

Part 4
Telling/Dancing Our Stories Ourselves: The Santa Claus Parades

Chapter 8: Transitions 3

Suzanne enters and moves to the centre-stage. In a reflective voice, she states:

“Imagine that you can hear a medley of the popular Christmas songs from the 1950s and 1960s, playing:

It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas...

Sleigh Bells Ring, are you listening? In the lane, snow is glistening...

Jingle bells, Jingle bells. Jingle all the way...

Frosty the Snow Man...

I’m dreaming of a white Christmas...

All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth...

You better watch out, you better not cry... I’m telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town...

Rudolph, the red nose reindeer...

On the first day of Christmas...

Walking in a winter wonderland...”

Chapter 9: Remembering the Santa Claus Parades (late 1950s to late 1960s)

Suzanne continues: “In this part of the book, Cecille, Denise, Michelle and Stefan reminisce about their participation in the annual Santa Claus Parades which were conceptualized, designed, constructed and created by Gordon and Fay Simpson.

The Simpson’s played their respective roles extremely well. Mr. Simpson was a Canadian artist and designer. Mrs. Simpson drew many of the participants, in the parades, from her kindergarten and dance schools. Gordon and Fay had very high standards. They held everyone involved accountable to create with them, each year, a fictitious world largely for the benefit of the public who stood or climbed trees along the route to watch the parade.

There were some classic floats such as the float for Santa and his elves as well as the float with the Snow Queen and her two attendants. There were massive effigies of key local and international, political leaders and celebrities. In addition, each year, there were several additions, some proved to be so popular that they were absorbed into the growing repertoire of floats.

Stephan Maxwell, for example, tells of playing the role of Peter Pan in the 1950s when he was a little boy, at Mrs. Simpson’s kindergarten. Denise was Wendy in charge of the lost boys. (See photograph of Wendy and some of the characters). Cecille remembers, vividly, playing the role of one of the many slave girls in Cleopatra’s float. In her part of the book, Denise describes the year in which there was a protest concerning the inclusion of the slave girls, in the parade, and calling them by the euphemism: attendants.

When they were teenagers, Cecille participated with Michele Mowatt and Jackie White in several of the Drum Majorettes bands. Eventually, Cecille became the leader of the Drum Majorettes who led the parade. Over the years, Denise had several roles in some of the major floats.”

Cecille enters, stands beside Suzanne, and continues by providing a larger context: “I remember that the annual Santa Claus Parade took place, sometime, in early December. As children, with my grandmother, we took the bus downtown to the Parade and walked eagerly down King Street. We walked on the right/west side of the street, passed a number of department stores. On the opposite side of the road, for several blocks, there were several low-rise, elegant, colonial, government buildings, including the courthouse and some of the other major government administrative offices. I remember that each floor, of the buildings, usually had sizeable numbers of curious onlookers who came out to watch the parade. We walked along King Street, in order to find a suitable place, outside a store and well above Times Store, the Victoria Pier and the Craft’s Market, located at the end of King Street.

Having chosen what we considered to be a very good vantage point, we (my grandmother, Lucille, sister, Lorna and brother, Michael) waited patiently with a section of the very large crowd. We stood with eager anticipation. Long before we could see anything, we would hear in the distance, to the north, the Alpha boy’s bands playing and then see the smartly dressed bands of sea scouts. All bands, proudly wore their respective uniforms, and marched with dignity. Or

we could hear the taped music, blaring out the popular Christmas songs, some of which were mentioned earlier by Suzanne.

In awe, I would watch the bands and floats as they swirled by. I loved the spectacle. I loved seeing the costumes and the characters from the fairy tales, as well as from the classical and contemporary stories. All of which were presented for our entertainment.

As I watched the parade, little did I know that one day, Mrs. Simpson would invite me to take a very small part in a wonderful Santa Claus Parade. I was one of Cleopatra's slaves, so called 'handmaidens' or 'attendants'. I can remember, as if it was yesterday, wearing the very long, flowing costume. It was sleeveless with a square neck, with small vertical tucks, down the front of the bodice.

Denise was Cleopatra. There were at least 6-8 of us, slaves/handmaidens, walking in twos, on either side of Cleopatra's float. We wore our lovely new costumes and our black ballet shoes. We walked from the beginning of the parade, at the Old Race course, along the main streets of Kingston, eventually arriving at Victoria Park, swept around the Parade, and finally walked down King Street, to end in front of Times Store (the major sponsor and funder of the parade).

Sometimes, before I was one of Cleopatra's slaves/handmaidens, I have fleeting memories of being an 'Indian girl' with long, black, cloth plaits. I was part of Pocahontas' float. What is far more memorable, is being a drum majorette in the early to mid-1960s. Jackie White was one of the star performers in the majorette's band. There were at least 10-12 majorettes. We wore bright red, short, drum majorette costumes with our own, black sleeveless leotards. The bodices of the jackets, fitted tightly and were trimmed with several horizontal bands of gold braids, and large gold buttons. We wore jaunty red hats with distinctive peaks at the front which covered our eyes.

We learned our routines and learned to twirl our handmade, silver painted, papier-mâché batons with great expertise. I was a majorette for a few years, with Michele Mowatt as the leader, until one year, Mrs. Simpson invited me to lead the group. I was thrilled. This meant that I had the opportunity to work with the group, in order to develop the choreography, for at least 3 to 4 different dance routines - some slow, some fast, and some in between. Since, during the parade itself, we did not know, ahead of time, exactly what the music would be, the leader learned to quickly anticipate the next song when she heard the first few introductory strains of the music. In retrospect, in many ways, leading the group was a far more difficult job than performing in one of Mrs. Simpson's ballets. For the dance performances, each sequence of movements, and even the mimes, were rehearsed to achieve perfection. However, since we had the simple dance routines for the Santa Claus parades, down pat, we could quickly swing into the next sequence of movements. Of course, there were times in which we walked slowly but purposefully, and other times when we walked briskly, since we could not literally dance all the way, from the starting venue, down to Times Store, the end of the parade.

The most important role, as far as I was concerned, was that of the Snow Queen. Her beautiful float, marked the concluding section of the parade, and heralded the arrival of the final float in which Santa Claus sat beaming benignly, waving, and 'ho-ho-hoing' to the crowd. His sleigh was drawn by the team of papier-mâché reindeer. I think that, at some stage, I might have been

an elf on Santa's float. Again, I have no specific memory, just a few glimmers of wearing a green elf-like costume, but since someone's memories are known to fade with time, this might not have been a true memory. Only imagined.

However, I have no doubt that in the late 1960s, prior to going to UWI, I was a Snow Queen at least once. Denise confirms this. She has included, as proof positive, a photograph. I remember my grandmother, reporting with pride to my mother that, when I approached in my role as the Snow Queen for that year, she heard a man exclaim loudly: '...another beauty queen, dat one!' Little did I know, that my grandmother was proud, but at the same time very apprehensive, because one of her nieces had been a former, Miss Jamaica. She migrated to the USA, and shortly afterwards, died a tragic death."

Stefan's memory as told to Cecille: "In a telephone conversation, in fall 2015, Stefan stated that he remembered, very clearly, attending Mrs. Simpson's kindergarten. He stated that Mrs. Simpson had a tremendous influence on his early education. He also mentioned that he remembered playing the role of Peter Rabbit, in one of the school's early performances. Stefan stated that Mrs. Simpson was a very persuasive person. As an example, when he was a youth, he played the role of Peter Pan in one of the Santa Claus parades. Stefan stated that he was virtually blind without his prescribed eyeglasses. However, on that day, Mrs. Simpson told him that he could not wear glasses because Peter Pan never did. Stefan explains that he remembers standing on a very high float, mounted on a big truck, supposedly fighting the dreaded Captain Hook for his life. However, since he could not see, he parried and thrust his papier-mâché sword with all of his might, without even an inkling of exactly where Captain Hook was play fighting with him. It must have been a hilarious sight. (See photo of Captain Hook. Unfortunately, Peter Pan is not in the photo).

Hearing Stefan's story, I remembered that Barbara Smellie (McMillan), another key Simpson dancer, who usually led the male corps de ballet, wore very thick glasses. Barbara was extremely nearsighted. However, whenever she performed on stage, Barbara was persuaded by Mrs. Simpson to dance without wearing her glasses.

For some of us, the annual Santa Claus parades marked an important part of the Christmas festivities. As children, we knew well that Santa did not exist, but the parades were similar to the ballet performances, because they led some of us to believe that a world of magic and illusions could be created, if even for short periods of time."

Sample Photos of the Santa Claus Parades from Denise (Hall) Desnoes' Archives

Snow Queen Float: Cecille Harriott as the Snow Queen, and an attendant. The second attendant, Denise Hall, not shown, is sitting on the opposite side of the float.



Snow White and the 7 Dwarves Float: Denise Hall as Snow White; Paul Passmore as the Prince; the 7 dwarves, wearing heavy papier-mâché masks, are Fay Simpson's students.



Peter Pan Float: Captain Hook (forefront) and Wendy, possibly, Pat Cumper.

Who are these characters: First one on the far side of the ship, behind Wendy, with his back to the camera (who is he?). The second one, the little girl sitting to Wendy's right (is probably one of the lost children, who is she?).

