



The South Shore Drill Team was a sight to see during their performance in the annual Threshermen's Reunion Parade on Sunday. The drill team makes up just one facet of a parade that has lots of moving pieces. LUKE SMUCKER/DAILY LEADER

Putting on yearly parade requires all kinds of help

By Luke Smucker
Staff Reporter

The calm and hopeful dynamic of the crowds positioned on sidewalks awaiting the start of the annual Threshermen's Reunion Parade was a stark contrast to the controlled chaos near Lincoln School, where numerous floats, vehicles and parade walkers prepared for the start of one of the city's long-standing traditions.

"Each year, the Threshermen's Reunion Parade is a big parade and it would not get down the street without all of the volunteers," said Mindi Terrell, Pontiac Area Chamber of Commerce executive director. "People have no idea how crazy it is that day.

The roads are clogged and people are getting here and going there. We are zipping around on golf carts taking care of last-second preparations — it's just crazy. But, it's fun crazy, you know?"

To help add more "control" to the controlled chaos on the morning of the parade, Terrell said a parade line-up is physically created with each float representing a piece of paper. Terrell said this portion of the parade preparations is particularly important to the pacing of the parade.

"You don't want two floats that both have music being placed right next to each other," Terrell explained. "There are bands and floats with music during the parade, so you've got to make sure they are far enough apart from

See 'PARADE' Page A6

PARADE

Continued from Page A1

each other. Also, you don't want to have too many tractors in a row, so you've got to keep this constant diversity going."

While there are many volunteers who play a pivotal role in the parade's execution, Terrell said one of the most notable volunteers is Jim Williams, this year's parade chairman, who has been volunteering with the parade since 1972.

"Back in 1972, I got a letter or a phone call from John Opperman, who was the parade chairman at that time. He organized a meeting at the former Pontiac National Bank," Williams said. "I went there and found out it was a staff meeting for the parade. At the time, I had never been involved before, but I knew John. He put Eldon Smith and I in charge of the horses in Play Park.

"The next year, when I volunteered, I was appointed to work at the corner of Chicago and South streets. I did that for three or four years. Basically, you feed the various participants into the parade lineup as their numbers come up."

Williams said he has continued to volunteer with the parade each year because of his love of the traditions in Pontiac.

"I lived at the corner of South and Chicago, so the parade on Labor Day was always around us," Williams said. "Once you get involved with the parade, you just naturally follow

through with it each year."

Similar to his own humble beginnings, Williams said he likes to assign new volunteers to a corner. Once a volunteer has their placement, Williams said it's important to go through what the list of duties and responsibilities are.

"It's chaos, but it's organized chaos," Williams said. "Once they have gone through the whole process, it's pretty easy to understand what the procedures are. From there, you just gotta keep up the good work."

Williams served as chairman of the parade from 1987 until 2011. After that year, he took a three or four-year break before coming back to be parade chairman and has retained the position ever since.

"Having Jim's history with the parade is critical," Terrell said. "We have standard operating procedures for the parade, but the document is 15 pages long. Even then, there's still information that's not in there because it's in people's heads.

"If we all disappeared today and someone completely new had to do the parade next year, I think they could figure most of it out through the documents we've written, but there are still just things that you would miss."

At the beginning of each year, Williams and other parade organizers start looking toward the next year's parade. Williams mentioned that ideas for parade themes tend to come to him at odd times, so he always has a pad of paper nearby.

"Sometimes I'll think of something late at night and get up to write it down if I think it'll be a good parade theme," he said. "I take it seriously because I am put in charge of continuing a tradition for the City of Pontiac."

As good as a parade theme may sound on paper, Williams stated there are always going to be people who aren't happy with it.

"You hope that the theme we chose makes it easy for people to build floats to fit it," he said. "However, once the day of the parade comes, you'll have half

the people who think it has too many tractors, you'll have some people who think it has too many cars. Then, you've got another group that doesn't think you have enough marching bands. So, you just have to do what you can do and follow through with the traditions of the parade in order to get through one more year."

In addition to helping with organizing the parade, Williams also helps with the sign painting for the parade, a voluntary service he has provided since around 1977.

"The parade chairman at the

time wanted to know if I could paint the signs because up to that point, I had been painting what we call the "stake signs," he said. "The stake signs are a 7-inch-by-11-inch sign that goes in the left side of the windshield of the unit so that when it goes by the reviewing stands, the judges can figure out what the float is and then the float or unit can be judged correctly."

After painting those signs for a few years, the parade chairman asked if he could paint the bigger sponsor signs.

"I said, 'Well, I'm not a professional sign painter or an artist, I'm just a sign painter,'" Williams said. "But I've been painting them ever since. I don't do it because I love it, painting the signs is just part of prepping for the parade. Fortunately, we've cut back on the signs and changed the format. It used to take about 40 hours to paint all of them and now we're down to 20."

At the end of the day, Williams said what makes it all worth it for him is the calm before the parade on Sunday morning.

"When we show up at about 7 a.m. and you see that people already have their lawn chairs out and their blankets out," Williams said. "They're getting prepared for the parade that doesn't start until that afternoon, so it's great to see. The young kids that are there, when they get older they bring their families and that's good. It's always good to continue a tradition."



Parade Chairman and volunteer sign painter Jim Williams paints a sponsor sign for the annual Threshermen's Reunion Parade. Williams has been painting signs for the parade since 1977.

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