

# The Lighter~Than~Air Society Newsletter

Issue # 1 May 2008

Greetings LTAS Members,  
Welcome to the first edition of our new communication tool for our membership. The LTAS Newsletter will be published three times a year to inform you of what the Society is doing here in Akron. We want you to know how the Board of Directors is working continuously to promote the Society and to preserve and display our outstanding collection of artifacts, as well as inform you of the events we are involved with that promote the Society. Our board is an excellent mix of industrial, government and educational representatives who are familiar with a variety of aspects needed to connect to the community and beyond.

One of our main public presentations of our collection occurs here in the Akron Historic Exhibit at the Lock 3 Park in downtown Akron. The exhibit is a consortium of many area historical organizations here who work cooperatively to keep this excellent location operating. It is almost entirely operated by volunteers from the groups involved and is open free to the public. We have had over 122,000 visitors to that location in the 5 years it has been open. Visitors have come from 37 States and 17 Countries. We are constantly working to improve the items we present, and will keep you appraised of what is going on at that venue.

We will focus on these types of local issues in the Newsletter and not attempt to replace the technical and historical issues that are traditionally presented in the *Buoyant Flight*. It has been difficult to keep up the frequency its publication, and we are establishing this newsletter to maintain our communication with you on a more regular basis between *Buoyant Flight* issues.

To correct and update your records, we published issues of *Buoyant Flight* almost regularly through November-December 2005 (Vol. 53, Number 1), the last issues were March-April 2006 (Vol 53 Number 3), Summer, 2006 (Vol. 53, Number 4), and Winter 2007 (Vol. 53 Number 5). This should bring you up to date on the issues that should be in your library or collection.

This newsletter contains an excellent article by one of our board members, Ron Syroid. It was published in the November 2007 issue of Akron Life and Leisure Magazine and written before the parade and annual banquet occurred. It is republished here thanks to Ron's generosity. It is an excellent example of an event sponsored and promoted by the Society to keep our name before the public and to be involved in an event that was

enjoyed by a huge public audience and was greatly appreciated by the City of Akron to help them promote their annual "Akron Holiday Parade". The use of the parade balloons created the largest turnout in it's history because of our statewide promotion. The City of Akron has decided to make the use of the parade balloons an annual event.

We look forward to future issues to keep in contact with you and inform you of what your Society is doing.



## THE "HAPPY DRAGON" INVADES AKRON AT THE HOLIDAYS

**"Let's have a parade !"** by Ron Syroid

When Macy's began its Thanksgiving Day parades, a new American tradition was born. The giant character balloons, built by The Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. in Akron for more than 50 years, really made the event unique. Yet, until this year, Akron crowds have never enjoyed seeing huge creations in their own festivals.

For a long time Dave Osterland has dreamed of character balloons in the annual Akron Holiday Parade. Now, as Chairman of the Lighter-Than-Air-Society (LTAS), his dream will be fulfilled. Thanks to the efforts of LTAS, an organization dedicated to all lighter-than-air craft, a dragon and reindeer will fly downtown on Saturday, Nov. 24, he said. The University of Akron float will carry an inflated Zippy, too. They will then all be displayed at Lock 3



Park.

"Flying High" ceremonies to commemorate the nonprofit society's 55th anniversary, will include presenting Manfred Bass, former long time director of Macy's Parade Studio, at events in Akron. Artifacts, rare photographs and books of lighter-than-air history will be displayed through December in the Akron-Summit County Library and films will be shown..

The LTAS will partner with the library to offer free screenings in the downtown Main Branch auditorium. "Miracle on 34th Street," the story of Santa Claus as an employee at Macy's, using the famous parade as background, will be shown during the holidays for the movie's 60th anniversary. The History Channel documentary, "Inside Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade," will be in a special program on Sunday, Nov. 11 to highlight Akron's role in the big parade. The balloons in the Akron event will symbolize a tradition that stretches back to the early days of the Macy's parades.

Macy's parades have thrilled people since the very beginning. About 300 immigrant employees asked the store's executives for a pageant to celebrate America. At the command, "Let's have a parade!" they stepped off on Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 27, 1924. It was their party and it was raucous.

Marching down Broadway, stilt-walkers, acrobats, jugglers, clowns, and bands joined camels, donkeys, goats and elephants from the Central Park Zoo. Onlookers spontaneously followed them through the heart of Manhattan. That first procession ended when Santa Claus arrived in Herald Square at Macy's animated marionette Christmas display, "The Fairy Folk Frolics of Wondertown," in its 34th Street windows. The "World's Largest Department Store" had a crowd pleaser. Seizing its public relations gift, Herbert Straus, president of the R. H. Macy & Co., quickly announced the 1925 Christmas Parade, as they were called until 1935. He promised a new surprise and established the typical tease to build anticipation each year.

The caged lions and tigers in the 1925 and 1926 celebrations growled and hissed and scared the youngsters, so the beasts were banished. Instead, the theatrical talents of Macy's designer and puppeteer Tony Sarg imagined a different type of excitement. For the 1927 parade he designed big, air-inflated creations. He needed an industrial partner and called Goodyear, who built Felix the Cat and a 60-foot dinosaur. Carried along the streets, the rubbery figures were a smash hit. Sarg was inspired. To boost the spirit of the Nov. 29, 1928 parade, Macy's asked Goodyear for helium filled character balloons to float over the New York City streets. The rubber maker's work in buoyant flight had

received national attention. The collaboration was ideal.

Goodyear employees had been developing the technical expertise since 1912. They had built weather and surveillance balloons, dirigibles like the *Akron* and *Macon*, and blimps for the Navy. Company executive Paul W. Litchfield liked all types of aircraft. Lighter-than-air ships especially intrigued him, according to Ren Brown, 82, who co-founded the LTAS in 1952 as an employee group. Motivated by Litchfield's talks about aviation to his Goodyear Heights Boy Scout troupe, Brown started as a blimp mechanic after graduation in 1943 and eventually became a pilot. He saw Macy's character balloons constructed. Often overlooked in lighter-than-air stories, they were a fascinating diversion that required the same skills and talents.

Using Sarg's design drawings, employees cut rubber into basic geometric patterns. Cones turned into noses and hats, spheres made heads and bodies, and cylinders became arms and legs. They seamed and stitched the shapes into "balloonatics," a term Sarg invented. Employees added line attachments for the 20 handlers who maneuvered each character. Goodyear crafted and tested the balloons in Akron to check for helium leaks, then boxed and shipped them to Macy's warehouse. Among the first flying animals in 1928 were a 40-foot blue elephant, a dragon, a tiger and a 50-foot hummingbird.

Macy's released some balloonatics afterwards. They escaped the canyons of tall buildings and soared away into the sky to the delight of the crowds. Rewards were offered for their return, and some were shot down for the bounty. After near tragic incidents when daredevil pilots captured balloons in flight, the practice was discontinued in 1933.

Anyway, by then Macy's and Goodyear had created the sensational signature image that made the festival unique in the world. The behemoth balloons grabbed headlines like, "Terrible Flying Dragon Invades Broadway," in 1929. Macy's had truly created a Broadway production with its own superstars.

Each year at least one new, colorful character was introduced. Tony Sarg's assistant designer, famed puppet master Bil Baird, worked closely with the experienced professionals at the Wingfoot Lake hanger and Akron Airdock. On his 1930 float, Santa rode a dirigible, in a nod to Goodyear and its airships.

Mickey Mouse flew in 1934. Popular cartoons were often character models. However, joining Mickey that year was a caricature of Eddie Cantor,



the radio and screen star. The only other person ever so honored was Harpo Marx. In 1961 Bullwinkle rose to the adventure by flying high above the crowds, and Snoopy first flew above treetops in 1968. Underdog roamed in 1965, Kermit sailed in 1977, and Spiderman debuted in 1991.

Few beyond Manhattan knew of the mirthful march and its flying giants. But Goodyear workers did. The 30,000 rubber and aircraft employees and their families saw the goodwill ambassadors displayed in a unique setting at their world headquarters. Each Christmas season the children of every employee got a gift from the company, according to retiree Janet Rudolph. In the Goodyear Hall gymnasium stood a large decorated tree and a mountain of presents. The Goodyear Concert Band played songs of the season from the balcony. Macy's colorful character, inflated and sitting in a corner, cheered the endless line that slowly moved through the vast room all day long. With a smile, Robin Wallace remembered she always chose a doll in a glass bell. "I don't know which balloon stood next to Santa Claus," she said, "But it seemed 100 feet high!"

The pageant reached a wide audience through the media following World War II. It had been suspended during 1942-1944 when rubber and helium were critical resources. However in 1945, with the traditional command, "Let's have a parade!" the march resumed in full glory. It was televised nationally for the first time. Meanwhile, a native New Yorker wrote a screenplay about the real Santa Claus coming to town.

Hollywood used Macy's Parade for the uplifting post-war story of hope, "Miracle on 34th Street," starring Maureen O'Hara, John Payne and 9-year-old Natalie Wood. The film was nominated for Best Picture, and Edmund Gwenn received an Oscar for portraying Kris Kringle. Ironically the movie opened in the summer of 1947. However, its popularity grew, so it played continuously at Radio City Music Hall into the holidays, and Macy's invited the stars to the festivities. From TV coverage and the movie, America finally learned of the Macy's Parade that started as the employees' pageant for New Yorkers.

Some balloons were returned to Akron and remodeled after the pieces were separated. Using revised drawings, they were repainted a different color and then restitched to produce completely new characters. Laffo the Clown of 1940 had been the Tin Man in the 1939 parade, and the 1940 Superman became the Football Player in 1941. Among those seen in the movie was the Baseball Player, which had been Bobo the Clown, as Natalie Wood's skeptical character explained.

Through the years Macy's had some changes, too. Jean McFaddin became the producer in 1977, and the "Parade Lady" restored the emphasis on Santa and the

children. Having a theatrical background, she wanted the crowd entertained while waiting at Herald Square. So Broadway performers danced and sang until the procession arrived. Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade has been broadcast on live TV to 65 million viewers annually with the Rockettes and stage stars under McFaddin's regime. "It's the longest running show on Broadway," she said.

She worked with Goodyear until 1983, when the company withdrew to focus on its core business after an era that spanned more than half a century. Macy's designs changed, too, and Aerostar used newly developed materials and colors to construct more modern styles.

Manfred Bass, who guided the creation of balloons for the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade for 30 years, and Bill Smith, who has supplied balloons to over 500 parades since 1987, will be the featured speakers at the society's fund-raising dinner on Saturday, Nov. 10, according to Osterland, and also at the library at the public program on Sunday, Nov. 11. About 100 handlers from LTAS and other organizations will march four high-flying balloons; the happy dragon, a reindeer, a dinosaur and a large candy cane in Akron's event. With a broad grin Dave Osterland said enthusiastically, "Let's have a parade!"



#### **The L-T-A Society Directors:**

David Osterland (Chairman), David Gowans (Vice-Chairman), Benjamin Schlater (Treasurer), James Boyazis, Eric Brothers, P. Rendall Brown, John S. Cunningham, Robert Handelman, John Miller, Pat Munka, Ron Syroid, Steven Paschen, Loren Seely, Timothy Toppen, David Wertz. Honorary members Howard Flood, Charles Huettner and James Shock..

Recording Secretary: Sandy Bee Lynn

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**PURPOSE:** *To further knowledge pertaining to the history, science and techniques of buoyant flight; to encourage the use of lighter-than-air transportation; and to establish and maintain a library and museum on lighter than air.*

*Everyone is welcome to join*

### The LTA Society Membership Application

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Email address \_\_\_\_\_

#### Types of membership available:

- ☐ Active Membership, U.S. & Canada: \$25 per year
- ☐ Active Membership, **all other countries:** \$35 per year
- ☐ Benefactor Membership: \$100 per year

☐ Life Active Membership:  
(NEW! Senior rates!)

- ☐ \$425 - Up to Age 55
- ☐ \$325 - Age 55 to 70
- ☐ \$225 - Age 70+

- ☐ New Membership      Please mark your envelope ATTN NEW MEMBERSHIP or
- ☐ Renewal              ATTN RENEWAL to speed processing.
- ☐ **Please note:** My address has changed to the one written above

Make checks or money-orders in U.S. funds payable to **The Lighter-Than-Air Society** and mail to:  
**THE LIGHTER-THAN-AIR SOCIETY, 526 S. MAIN ST., STE. 406, AKRON, OH 44311 U.S.A.**

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