

We love parades because they help us slow down, experts say

Almost everyone loves parades, because they help us slow the pace of our lives, say experts such as MSU's Kimberly O'Farrell.

By Kay Harvey, Pioneer Press staff writer [published in the Pioneer Press, St. Paul, MN, 7/3/2005]

Parade season is heating up. And despite competition from 10,000 lakes, a growing string of water parks and Valleyfair, almost everyone still seems to love parades.

While the enduring popularity of this century-old piece of Americana may seem surprising, community parades are more relevant now than ever, say those who study such things.

In an increasingly urban-centered, high-tech society, "a parade is one of the only places where people feel community," says Robert Thompson, a nationally recognized pop-culture expert who teaches at Syracuse University in New York.

That's not all. A parade lends fast-paced Americans a Zenlike quality, says Kimberly O'Farrell, an assistant professor of social psychology at Minnesota State University in Mankato. "It keeps you in the present."

It's a stretch to say everybody loves a parade, Thompson says. But most who don't may choose not to admit it for fear of being judged un-American.

Parades have marched into 2005 because they remain a universal form of cultural expression in America, Thompson says. For the masses, that boils down to a feel-good experience that allows a community and the people who live there a few minutes in the spotlight.

"There's something really delightful about seeing your main street transformed," he says. "A parade makes your community look completely different. It's a way of seeing your town as a place of excitement."

For kids in a band, dance troupe, gym class or horse club, it can offer a rare opportunity for a spot on center stage. "One in 200,000 gets chosen for a reality show," he says. "But if you're in Girl Scouts, you can get to march in a community parade."

For older parade-goers, part of a parade's draw is a strong element of nostalgia. "A parade represents one of the remnants of a Norman Rockwellesque America that people remember but don't have much of," he says.

Parades make us feel good because they fulfill basic human needs, O'Farrell says. A need to play, for one. In a hard-working, achievement-oriented culture, parades extend an invitation to act a little goofy.

"People in the parade are dressed in crazy clothes, squirting water at each other and throwing gum to the crowd. That makes it safe for people to be kind of wacky and crazy. That's appealing to people."

Community parades also foster a feeling of belonging. "There's a feeling of 'this is my community, the people we know.' And it's so fun," she says.

Through the years, some communities have dropped their Fourth of July parades or moved them to other dates to coincide with town festivals.

Eagan is among several in the Twin Cities metro area that haven't budged. When the city's Fourth of July parade faced financial and logistical problems a few years ago, word spread quickly the event might be doomed.

"The outcry was substantial," says assistant parade organizer Rob Kane. Businesses and individuals rallied to save the event, started by the Eagan Lions Club in the late 1960s. "It's really the people who perpetuated it."

A sense of belonging draws community members — and those who have moved away — to the parade and the four-day Eagan Funfest. "I see friends I don't see in winter," says Kane, who grew up and stayed in Eagan. "It brings a city of 64,000 people down to a small-town atmosphere."

In Forest Lake, a Fourth of July parade in its 82nd year and a mega-fireworks display over the lake have won the city media accolades as the Fourth of July capital of the Midwest, says Pattie Black, parade organizer. Sponsored by the Forest Lake American Legion, the event annually draws 50,000 to 60,000 parade-goers lined up 10- to 12-people deep.

Some nail down blankets and lawn chairs at least a day ahead of time to secure a place on the edge of the parade route. Others just move in. "Some people bring barbecue grills and sleep in their spots," Black says.

But size and spectacle aren't required to make a Fourth of July parade stick, contends a bunch of neighbors in St. Paul. About a hundred people line up every year at 10 a.m. on Lincoln Avenue between Lexington Avenue and Oxford Street to march a few blocks and back again. At the heart of the parade is an amateur band, usually seven or eight musicians.

"Kids dress up and decorate their bikes and their dogs," says Pat Flahaven, a loyal bandsman who plays trombone. "People wear red, white and blue. They sing patriotic songs. Some people just stand out on the porch and wave as we go by."

Neighborhood resident Jim Budge initiated the celebration to impress the importance of patriotism on his kids 50 years ago. Now, nobody really organizes it, Flahaven says. Nobody has to.

"It's kind of a force of its own," he says.

Here are the top 10 reasons why almost everybody loves a parade:

1. It's not television. A parade is right in front of your face, and it's really happening.
2. No channel surfing required. You don't like bagpipes, or it's not your kid's scout troop? Wait a few seconds, and something else comes along.
3. No need to scope out the ratings for violence, adult situations and language. You can count on most parades for wholesome family fun.
4. There's a real chance for equal opportunity. A parade is one of the last truly democratic chances to nab a place in the spotlight.
5. A parade makes your community look good. Even the most pathetic street looks festive with a parade moving down it.
6. Your community becomes where the action is. It's human nature to feel good about being in the place to be.
7. Parades make it easy to check out the neighbors. It's one of the only events that literally trots out a lineup of your fellow citizens.
8. You get to bask in reflected glory. You feel so proud of the kids across the street when they pass by doing cartwheels with their gymnastics class.
9. No apologies needed for acting a bit goofy. Parade participants dress a little wacky and seem to be having fun. Why not get in the spirit?
10. Parade-watching brings sweet rewards. Now and again, someone runs past tossing candy into the crowd.