

Isabella Coleman's parade legacy lives on

Rose Parade pioneer developed many float techniques still in use

By Lauren Gold Staff Writer

PASADENA — Kathleen Nelson, 66, remembers riding down Colorado Boulevard when she was 16 years old, dressed as an Eskimo and surrounded by fake snow. The Rose Parade float she rode was one of many built by her grandmother, Isabella Coleman.

Coleman was one of the Rose Parade's most influential float-builders, and her legacy lives on today with the Isabella Coleman Trophy for best presentation of color and color harmony through floral use.

This year's winner was the Odd Fellows and Rebekahs entry "Shining Knights Still Exist," which depicted a lone knight protecting an English castle.

Coleman first got involved with Rose Parade float decorating in 1904, helping her mother decorate the family's electric car.

Nelson said Coleman built her first solo float in 1910, decorated with marigolds she picked from her personal garden. After winning a prize that day, Coleman decided to create her own float-building company.

She built her first professional float in 1913 for the Pasadena Board of Realtors. During her subsequent 55-year career, Coleman created more than 300 floats for the Tournament of Roses.

At that time, the parade was less commercialized and more community-oriented, said National Museum of American History Curator William L. Bird. He said Coleman never regarded her float company as a business.

"Float-building and participating in the parade by riding on a float was just part of life in Pasadena at that time and in other communities, which is largely forgotten today," Bird said. "There were no professional float-builders. It was a community spirited involvement kind of parade."



Courtesy photo

Isabella Coleman in front of a poster from the 1912 Rose Parade, the event for which she built her first float.

ONLINE EXTRA

For more historical photos about Isabella Coleman and more photos of the 2012 floats, see our website: pasadenastarnews.com



ABOVE: The 2012 Rose Parade float — "Shining Knights Still Exist" — entered by Odd Fellows and Rebekahs as it made its way along the parade route Monday.

Walt Mancini
Staff Photographer

LEFT: Isabella Coleman's first float in the 1912 Rose Parade.

Courtesy photo

Bird wrote a book in 2007 about Coleman and other holiday decorators called "Holidays on Display."

Coleman introduced a number of float construction techniques that are still used today, Bird said, such as a cockpit built into the float for the driver, putting the flowers into glass vials of water and using a radiator that allowed the float to move slowly.

"She was a real pioneer in all the technology they still use today," Nelson said.

One of Coleman's major innovations was using airplane wheels to keep the floats low to the ground, making them look as if they were actually floating.

"Every builder has kind of an ideal float," Bird said. "Her ideal float was

something that was really low to the ground, and this was so that you would engage the spectators at street level, most of whom were sitting knee high on a curb."

Some of Coleman's signature features, Bird said, were swans and pagodas with strings of flowers hanging off of them. Of Coleman's many floats, Nelson said she remembers a pea-

cock, an eagle, a Chinese garden and a butterfly.

Coleman not only was an innovator for float-building practices, but she also made way for women to become more involved in the parade events.

In 1912, at 18 years old, Coleman convinced the organizers of the annual Roman Chariot Races that she should participate. And, she did. The races were later replaced by the annual Rose Bowl game.

"She convinced the men she could handle the horses," Nelson said. "She thought it was a victory for women to show that she could do these things. She was such a trailblazer."

Nelson said that Coleman was also the first female member of the Tournament of Roses Association.

In the end, though many might not remember Coleman by name, Bird said her significant influence on the Rose Parade is undeniable.

"If you look at this as a field, you'd have to say she is one of the pre-eminent builders in any generation," Bird said.

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