

THANKSGIVING IN DETROIT



A Big Heads-over-40,000-heels experience

BY ERICA HOBBS

Thanksgiving in Detroit is a full-day extravaganza for Visit Detroit President and CEO Claude Molinari. The DAC member and his extended family wake up every year at the crack of dawn to begin Detroit's trifecta of grand Thanksgiving celebrations: the Strategic Staffing Solutions Turkey Trot, America's Thanksgiving Parade, presented by Gardner-White, and the Detroit Lions football game.



Claude Molinari

Despite having lived all over the country—including being born and raised in New York City—other cities can't hold a candle to Detroit's Thanksgiving experience, he said.

"Detroit owns Thanksgiving, there's no other way to put it," Molinari said. "Being a transplant, we usually travel for Christmas, but we always host Thanksgiving."

Detroit is one of the few cities in the world to host a grand parade, professional football game and run on Thanksgiving—traditions that span

nearly a century and hold a special place in the hearts of Detroiters.

DAC Director and Judge Thomas M.J. Hathaway described Detroit as the Silicon Valley of its time when it started its Thanksgiving parade in 1924. Full of innovation and prosperity from the automotive industry, the city had a lot to be thankful for, he said.

"People had wealth," Hathaway said. "It may not have been a lot, but they could all afford a home, and so people were blessed. Thanksgiving was a true day of thanksgiving in Detroit for generations."



Detroit's Thanksgiving parade has long attracted a diverse audience, like this one assembled at Grand Circus Park.

The annual Lions game joined the Detroit Thanksgiving roster a decade later in 1934, followed by the Turkey Trot in 1983.

The traditions have long embedded themselves into the DAC as well. With the Clubhouse mere blocks away from Woodward Avenue and practically next door to Ford Field, Thanksgiving is the DAC's busiest day of the year, serving as a base and meeting spot for those planning to take part in the downtown activities. The Club offers breakfast and reserved seating at the parade, as well as traditional Thanksgiving meals for those who would rather not cook at home. The weekend also hosts the DAC's annual father-son event, with bonding activities and games.

The Thanksgiving experience is one of the great amenities the Club has to offer, Hathaway said.

"Whatever you want to do—go to the parade only, go to the parade and football game only, go to the football game or come in for your fabulous Thanksgiving dinner—it's available to you, all courtesy of the extraordinary staff at the DAC," he said.

'HEART AND SOUL OF OUR CITY'

Voted America's Best Holiday

Parade three times in *USA Today's* 10Best Readers' Choice Awards—including last year—America's Thanksgiving Parade reaches far beyond metro Detroit in popularity. Besides having more than 1 million in-person spectators, the parade is broadcast in southeast Michigan on WDIV-Channel 4—last year some 705,000 households tuned in—and syndicated to 185 cities across the United States.

"It's really, truly the heart and soul of our city and state as far as events go," said Tony Michaels, president and CEO of The Parade Co. and a DAC member. "It just captures the heart, it truly does."

When Hudson's originated the parade in the early 20th century—calling it the Hudson's Thanksgiving Day Parade—it tied with New York's Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade as the second-oldest in the country, four years behind Philadelphia's parade, which began in 1920.

After Hudson's, the parade transferred to the Detroit Renaissance Foundation, which later became the Michigan Thanksgiving Parade Foundation/The Parade Co., which also runs the Turkey Trot. When the parade was nearly canceled in 1990 due to financial troubles, furniture mogul and DAC member Art Van Elslander famously saved it by writing a \$200,000 personal check. His Art Van Furniture chain would then become the parade's long-term presenting sponsor before Gardner-White took over in 2020.

"We're just so fortunate," Michaels said. "These things don't happen without these great companies and great people."

The parade's three-mile route cuts



Tony Michaels

through the heart of the city along Woodward Avenue, from Kirby to Congress streets.

With more than 2,500 volunteers, the parade features over 75 parade units, with 26 floats, 12 marching bands and six larger-than-life balloons, including beloved figures like Kermit the Frog and Captain Underpants. It also features numerous performers and celebrity grand marshals, concluding with a traditional appearance by Santa Claus.

Michaels said The Parade Company prides itself on producing great entertainment and strives to make it better every year.

"We're doing things and making things that other people simply can't produce," he said. "When you look at these 120- to 140-foot floats that we do with animation on them, all kinds of things are happening. We put a lot of attention toward that."

One of those irreplicable features is the parade's collection of Big Heads, a series of more than 100 oversized, paper-mache heads worn by volunteers marching down the avenue. The original heads have a rich



Distinguished Clowns at the DAC in 2022. Standing, from left: Larry Walsh, Rick DiBartolomeo, Bonnie Jobe. Seated, from left: Brian Ellison, Mickie Wordhouse.

history, brought back from Carnival celebrations in Viareggio, Italy, decades ago. Now made locally, the collection—the largest in the world—includes animals, characters and flowers, plus a series of caricaturized Michigan celebrities and figures like Aretha Franklin, Tom Selleck, Barry Sanders and Gerald Ford.

Another one of the parade's unique aspects is its Distinguished Clown Corps, which marks its 40th anniversary this year. The Corps is made up largely of community leaders—many of them DAC members—who donate \$1,000 to the parade for the privilege of dressing as clowns and passing out beads to kids along the parade route.

DAC member Rick DiBartolomeo has been a member of the Corps for 15 years and honored recently as its Grand Jester for his service. He said being a member is a way to give back to the city, and he loves the rush of walking down Woodward Avenue and seeing the smiles on people's faces as they go by.

"It's always fun to see people along the parade route that you know, in particular when we see the DAC section," he said. "It's one of the highlights of the year for me, and it's certainly a highlight of the day, celebrating an American tradition with Thanksgiving but also a Detroit and DAC tradition."

Unlike the more nationally focused Macy's parade, the local parade is Detroit-specific, celebrating the city's rich history and at a time when it needs it, Molinari said.

"Detroit has a perception problem in the nation," he said, "and when half the nation is seeing this incredible parade and our beautiful city and all the new skyscrapers and things downtown on Woodward Avenue, they can't help but change some of that

perception in a positive way."

GAME PROVED JUST THE TICKET

While the tradition of holiday football games dates to the late 1800s, the Detroit Lions were the first to make them a national sensation, thanks to an owner who also had the distinction of being a broadcast executive.

After buying the Portsmouth (Ohio) Spartans, George Richards transferred them to Detroit and renamed them the Lions—in reference to their baseball counterpart, the Detroit Tigers. Richards also owned WJR-AM, which was part of the larger NBC Blue Network. In a move to boost ticket sales in a baseball-dominated town, Richards invited the Chicago Bears to a Thanksgiving game and convinced the NBC Blue network to syndicate the game through its 94-station network across the United States.

The teams were two of the best in the National Football League. The sell-out game was a tremendous success, leading to a second game in



George Richards

1935, the same year the Lions would win the NFL Championship.

"It was ... this institution after that," said Jeremy Dimick, a sports specialist and the director of collections and curatorial at the Detroit Historical Society. "It became a tradition really early on, but mostly because the team was so good in those first couple years."

The Lions would become the only NFL team to host a Thanksgiving game for more than 30 years until the Dallas Cowboys joined in 1966, and the NFL established a rotating game in 2006.

Being the only professional team to play on Thanksgiving every year brought the Detroit tradition to the larger country, Hathaway said, something he experienced throughout his life.

"I went to school out East, I went to law school down South, and everybody said, 'Oh, I remember watching the Lions on Thanksgiving Day,'" he said. "Everybody would watch the Detroit Lions play, and so it became a signature thing."

In an era without a lot of championship success, Dimick said, the game also becomes a highlight of the season for Detroit Lions fans.

"It's ... become the de facto big



The tradition that put Detroit Lions football on the Thanksgiving menu began with this 1934 game against the Chicago Bears.

Lions game every year, because it's on national TV," he said. "It's kind of the one constant and the one bright spot ... even the casual fan ends up watching the Thanksgiving game because it's so big into people's routines."

While Ford Field is an easy walk from the DAC Clubhouse, the trek to the Lions home turf has not always been so convenient. When the Lions first moved to Detroit, they played at the University of Detroit's stadium. In 1938, the team moved to Tiger Stadium, then left the city entirely in 1975 for the Pontiac Silverdome. It wasn't until 2002—when the Lions relocated to Ford Field—that all of Detroit's Thanksgiving traditions were united downtown.

Dimick said the set-up of the Thanksgiving activities is brilliant. "[It takes] advantage of this downtime in the morning before most people go on and have their Thanksgiving dinner in the afternoon or in the evening," he said. "You can see how it's really easy to build your day around those couple activities."

A FEAST OF FEET

Known as the "parade before the parade," the Turkey Trot kicks off Detroit's Thanksgiving Day and has become a beloved way to revel in the start of the holiday season while working up an appetite before the grand feast.

With participants clad in festive turkey hats, tutus, Santa suits and more, the race has grown to include over 20,000 participants and is the largest in the country, said DAC member Cindy Pasky, founder and CEO of Strategic Staffing Solutions, which sponsors the race. Among the field is a healthy contingent of DAC Fitness Club



Cindy Pasky



Only in Detroit can runners dressed up like turkeys speed past a cheering audience of thousands lining Woodward Avenue in this "parade before the parade." Thought to be the largest turkey trot in the nation, it attracts over 20,000 participants.

members, who often bring friends and family.

With a variety of courses to choose from—the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Mashed Potato Mile and 5K Stuffing Strut, in addition to the traditional 10K Turkey Trot—it is also one of the most inclusive, Pasky said.

"You have a lot of children that are in the one-mile; you have a lot of walkers in the 5K; [and it's] an opportunity for an elite runner with a fast, flat course," she said.

That inclusiveness is a big draw for Molinari, whose Turkey Trot tradition has become a multigenerational family affair. He, his wife and daughter run the one-mile-plus-5K Cranberry Combo, his son does the 5K and 10K Drumstick Double, and his sister and brother-in-law run the traditional 10K Turkey Trot. His 86-year-old mother and 76-year-old mother-in-law join as well, taking part in the Mashed Potato Mile.

"[It's] fun to have everybody join in," he said.

But the diversity spans more than age, Pasky said.

"Every background, every age, every size, every type of relationship—it's all represented in the runners, and it's all

represented in the individuals watching the parade," she said. "It just reinforces the message that we are strongest when we are who we are, and you see that when you look up and down Woodward on Thanksgiving Day."

Since the courses largely take place along Woodward Avenue before the parade begins, it has the added benefit of having a built-in audience of cheering crowds.

"Imagine, here you are running a 5 or 10K, and you're running right in front of thousands of people lining Woodward Avenue," Michaels said. "I mean, it's crazy."

Detroit's Thanksgiving traditions continue to evolve, with a big move in place for The Parade Co., which is in the midst of a \$45 million Be a Heart of History campaign to relocate its headquarters to the Brodhead Armory on the Detroit riverfront. Coincidentally, "Heart of History" is the theme of this year's parade.

With the parade, the football game and the runs, Turkey Day in Detroit is unlike any other city in America, Michaels said.

"We really have something special here," he said. "We really do."