



Early Years of the Set of Pieces

The Natchitoches Christmas Festival soon grew to mean more than Christmas lights strung across the downtown area. The first Christmas set piece, credited to Burgdorf was a piece of metal twisted into a “Star of the East” which was six feet across and lit with Christmas lights. It was placed on the banks of Cane River Lake across from Front Street. Charles Solomon, a City Utility employee, built the next “Star of the East” that is approximately twenty-one feet across. Solomon, known as Mr. Christmas, created forty set pieces during his four decades while serving as chief electrical inspector. Charles Maggio helped Solomon create the set pieces after beginning work in the Power and Light Department in 1936. Solomon and Maggio volunteered their services to the city long after their retirement in 1973 and 1976, respectively. Until 2002, set pieces were permanently placed along the riverbank. The producers of the movie “YaYa Sisterhood” scouted Natchitoches for the filming of the movie. When they learned that the set pieces were permanent and would not be removed, the producers opted to film the movie in another city. Charles Brossett, a city utilities employee, began making removal set pieces along with the artist of the project Terry Elter. All of the set pieces have been rebuilt to enhance the splendor of Christmas and are removed at the conclusion of each season to enhance the serene beauty of the river and the ambiance of the downtown area. The famous set pieces can also be seen in the movie “Steel Magnolias”, which was produced in 1989 in Natchitoches.

Maintaining the “City of Lights”

Maintaining the thousands of Christmas lights is a fulltime job for the Natchitoches Utility Department. This department is responsible for stringing and maintaining the thousands of lights and for the design and construction of all set pieces making them unique to the Natchitoches community. Today over one hundred set pieces are displayed along the East side of Cane River Lake. This project earned the Natchitoches Utility Department the 2001 Louisiana Main Street Award for Best Public Improvement in a downtown area.

The Parade

Through the years, unique traditions have evolved that allow the Natchitoches community to celebrate in its own special way. The first Christmas Festival Parade is believed to have taken place in the 1940s. The parade leaves the grounds of Northwestern State University traveling through the streets of the Historic District. The parade features bands from Northwestern State University and high schools throughout the region. Dancing groups, queens, themed floats and costumed characters provide revelry for the thousands lining the parade route. Grand Marshalls, Mrs. Claus and, of course, Santa Claus are always favorites. Natchitoches royalty include Miss Merry Christmas, who serves as queen of the season, the Christmas Belles, Miss City of Lights, the Christmas Angels, and Miss Natchitoches Teen. Additionally, queens from other cities and festivals are featured in the parade.

Fireworks

In 1936, a fireworks display was added to the festival. Allen Cox and Sam West conceived the idea and initiated funding from local businesses. The display cost \$300.00. Today's fireworks shows cost over \$100,000 and are a spectacle every Saturday from the Saturday before Thanksgiving until New Years Eve. Festival Cuisine The Natchitoches Christmas Festival offers large variety of food items, including funnel cakes, cotton candy, hamburgers, meat pies, alligator etc. Possibly the most sought-after festival food is the famous Natchitoches meat pie, which is available from local restaurants and food vendors along the riverbank.

Christmas Queens

The tradition of selecting Miss Merry Christmas began in 1956 when Judy Huble, a 17-year-old Natchitoches high school senior was chosen to represent the Christmas festival. Her responsibilities were to ride in the parade and to promote the Christmas Festival on the radio, this tradition continues today. Brittany Wright made history in 2001 when she was crowned Miss Merry Christmas. Her mother Aimee Rabalais was crowned in 1972. Both she and her mother rode together in the 75th Christmas Festival parade.

Christmas Festival Poster

The Natchitoches Arts Council is responsible for selecting the annual Christmas Festival Poster. The first Christmas Festival Poster was unveiled in 1980. Local artists and artist from around the country submit artwork to be considered for the poster. Previous posters have been created in all mediums. Framed prints of the festival posters, which are signed and numbered, have become popular gifts for residents of Natchitoches and visitors to bring home to their families. The money raised from poster sales provides three scholarships at Northwestern State University for students in creative and performing arts.

Gala

Northwestern State University School of Creative and Performing Arts and the University has provided some type of entertainment the night before the Festival for more than thirty years. The Christmas Gala emerged from that tradition and presents two evening performances and two children's matinees on the Friday before Festival Day each year.

Santa Claus House

The Santa Claus House, located on the downtown riverbank in the Historic District, was first built in 1965 and remodeled in 1984. Members of several civic organizations, such as the Lion's Club, Kiwanis Club, and Jaycees dress as Santa Claus, so that every night throughout the holiday season children have the opportunity to visit Santa Claus.

Conclusion

Throughout its 92-year history, the Christmas Festival has become a family-friendly event that is sensitive to the needs of both tourists and residents. The traditions that have evolved from this event have helped shape the area's unique history. Every event and tradition has etched its way into the very fabric of our history and plays as much an important role as any historical figure, place or event of the oldest permanent settlement in the Louisiana Purchase. The many unique traditions set Natchitoches Christmas Festival apart from any other celebrations.