

Old Floats

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Most Rotarians in Bemis, Tennessee hadn't given much thought to where old floats go when they die, until the December meeting when Jim Kerr announced that he needed three club members to help him rescue Mr. and Mrs. Santa, four elves, an unknown number of reindeer, and two nutcrackers from a condemned warehouse in Memphis.

The following Wednesday, Jim led a convoy of two Chevy Silverados and a Ford F-350 to the dilapidated facility, where they loaded their papier mâché loot: a life-size sleigh and four reindeer, a train loaded with brightly wrapped but empty packages, two 11-foot toy soldiers and two nutcrackers about the same size, four five-foot elves, and Mrs. Santa's bust (which was an impressive nine feet from her neck to the crown of her grey head). The corresponding Santa head disintegrated while it was being tied down with bungee cords.

In retrospect, someone should have known that there was peril in those artificial artifacts when packages started flying out of the sleigh on Interstate 40 around the Highway 14 exit into Covington. Jim Kerr, however, was riding high as he rolled down his crew cab window with each loss and yelled, "Merry Christmas!" into the wind.

The annual Bemis, Tennessee Christmas Parade was hosted every year by the Rotary Club. Almost 80 entries were scheduled for the fabulous nighttime event: 38 floats, 11 bands, 14 assorted dance and singing groups, and the Antique Car Club. And of course, the city's Santa entry, with Pastor William Wells from Siloam Southern Baptist Church as the jolly old elf because he fit the costume.

In addition to creating their club float this year, the Rotarians helped other groups with their entries. The nutcrackers went to Boy Scout troop 774 and the sleigh

with its reindeer were donated to the city. The soldiers, elves, and train were a bit too disheveled for resurrection into this year's parade, so they were warehoused in Jim's garage for reconditioning during the summer.

The City of Bemis's entry was undoubtedly the best-organized float, because it was there year after year. No one worried whether or not the pastor-Santa would show up, or if there was enough candy for the city employees' children to toss. These details were always under control. But the new, old sleigh had arrived from Memphis only a few days earlier, and one of its four reindeer was missing an antler. Rotarian Billy Qualls solved the dilemma with duct tape and an actual antler from his father's stuffed prong-horn antelope. The repaired antler looked a lot like a tube from a roll of paper towels, but it was better than no antler at all. And, since it was a *real* antler, no one dared mention it to Billy.

The churches' floats had the same themes every year: men in brown robes and sandals, kings with rhinestone-studded shoeboxes, Mary clutching a baby doll in a towel, and assorted livestock. But Jim Kerr had a bigger vision for this year's First United Methodist float. He supervised the installation of Mrs. Santa's head onto a four-wheel trailer, along with floodlights and a sign across her bosom reading, "Mrs. Santa Invites You." Additional signs on the float's sides specified "First United Methodist Church." The float was completed with white plastic skirting and fuzzy red garland around its outside edges.

On Sunday morning First Methodist's pastor had no shortage of volunteers when he announced from the pulpit that any child could ride in the trailer and fling candy to the crowds. But there were no takers for the driver of the church's 15-passenger van which pulled the float, so the pastor conscripted the church organist, Martha Smith.

The afternoon of the parade was overcast and a chilly fifty degrees. The entire Rotary club was at the intersection of Highway 69 and Pinhook Road. In the

parking lot of the old Piggly Wiggly, Martha backed the church van up to the United Methodist float. Dick Greene had duct-taped a small generator onto the tongue of the trailer, and he tried to get the flood lights going.

Martha got out and surveyed the float. Mrs. Santa looked alarmingly like the drawing of Martha White on sacks of Martha White flour. She had a three-foot bun of grey hair on her seven-foot head atop her two-foot neck and shoulders. Her kindly papier mâché face was a little wider than the trailer. Wire-rimmed glasses framed her eyes, each about the width of a man's shoulders. The children would stand under her nose, between the Mrs. Santa Invites You sign and the floodlights. The kids would be blinded. If the lights were working. Which they weren't.

Martha waited, not so patiently, for the generator to begin working. Band members milled about the parking lot, practicing scales and showing off while trying not to look like they were showing off. Beauty queens teetered around in the gravel parking lot. Dance instructors jostled for their kick lines' positions on the parade route. Methodist children arrived and piled excitedly onto the trailer. Other floats turned on their lights.

At dusk a Rotarian directed Martha into her place in the parade line. It was apparent that Mrs. United Methodist Santa would have no illumination. Martha stared straight ahead, down Highway 59.

And so she drove the van slowly, pulling the trailer filled with giggling children who had no idea that the crowd's gesturing and laughter was anything but normal for a fabulous float. The kids flung handfuls of candy into the throng, riding in the shadow of a mysteriously dark head. A huge head. A First United Methodist Church recycled Christmas float head.

