1887, eight years after Thomas Edison invented the first practical light bulb, it was a Romanesque fantasy glowing with electric light. In 1888, the turreted wonderland was the largest ever built, although it too thawed slowly under the fiery breath of Vulcanus Rex.

This year's ice palace, an abstract fantasy for children's wonderland, was to be the grandest of them all, and the whole city turned out to build it. People who wanted to own a piece of the pal-

ace paid \$10 for one of the 50,000 ice blocks, each weighing 700 pounds and measuring two feet by 3.5 feet by 22 inches.

THE ARCHITECTS, who donated their time, estimate now that the palace would cost \$1.2 million if everything was paid for. The unions donated their time to build it and the people bought the ice, so the out-of-pocket expenses were \$200,000 instead of \$2.5 million.

The system of construction was based on that used in the old days. The city found two men who were involved in the last really major ice palace project in the 1940s. They borrowed an antique ice cutter from another city, built a conveyor belt and went to work.

The ice is cut in huge uniform blocks from the lake, rafted to the conveyor and lifted up hill through a finishing operation that ensures uniform size. Cranes lift the huge blocks to workers waiting to build the walls, layer by layer. No additional materials can be used; wood or steel would melt the ice.

Even the mortar is made of snow and water, and that's what has caused the problem. The ice blocks haven't melted, but the mortar refused to freeze

during the thaw, so the blocks wouldn't hold steady.

On the first day of carnival, the palace was only half built, but good freezing weather has held since then. Everybody is praying that the palace will be finished this week.

In the late 19th century, they got rid of the palace after the carnival by stringing it with hundreds of roman candles and letting the spectacular fireworks melt the edifice.

BUT INSURANCE considerations dominate this year's construction, so the castle will go down as silently as possible when the carnival is over.

Hundreds of other ice sculptures are an important part of each year's Winter Carnival. As we stand on the parade route, watching King Boreas and Vulcanus Rex go by, the layers of people on the edge of Rice Park make a frame of colorful coats, caps and winter boots around the acres of ice sculptors who are busy chopping, chipping and refining their masterpieces for the final judging.

They started at 9 a.m. with 400-pound blocks of ice in a snowy park, in

the center of town. As the day wears on, and children watch wide-eyed, fantastic figures emerge under the sculpting hands: eagles and sea horses, birds in a frozen tree, children holding hands.

ALL EYES were turned on the sculpting until the parade began to wind around the park. Now the crowd faces the street, cheering the young woman being tossed from a blanket into the air, the clown who rides on a high unicycle, the yacht club float that got its funnels caught on the wires as it turned the corner, and of course, on the followers of Vulcanus Rex.

Vulcan's princes capered down the street leaving their greasy kisses behind them as they followed the parade. Now they are coming back, sirens screaming as their fire engine goes the wrong way along the parade route. Sooner or later they will win out against the ice of winter, and spring will come at last.

For more information on St. Paul, which hosts many festivals throughout the year, contact the St. Paul Convention Bureau, B-100, Landmark Center, St. Paul, 55102 or telephone toll-free 1-800-328-6322, Ext. 963.

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