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Fancy thinking

Five decades later, Hall of Fame Mummers captain Bill Isaacs is seen as the man who forever changed the annual revelry.

By James J. Julia

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This picture of Bill Isaacs comes from a double victory for them, "Close Encounters of the Fantasy Kind," and captain.

In a little more than a month, the Mummers will again make Philadelphia the home to the nation's most unique New Year's celebration. For the 115th year, the String Bands will provide the sound of the Philadelphia Mummers while the Fancy Division will offer the beauty and pageantry and the Comic and Wench Divisions add originality and satire. The Fancy Brigades will combine life-size floats with crisp choreography, but then again, hasn't it always been that way?

In fact, for one division, it has not! Go back to 1960, and you can still use what I referenced above for all but the Fancy Brigade Division. The brigades who came into existence in the late '40s were still searching for their identity. In '60, they were viewed as String Bands without instruments.

In '62, that was about to change. The Downtowners, 148-50 Snyder Ave., chose a theme called "Dixie Fantasy," and Hall of Fame captain and founder Bill Isaacs Sr. had an idea to build a "Steamboat" to feature in the theme. His idea kept growing, and in the end, the Downtowners' theme featured a then unheard of 35-foot "Showboat" float.

While the Downtowners that year were not the first brigade to build a float, no one had ever done it on such a grand scale. Due to its size, the weight of it would make it difficult to maneuver. So Bill, a captain emeritus who passed away in 2009 at age 87, came up with an idea to build the float on a car (a 1953 Packard), which was another division first.

The Downtowners finished fourth in the '63 Parade — their first time in the top four. According to Bill, "while we did not win, I knew the large floats would be used in Downtowner themes from that point forward."

Not even the 12th-Street-and-Oregon-Avenue product could have realized his prized theme with a life-size float had changed the Fancy Brigades forever. He had provided the division with their identity, one which would finally separate them from the other divisions. Bill's mix of large floats and crisp military drills would make the Downtowners a power-house competitors in the '60s and '70s. During that time, the Downtowners built an Elephant that Bill rode on for their first place Genghis Kahn and the Mongols theme in '65. Bill would follow up with a Chinese Pagoda ('75), an Aztec Temple ('73), a Viking Ship ('76), and his favorite, a 45-foot Pirate ship ('71), which according to Bill "could turn on a dime."

As it happens with competition, by the mid-'70s the other Brigades started to catch up with the Downtowners' building skills. For the brigade division, people came out to see the floats as much as they did the spectacular costumes.

Over the years, the themes continued to evolve. They have grown in size and number and became more animated. Many have contributed to this evolution but the following made significant contributions: In the

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'80s, Dave Moscinski introduced lightweight foam, making the floats easier to maneuver, Butch D'Amato introduced animation, making the floats more than just backdrops, and the Shooting Stars, under Mickey Adams, expanded the scope of the floats. Bill would be proud to know that his Downtowners are still talented float-builders.

As you watch the spectacular presentations put on by the brigades this New Year's Day, know that the birth of the presentations started 53 years ago by a man named Bill Isaacs and his Steamboat Float.

James J. Julia is the president of the Philadelphia Mummers Fancy Brigade Association.

Contact the South Philly Review at editor@southphillyreview.com.



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COMMENTS

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1. **Bob Pandola said...** on Nov 26, 2014 at 06:01PM

“Bill Isaacs was a very near and dear friend to me and my family. He was talented beyond imagination. He was one of the rare breed of individuals that could develop a theme from conception to completion. He was a great Mummer and a great mentor. I remember helping him build a miniature mock-up of the floats he designed for Cleavemore when they captured first prize with the museum theme. He was truly a perfectionist.”



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