

'I LOVE A PARADE'

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

The first one was held on Thanksgiving Day, but it wasn't advertised as a Thanksgiving Day Parade. Promotional materials called it a "Christmas Parade" and a "Marathon of Mirth."

It was only two blocks long, with four floats, a mounted police unit, a collection of animals from the Central Park Zoo and a number of costumed characters on foot. There were none of the parade's soon-to-be famous oversized balloons. Those wouldn't come along until 1927.

But the first Macy's parade was held Nov. 26, 1924 — 102 years ago.

THE FIRST MACY'S PARADE IN 1924



Elephants from the Central Park Zoo march in the parade.



Santa's float at the rear of the first Macy's parade.

The first thing you should know about the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade is that it wasn't the nation's first department store-sponsored Thanksgiving parade. That honor belongs to Philadelphia, where Gimbel's launched a parade in 1920.

And it wasn't even New York's first Thanksgiving Day tradition. In 1870, children began dressing up — usually as street urchins — and going door-to-door begging for candy. This "Ragamuffin Day" tradition would gradually move to Halloween, squeezed out of New York by the Macy's event.

The Macy's parade began in 1924, when store employees, many of them immigrants, wanted a way of expressing their new American heritage. They asked their boss, Rowland Hussey Macy, for permission to hold a festival on Thanksgiving Day that would herald the coming of Christmas.

Macy immediately saw the promotional value of such an event and set up a parade — more of a moving street festival, really, like a holiday season Mardi Gras — that would start in Harlem and end at the front door of the store on Herald Square.

The parade included four floats, a New York Police mounted patrol unit and a collection of animals from the Central Park Zoo. The giraffe reportedly had trouble ducking his head to get under an elevated train line.

Also, there were clowns, tumblers, dancers and other street performers and four bands, including a jazz band of Macy's employees, a 75-piece military band and a drum and bugle corps.

A thousand Macy's employees participated in that first parade, while an estimated quarter-million watched. Spectators were encouraged to fall in behind Santa, who brought up the end of the parade.

At the end, Santa was crowned "King of the Kiddies" and climbed aboard a throne on the store's new entrance marquee.

THOSE WONDERFUL BALLOONS



The Balloonatics float from the 1926 parade.



The Felix the Cat balloon in 1927.



The Mickey Mouse balloon in 1934.

In 1927, the Macy's Christmas Parade was officially renamed the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

By that time, it had become clear that live animals just weren't cut out for a Thanksgiving Day Parade. Macy's officials noted the popularity of a float the previous year that carried dozens of helium filled balloons and decided to replace the live animals with giant hot-air-filled balloons in the shape of animals and cartoon characters.

The 1927 parade featured "a human behemoth" 21-feet tall, a 60-foot dinosaur, a 25-foot-long dachshund and the first cartoon character balloon, Felix the Cat.

While inflating the balloons was tough work, deflating and packing them away was an even bigger chore. In 1928, parade officials hit on the idea of simply releasing balloons after the parade and then offering a $100 reward for their return. Some were returned in tatters. This tradition ended in 1932.

In 1934, Macy's in-house balloon design department collaborated with Walt Disney to create the first Mickey Mouse balloon. The completed balloon was 40 feet tall and 23 feet wide and required 25 attendants to hold it down and guide it through the parade route.

The parade was suspended for three years during World War II. It resumed in 1945 and, two years later, was featured in the movie "Miracle on 34th Street."

The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade was first broadcast on TV in 1948. The balloons have been grounded when winds are high — most recently in 1971. In 1997, however, a Cat in the Hat balloon was blown into a lightpost that fell on a spectator and left her in a coma for 24 days.

THE 2026 PARADE BY THE NUMBERS

48	90	90	15	28	10	8,000	300	200
Balloons to be included this year. Eleven are new for 2026.	Minutes to inflate each balloon with helium.	Handlers for each balloon during the parade route.	Minutes to deflate each balloon after the parade.	Floats to be included this year.	Marching bands to be included this year.	Volunteers — some are Macy's employees — who participate in the parade.	Pounds of glitter used in each year's parade.	Pounds of confetti used in each year's parade.

Sources: Life's "America's Parade: A Celebration of Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade" by Stephen Madden, "Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade" by Robert M. Grippo and Christopher Hoskins, Macy's, the New York Times, New York Public Library, CNN, Good Housekeeping, Women's Wear Daily, Vox media, Scholastic Parents, Nickelodeon Parents, Ephemeral New York, Mental Floss, History.com

ALL PHOTOS FROM MACY'S