

The History of Marlborough's Labor Day Parade

*By
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When presented with the daunting challenge of writing about *any* aspect of Marlborough's history at first I was overwhelmed with possibilities. After consideration I chose to research an area in which I have personally been a part of, the Marlborough Labor Day Parade. I have been a parade participant for many years, first as a Girl Scout, then as a banner carrier, and finally marching for 5 years as a member of the Marlborough High School Band.

The Marlborough Labor Day Parade was the idea of Mayor Romeo J. Gadbois. In 1952 Mayor Gadbois was searching for a way to brighten the lives of the city residents and lift their spirit after the conclusion of World War II and the Korean War. The city along with the nation was rebounding from these two military actions which took a toll on the country. Mayor Gadbois in consultation with Louis Ghiloni of the Recreation Department formed the Marlborough Labor Day Parade and Celebration committee. The committee was comprised of members of the Recreation Department Advisory board (lead by Louis Ghiloni) and members of the Marlborough Shoe workers Association. Mr. Dennis Maher, a shoe union official, was named the General Chairman of the committee. Fire Chief John Bracken named Chairman of the Float Committee, and Harry Sherman & Ralph Ricciuti as Co-chairman of the bands committee. Though times were tough and money was tight, Mayor Gadbois was able to use money left over from the WWII welcome home celebration as seed money to get the parade started. The parade was also funded in part by donations from shoe companies.

The first Labor Day Parade was held on September 1, 1952 at 2:00pm and lasted one hour. Newspapers report it was a cloudy day with rain drizzling. When it neared 2:00pm the drizzle stopped, and remained dry the rest of the afternoon. It was estimated that a crowd of over 5000 people lined the streets to watch. The original parade route started at the fire station on Pleasant St., turned right onto Lincoln, left onto Broad, left onto West Main, continue onto Main St., left onto East Main, right onto Front, right onto Church, right onto Hildreth, back onto Main Street ending at Ward Park. The first Parade Grand Marshall was J. Francis Granger, Superintendent of Streets at the time. Parade participants as reported in the Marlboro Daily Enterprise were: US Army Band from Ft. Devens, Dignitaries, members of the city council and officials, Recreationettes of Dedham, Marlboro Recreation department float, Cub pack 5 and float, Warren Indian band, St. Cecilia's Drum corps, Marlboro Little League teams and umpires, Legion Auxiliary float, D.A.V. Auxiliary float and marching unit, Colleary Post float, Rotary club, Kiwanis club, Marlboro Fish & Game, Women of the Moose, Southboro Singers, Lions club car, Polish National Alliance Drum corps, members of Marlboro Shoe Workers Association, Worcester County Electric Company float, antique cars, Leicester All Girl Drum corps, Boston Fire Department band, Marlboro firemen and fire department equipment, Akroyd-Houde American Legion Drum & Bugle corps, ending with motorized equipment from the city departments and a school bus. Politicians who also participated were U.S. Senator Harry Cabot Lodge jr. and Representative Charles J. Kelleher. Senator Lodge and Representative Kelleher joined Mayor Gadbois on the steps of City Hall to review the marchers, hence starting the tradition of a parade reviewing stand. At the conclusion of the parade, Mayor Gadbois spoke briefly at Ward Park and the crowd was treated to an exhibition by the musical units. The highlight performance being by The Akroyd-Houde Post American Legion Drum & Bugle corps

which had just returned from participating in the National American Legion convention in New York. The celebration was named a success and the following year (1953) the parade was placed under Louis Ghiloni's Recreation Department.

Mr. Ghiloni was made Parade Director in 1953. Many of the city's older citizens remember the successful celebration of the 300th (Tercentenary) Anniversary of our incorporation in 1960. It was this celebration that cemented his role as Parade Director for many years to come. In 1975 a dispute over the size and cost of the parade arose between Mr. Ghiloni and Mayor Kelleher. The mayor wanted to cut funding and Mr. Ghiloni felt the cuts would lead to an inferior parade for Marlborough. Mr. Ghiloni resigned as Parade Director and a new chapter in the history of the parade began.

The following years saw a series of different parade directors and managing boards. Mayor Kelleher appointed H. Leo Evers who directed the parade for 2 years. Next, former teacher Jim Edmonds was at the helm for approximately 4 years. During this time the parade shifted from being part of the Recreation Department to being under the Cultural Affairs umbrella. Due to a conflict of the main interest of the Cultural Affairs Committee, the parade began to decline and almost became non-existent.

In 1981 Mayor Joseph Ferrechia approached George Whapham who had been a parade committee volunteer asking him to take on the role of Parade Director. Mr. Whapham had concerns over how he could put together a quality parade on a small budget. Mayor Ferrechia assured him that if he accepted this role, he would obtain funding from the city council. With \$5000 from fundraising efforts and \$15,000 from the city council, Mr. Whapham accepted and the parade was back. This was the start of 28 years of parades under the direction of Mr. Whapham and the parade was built back up to its glory days of many participants and grew to over 3 hours in length.

Through his years Mr. Whapham also faced challenges with the managing and financing of the parade. In 1990, the year of the city's 100th anniversary, Mayor Michael Hogan decided to move the parade from under the Cultural Affairs umbrella to being run out of the mayor's office. The celebration was a huge success and again we had many years of great parades. The parade has always been funded in part by the city and private donations. Starting in the late 1990's fundraising became a vital aspect of his role as Parade Director. The city council was cutting the budget and he would solicit local businesses to make up the difference. Unfortunately he could no longer afford to hire the popular Mummer's string band. At one point the city council wanted to eliminate funding for the parade all together. The residents of the city were outraged over the possibility of not having the parade they came to love. Thus began the 'Save the Parade' campaign. With generous donations from residents and tee shirt sales, donations from area businesses and pressure put on the city leaders, the parade was able to go on. In 2008 George Whapham retired as Parade Director at the age of 79 after 28 years. In 2009 Mr. Ed Thurber became and is the current director of the Marlborough Labor Day Parade. He named Mr. Whapham as Parade Grand Marshall to honor him for his years of service.

I have enjoyed participating in the parade and playing a small part in the history of Marlborough's Labor Day Parade.