

THE PAST IS

prologue

By
Michael Callahan

AMERICAN ICON



A colorized photo of superhero rodent Mighty Mouse's exuberant turn in the 1951 parade.

Floating on Air

A century on, the country's most beloved Thanksgiving spectacle reaches new heights

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HAT FIRST PARADE, held on a relatively mild Thanksgiving Day in 1924, was extolled as “a marathon of mirth” in splashy newspaper ads. It was actually more akin to a modest church carnival on wheels. Comprising a few marching bands, some clowns, some Mother Goose-themed floats and a small menagerie of animals on loan from Manhattan’s Central Park Zoo that occasionally terrified onlooking children with their howls and growls, the procession managed to trudge a staggering six miles, from 145th Street all the way down to Herald Square, to its final destination: R.H. Macy & Company, America’s largest department store.

Despite its modest offerings, the parade still drew a crowd: By the time Santa, pulling up the rear, descended from his sleigh and climbed a ladder to sit on an ornate gold throne above the store’s brand-new entrance on 34th Street, an estimated 10,000 people were there to cheer him on. It was a crowning achievement in more ways than one: Macy’s was celebrating its just-completed expansion to one million square feet of retail space, which now gobbled up an entire city block from Broadway to Seventh Avenue.

With a blare of his shiny trumpet, Kris Kringle sounded the call for the Macy’s windows to reveal their holiday displays, which the store had branded “The Fair Frolics of Wondertown.” Spectators rushed to the windows, reveling in the dancing marionettes behind the glass.

The parade merited barely a mention in the next day’s papers, but based on the crowd size, Macy’s thought it had a hit on its hands, soon placing ads declaring that “we did not dare dream its success would be so great.” It was the



▲ The Radio City Rockettes, seen in sequined glory in 1966, first kicked their way into the proceedings in 1957.

birth of a new annual tradition that would become as much a part of Thanksgiving as turkey, pumpkin pie or football.

While Macy’s wasn’t the nation’s first Thanksgiving Day spectacle—that honor goes to Philadelphia’s Gimbels parade, launched four years earlier—over time it set the standard for what an American parade could be. Whether you have stood amid the crushing throng, jumping up and down to gawk at a giant Popeye, or simply watched the affair while pleasantly sinking into your sofa, the enrapturing spell of the Macy’s parade—the undeniable pull of its sheer, overwhelming Americanness—never quite fades.

Macy’s marketing established the parade as a clever, homespun tradition to remind people to start buying Christmas gifts. Two factors came to cement its status as communal annual ritual for the nation. The first was the birth of television, which, starting in 1948,

“**WHEN YOU GO TO THE PARADE, YOU UNCONSCIOUSLY ENTER A SPACE THAT’S SACRED.**”



beamed the extravaganza into living rooms nationwide. The other would become the crown jewel of the parade's unabashedly hokey pageantry: its collection of majestic balloons, beginning with a two-story Felix the Cat in 1927. The balloons got ever bigger and more elaborate each year: an inflated army of Snoopys, Underdogs, Bullwinkles and Yogi Bears lazily bobbing their way between skyscrapers, each onlooker's face turned skyward in worship. In the early years, the balloons were released into the air afterward, with a return address provided and a reward as high as \$100 offered for each one's return; locating and retrieving the errant, deflated behemoths became a treasure hunt for area thrill chasers. That tradition lasted until 1932, when 22-year-old student aviator Annette Gibson attempted to catch the 60-foot-long balloon of Tom Cat with her small aircraft, entangling a wing and sending her plane plunging into a tailspin over Jamaica, Queens. Gibson's flying instructor took over the controls and landed them safely.

Over the decades, the parade has evolved into a massive panorama:

In 1948, there were 17 floats, six balloons and a few bands; this year's parade will include 27 floats, a dozen marching bands from across the country, more than 60 balloons, five to seven Broadway numbers, various dance and cheer routines, the occasional chart-topping singer and, of course, those legendary, leggy Radio City Rockettes, a fixture since 1958.

Last year more than 28 million people viewed at home, the largest audience ever. For them, the Macy's parade is far more than a procession of glittery floats and chorine kick lines. Creating a mere spectacle is one thing. But creating a shared sense of national belonging—a piercing pride in being an American, in an era marked by tragic division—is a feat for the ages. “When you go to the parade,” says historian Doug Matthews, author of the 2022 book *Why We Love Parades: Their History and Enduring Appeal*, “you unconsciously enter a space that's sacred.” A miracle on 34th Street, indeed. ♦

A Most Musical Motorcade

SOME OF THE BRASSIEST ACTS TO GRACE THE EVENT OVER SIX TUNEFUL DECADES

By **Chris Klimek**

THE MACY'S THANKSGIVING DAY PARADE was a generation-old tradition when organizers decided to dial up the excitement by adding star performers to the event in the late 1950s. But it wasn't easy to stage a genuine concert on a moving vehicle in cold weather during a live television broadcast. So starting in 1964, the performers would often lip-sync to a playback of music they'd recorded earlier. Here are some of the most memorable musical acts that have gotten America tapping our toes before turkey time.



1958 **BENNY GOODMAN AND HIS SEXTET**

The King of Swing, who'd appeared in the 1934 and 1937 parades as a non-performing celebrity guest, finally got to cook this year on the standard “The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise.”

1980 **SISTER SLEDGE**

If ever a song was designed to be performed atop a festive, slow-moving barge making its way south down a Manhattan thoroughfare, it's the irrepressibly welcoming R&B/disco anthem “We Are Family,” released just 22 months earlier—but already a classic.

1973 **GEORGE JONES AND TAMMY WYNETTE**

The volatile but prolific country music power couple performed “We're Gonna Hold On,” the title track from the second album of duets they released that year. They would divorce in 1975.

1996 **BO DIDDLEY**

The Captain & Tennille, Vanessa Williams and the cast of “Sesame Street” were there, too, but only the then-67-year-old creator of the Bo Diddley Beat ventured a self-diagnosis, performing his new single “Bo Diddley Is Crazy” atop the Tom Turkey float (above).