



Ak-Sar-Ben's Pageants

PARADES are things every American has a perfect right to enjoy. The majority of the population can recall with a chuckle certain long processions of unsteady, flaring and bad-smelling torch lights; throats hoarse from shouting, nice, fresh goddess-of-liberty dresses ruined because the national colors were rained on, and navy blue, visored caps with the names of the presidential and vice presidential candidates pasted on in front. If something like this does not occupy a spare chamber back in some of the earliest brain cells formed by every man and woman, he or she either was raised wrong or had the misfortune to spend a childhood in some other country. In America we parade, not as frequently as in years that will never be seen again on the calendar, but pretty early and often just the same.

It is sad to admit, but it is true, that we are simmering down a little. When King Ak-Sar-Ben I proceeded to rule he had three parades. Of late years his successors are content with two, and some very loyal subjects have been wondering if one would not answer the purpose. The electrical parade, being both unique and better than anything like it annually produced from coast to coast, is yet deeply rooted in affection, but the devising of new ideas for the daylight spectacle weighs heavily on those supposed to be charged with it.

Always Unrivaled and Novel

One reflection is consoling. Every pageant given under the seal of Samson and with the approval of the Ak-Sar-Ben monarch has been gladly welcomed, seen by many and delighted multitudes. More often than not the weather has been kind during the parades. It has been cold, or rained or blown and made things unpleasant for the audience, but the spectators have gone on liking the shows just the same, which goes to prove that the Ak-Sar-Ben parades are quite the unrivaled and novel events they are cracked up to be.

On the night of September 18, 1895, King Ak-Sar-Ben I, the identity of the ruler being protean, had his first parade. It was a brave showing of musicians and floats given up to the industries and commerce of the city, arranged with the "Feast of Mondamin" idea. A fine float was prepared for his majesty and he rode on it. The following night the second parade of the week was given. The fashion of daylight parades had not set in. It was a long and imposing array, fully 6,000 men being in line. There were legions of soldiers under state and federal commission, hosts of fraternal and secret orders and bands between every separate organization.

Original Key to the City

The king, really came to the festival on the night of the big illuminated parade, which had fourteen floats, representing varied subjects, such as a Nebraska corn-fed steer, the harvest time, war of the elements, Mondamin's court, Samson, fountain of youth, water witch, which was still a sprite the objective point of prayers in this commonwealth; the enchanted forest, a consummation wished for, and so on.

It is hardly necessary to say that the floats were not lighted by electricity, as it remained for Omaha to develop this scheme several years later. Mayor George P. Bemis was the first executive to have the honor of welcoming an Ak-Sar-Ben king and giving him the stereotyped "key to the city."

King Ak-Sar-Ben II was introduced to the "Feast of Olympia," also with three parades. Parade No. 1 had 6,000 persons in line and was civic and military in character. An electric float was seen for the first time equipped and manned by Union Pacific Lodge No. 17 of the Ancient Order of United Workmen. Another electrical device introduced was colored incandescent torches rigged by the Electrical Workers' union by tapping the trolley wires and making connection with the rails.

Parade No. 2 portrayed in floats the agricultural prosperity of the state. The counties had been invited to compete for prizes, but only Douglas, Sarpy and Holt responded. Sarpy county had an immense ship of state. The Union Pacific had a display of a realistic locomotive and train. Fire companies appeared in line and many business houses advertised on floats.

Genesis of Electrical Floats

The third and biggest pageant treated of mythological subjects, with the king as Jupiter, followed by floats for Juno, Flora, Hercules, Ceres, Bacchus, Apollo, Mercury, Vulcan, Justice and the like, all pronounced handsome and the finest seen up to date.

The annals of 1897 say that 3,500 persons followed the marshal of the civic and military parade, which contained such perennial standbys in these matters as the troops from Fort Crook, Thurston Rifles, Omaha Guards and cadets. Three electrical floats came out in the mechanical parade the second night. Their advent had been kept secret and they were well received and caused much admiration. One float was given up to the Klondike; Samson was represented thirty feet tall; Jonah was shown inside a giant whale by an alleged Roentgen X-ray device. Jonah was drinking beer at a small table and so avidly did he apply himself that near the end of the show he felt impelled to lurch from his chair and roll through the side of the whale. In the same line of floats Ak-Sar-Ben's court, a Moorish temple and Electra's court were shown.

Parade No. 3, illuminated, showed "Progress of Quivera," from before the time of the Jamestown settlement to the eve of the Trans-Mississippi exposition. George F. West was first given credit for establishing the theme and originating the general ideas of the floats. One wagon related the bountiful harvest; another Coronado leaving Barcelona in 1535; the land of the Aztec, a vision of the plains, the vanishing races, the end of French sovereignty, the march of Lewis and Clark across the continent, the progress of civilization, and was the last, but very symbolic, the "Return of Prosperity." A foretaste of next year's doings was glimpsed in a float dedicated to the exposition.

The reign of Ak-Sar-Ben IV was glorified in the

highest possible way by the presence of President William McKinley. It was Transmississippi exposition year, remember, and the president journeyed in a special train from Washington to visit the fair, see the fine sights of Ak-Sar-Ben and sanction and participate in the great Peace Jubilee week of the exposition.

The parades that year were particularly elaborate, the third being the combination of the two others, as explained. The first parade had Washington Irving's "Alhambra" for its genesis. It was deemed strange that scenes from Spain should be selected for public depicting so soon after the unpleasantness with that nation. It was assured, however, that the main attention would be given to the Moors, and the "glory of Spain subdued." The Moors were exalted at every turn. In this pageant they were the real things without doubt or cavil.

Draws on Planets and Stars

The electrical parade of 1898 was entitled a "Pageant of the Heavenly Bodies," and included such celebrities as Pegasus, Mercury, Draco, Polaris, Saturn and Mars. Aside from the astronomical mythology were some other floats that brought the real cheers. One showed the eagle of the Republic with the crown of Spain in its talons; another "Our Heroes of the Sea," with busts of Dewey, Sampson, Schley and Hobson; another "Our Heroes on Land," with a large bust of the president. The last float gave the thought, "Our country, may it ever be right, but right or wrong, our country." Bartholdi's familiar statue of Liberty was the main figure with attendants of Fame, History and Cuba.

They were still addicted to night parades and no other in 1899, but they cut the trio of old down by one. The wind blew a gale during the civic and military procession. The dust made looking at it extremely uncomfortable. Union labor turned out well. One of the features was forty-eight members of Company L of the First Nebraska back from the Philippine campaign. Of humor there was little.

The illuminated parade had "Scenes from Popular Operas, Comic and Grand," as its theme. These were taken from Lohengrin, Siegfried, Tannhauser, the Fortune Teller, Carmen, Wang, Wizard of the Nile, Aida, etc.

The first confetti in quantities hurtled about the streets of Omaha was seen at the afternoon parade of 1900, when this came as an innovation in Ak-Sar-Ben festivities. Merry makers were ordered to mask, but few did. Forty fraternal lodges were in procession with about 3,000 members, but 150 Ak-Sar-Ben knights made fools out of themselves for the sport of the mob. In the hottest heat of a national campaign representations in grotesque ways of McKinley, Bryan and Hanna were apropos. Fifty professional hoboes with their antics made a hit. The initiation at the Den was hinted at on a float showing how the victim shot down a barbed chute into a tub of boiling water and was hurried away to the steam room for renovation. Another float had to deal with the open door policy for China.

Advent of the New Century

The electrical parade dealt with "Isles of the Sea," and the most realistic bit was the total consumption of Hawaii by fire from the volcano Kilauea. Pele, the fire goddess, was badly scorched and blistered. Trained chemicals in the cavity of the volcano blew up and the rest just happened. Other floats covered all climes and included Japan and Iceland, England and St. Helena, Cuba and the spot that Robinson Crusoe called home.

Festivities the following year were overcast with sadness. The body of President McKinley lay in state awaiting transportation to Canton and burial. So as to give Thursday, when the grave was filled, over to mourning the date of the electrical procession was shoved forward to Wednesday. The day parade was given that afternoon. Soldiers, Indians, Highlanders, dancing girls, snake eaters and camels participated and the Elks made a good showing, as they had for years.

Rain fell during the electrical turnout, which was built from descriptions of "When Knighthood Was in Flower." There was the field of the cloth of gold, Richard, Coeur de Lion, Frederick Barbarossa, Chevalier Bayard, the Knights of the Round Table, the Maid of Orleans, though what knighthood did to prevent her burning at the stake is missing from history; Don Quixote, Hamlet, and so on.

For the day pageant in 1903 something specially elaborate by way of an automobile flower parade had been prepared. Again the wind was violent, mean and nasty, and the result was an atmosphere heavier laden with paper blossoms and dust than ozone. Women had a task protecting hats and ruffles and light-weight skirts. Nearly every motor car in town was in line and most of the effects were striking and some elaborate. It was the first time that Omaha society people took part in an affair of the kind.

Later Literature of Pageantry

Henry W. Longfellow was drawn on for ideas for the electrical floats, which were a series of his "poem pictures." Pegasus led, closely followed by the Bell of Atri. The Spanish Student, Evangeline, Helen of Troy, Wreck of the Hesperus, Courtship of Miles Standish, and other familiar figures and scenes from the great poet were all there.

Everyone remembers vividly the parade of Fiskepaugh's circus in 1904, only last year. It was by far the cleverest of all the Ak-Sar-Ben parades.

The night parade of electricity took cognizance of Nebraska's semi-centennial as a territory. The theme was "The Story of the State," and it was told well and dazlingly. The spectator was taken back before the dawn of history, shown through the tropical and ice ages, given a view of Coronado in his search for the Seven Cities of Cibola, introduced to glimpses of commerce, communication, agriculture and the like, and brought strictly up to date in the symbolic sense of the word. The floats were pronounced more gorgeous than ever before.

This year's theme is "Fraternity."

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