

The Grandest of Grand Floral Parades

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The Centennial Steering Committee meets every week to oversee the planning efforts for the Rose Festival's landmark celebration. This week we heard from the chairman of the Rose Festival's signature event -- the Grand Floral Parade -- about the exciting plans already unfolding.

Mark McGirr, the parade chairman, has a favorite word – HUGE! And that's what the Centennial Grand Floral Parade will be.

On Saturday, June 9, the biggest and grandest Grand Floral Parade in decades – maybe in a century – will make its way through the Memorial Coliseum, past the live television cameras broadcasting to an audience of millions, down four-plus miles of Portland city streets to entertain hundreds of thousands of eager spectators, many of whom will have camped overnight to await this annual tradition!

What will make the Centennial Grand Floral Parade so grand?

For one thing, the parade will be bigger than it's been in years – probably a half hour longer. There will be more floats, more bands and more horses . . . plus more colors, costumes and flowers!

The 2007 Grand Floral Parade will be designed to tell the Rose Festival story, highlighting a walk through a century of celebration. The parade will be divided into separate sections to highlight 'eras' of the parade's history, with favorite floats of the past recreated and famous figures of history featured.

The parade itself has a story to tell about our local and national history. In the hundred years of Rose Festival, its signature event – the Grand Floral Parade – has been cancelled six times, five years during war, and once when the Multnomah Stadium (now PGE Park) was being built. This stadium later became the staging spot for the parade, with thousands of spectators sitting in the stands as the entries covered the vast football field and snaked their way around the grounds and up the ramp.

In 1948 the tragic Vanport flood occurred on Memorial Day, just short weeks prior to the parade. The City Council took a vote whether to continue the event in light of the lives and property lost, and the count was three to two that the parade should go on (since the planning was finished and the money had already been spent). The parade was re-routed to S.E. Portland and actually marched down Foster Road that year.

Another natural disaster had Rose Festival planners scratching their heads in 1980, when, just two days prior to that year's parade, Mt. St. Helen's belched out another blast of ash – sending a dusting over Portland, blanketing the city in the deceptively snow-like stuff. With the cooperation of maintenance workers, float builders, band directors and dedicated volunteers, the parade went on despite the corrosive ash. Spirited spectators covered their faces with the distinctive masks that so many people had worn around town since the first devastating eruption.

Isn't it sometimes more important to celebrate community when times are tough than when everything's rosy?

My memories of parade watching as a kid have nothing to do with a street curb or lawn chair. In 1960 the Memorial Coliseum was constructed on Portland's east side, and the festival's 'big parade' started a tradition that has lasted to this day of sending the line of march through the building and past thousands of paying guests, entering at one end and exiting out the other through big doors built specifically for this purpose.

The Oregonian newspaper called the Coliseum "an extraordinarily fine vantage point" for watching the parade. And since the early 60s, hundreds of thousands of people have watched from the comfort of their reserved seats – including my family and myself! I have so many memories of sitting up in those seats, staring down at floats and bands and dignitaries passing by. I remember sitting up in Section 86 one year with my sister and our aunt, right behind a man in a very fuzzy sweater. Aunt Dorothy was munching on peanuts, and the shells were going everywhere. When that poor man stood up to leave at the end of the parade, his sweater was shedding peanut shells.

Was my face red!

My favorite parts of the parade back then? The horses, especially the pooper-scoopers. It fascinated me to watch them do their important work, so I was always hoping the horses would leave their signature samples as they traversed the indoor route.

Now, years later, having served as the parade manager for nearly two decades, I know parade horses are always more likely to need to 'go' when they get inside that arena, because the experience is fraught with tension for the high strung creatures. The horses are momentarily blinded as they move into the dark, cavernous atmosphere, and it was such a concern that years ago the Association paid to have brighter lights installed in the hallway area leading into the south door.

June 8, 1968 was one of my memorable Coliseum experiences, the parade morning that coincided with the televised funeral of assassinated presidential candidate, Robert F. Kennedy. I remember we had been torn about whether we should actually go to the parade on such a sad day, but the moment of silence inside the Coliseum prior to step-off was a shared experience that was far more impactful than sitting at home watching the funeral on TV. It made such an impression on me that in 2002 I was determined we should re-create the moment in memory of the victims of 9/11. I had goosebumps when Rose Festival President Eldon Tichenor, a man gifted with a great set of pipes, led us through a salute to our servicemen and a truly magical moment of silence, right after Oregon's Miss America, Katie Harmon, sang the National Anthem.

If you're taking the time to read this, no doubt you have Rose Festival memories of your own, unique to your family and friends. Please share them with us via this website. You may see them as part of the Oregonian's 'Tell Us Your Story' collection or reflected in this blog.

Start making plans to mark your spot on the street or, better yet, go now and get your reserved seat either inside or outside the Coliseum for the Centennial Grand Floral Parade! And keep watching our website for more details about this year's grandest parade.