

Mansfield Memories - An old-time Fourth of July of fireworks and horse-drawn floats in Mansfield

Kevin McNatt and Andrew Todesco

July 6, 2021



Local farmer Mark Janes won a novelty prize for his float, "a pair of oxen who pulled a small forest of upright fir trees and a lot of farming instruments" in the Fourth of July parade held in 1891 in Mansfield. *Courtesy/Mansfield Historical Society*

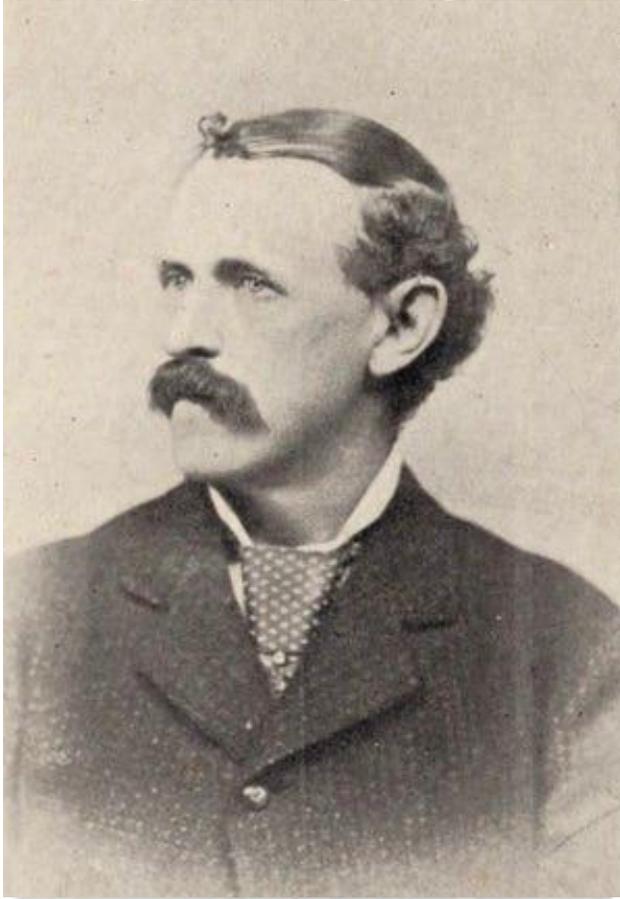
At sunrise on July 4, 1891, the weather looked menacing. Town leaders had planned one of the biggest Independence Day celebrations in local history. Mansfield wanted to showcase its growing industrial base with a full day of activities. Bad weather would jeopardize the plans.

But by 7 a.m. the sky had cleared and a cool breeze began to blow. Visitors from nearby towns began to arrive at the train station, meeting friends and relatives for a Mansfield-style Fourth of July.

Festivities began at 9 a.m. with the "grand trades procession," a parade of horse-drawn floats. Alson Cobb served as chief marshal. A leading citizen,

Cobb was a veteran of the Civil War who went on to serve as a deputy sheriff of Bristol County and Mansfield's fire chief.

The procession began and ended at the South Common. Along the way it followed a winding route of just under four miles through downtown Mansfield. Most floats were sponsored by local businesses displaying their trade or goods. Other participants included the Mansfield Brass Band, the fire



Civil War veteran Alson Cobb was chief marshal in the 1891 Fourth of July "grand trades procession," a parade of horse-drawn floats. *Courtesy/Mansfield Historical Society*

department, mounted police, Civil War veterans, and the town fathers "in a hack" (or horse-drawn carriage).

About 40 local businesses took part, some with multiple teams of horses. The floats were elaborate.

Rogerson's store featured a full parlor on its float, complete with furniture for sale at the store. Bailey and Sons bakery entered a giant flour barrel. On top was a 20-foot alligator made entirely of bread. Local farmer Mark Janes won a novelty prize for his float, "a pair of oxen who pulled a small forest of upright fir trees and a lot of farming instruments."

The afternoon was for sporting events. The excitement began with a tub race at Fulton's Pond. First place (and its prize of \$3) was won by Arthur Wills with second going to John Jackson. The other two entries, Patsey Flavin and Arthur Berry, decided to have fun with the contest. They went for "amusing the crowd and succeeded admirably".

A "Rhode Island clam bake" followed and was enjoyed by hundreds of people. Then it was off to the South Common for more races. By this time an

estimated 5,000 people lined the sidewalks. Officials had difficulty clearing the roadway. The 100-yard dash was won by Will Cook with a time of 13 seconds. Cook also won the wheelbarrow race.

A close one-mile bicycle race was won by W.N. Frazer with a time of 5 minutes and 16 seconds. W.H. Lyons finished two seconds behind, and F.A. Adams came in two seconds after Lyons. Next was a “slow bicycle race,” a 220-yard dash and a three-legged race. The potato sack race was won by the entertaining Patsey Flavin (of tub race fame).

After the races there was a “general stampede” to the Branch Street grounds for baseball. A local nine took on a team from Somerville, who had recently been touted by the Boston Globe as “one of the strongest amateur teams in the state.” Even more ominous for the home team, Mansfield had yet to play a competitive game that seas The crowd was treated to a thrilling game, won by Mansfield 7-5 on the strength of a four-run ninth inning. Mansfield’s Dan Harrigan threw out a runner from deep in the outfield to save the day. At the game’s conclusion Mansfield pitcher Lish Hibberts was carried off the field by his joyous teammates. Somerville manager P.G. Sterne won the respect of the Mansfield crowd with his gentlemanly manner.

Local factory owner Doliver Spaulding offered free lemonade to the crowd. Little drunkenness was reported that day, with only one pedestrian showing any such signs. Three Somerville fans were intoxicated but by all accounts they were well behaved.

By 8 p.m. another large crowd had convened at the Branch Street grounds for a fireworks display. The festivities began with a musical program by the Mansfield Brass Band, which included the Star-Spangled Banner, a waltz, a polka, a gavotte, and a march. The fireworks display was described as “elaborate, diversified, and most pleasing.”

The day was considered a great triumph for Mansfield.