



THE PARADE THAT TOOK FESTIVAL OF TREES TO THE STREETS

Downtown Davenport woke up to a new kind of magic on Nov. 21, 1992. Giant balloons floated above Third Street, smiling down on crowds bundled in scarves and mittens. An enormous checkerboard clown swayed between the buildings, joined by nearly 20 other oversized balloons.

For the first time, the Quad City Arts Festival of Trees had broken out of the RiverCenter and spilled into the streets of Davenport.

It was an audacious move — one that drew thousands of spectators and live local television coverage.

Inside the RiverCenter, Festival of Trees had already captured imaginations: Rows of decorated trees, music performances and volunteer-made displays turned the venue into a holiday wonderland.

But 1992 marked a turning point. Festival organizers wanted to take the spirit that lived inside those walls and make it visible to the whole city.

The Quad-City Times headline the next morning read, “Balloons Tower Over Davenport.” Reporter Scott Reeder described children perched on benches and parents waving from the sidewalks as giant inflatables — anchored by volunteers in red scarves — drifted overhead.



“It was lavish, theatrical and right here in our backyard,” longtime news anchor Paula Sands recalled.

That first parade featured 21 giant balloons and hundreds of volunteers who marched in time with high school bands and local performers. It transformed the Festival of Trees from a static indoor event into a citywide celebration. The streets of downtown Davenport became an extension of the RiverCenter — a moving stage where art, joy and community came together.

Thanks to that bold decision, nearly every year since 1992, Quad City Arts’ Festival of Trees Parade has marked the start of the holiday season for thousands. Families fill hotel rooms, dine in local restaurants and spend their day downtown. The parade has become one of the largest in the Midwest.

Each year, the Quad-City Times didn’t just report the parade — it choreographed the anticipation.

Front-page photos, route maps and volunteer features became part of the season’s rhythm. The paper turned coverage into tradition, and tradition into ownership. The parade belonged to everyone.

The growth of Festival of Trees Parade proved something simple but powerful: scale matters.

When art steps outside its venue, it meets people where they are — and that’s where legacy begins.

As the years passed, the parade evolved with the times. Helium to inflate the balloons may be harder to come by, but the Festival of Trees Parade remains one of the Quad Cities’ most cherished traditions. Over the years, organizers have tested creative solutions — from experimenting with cold-filled balloons to considering golf-cart decorating contests in the early 2000s — to keep the spectacle alive. Through every adaptation, the parade has remained coveted, cared for and protected.

That’s why The Cultural Trust remains committed to supporting Quad City Arts in its ongoing work to refine the event and sustain its success. The parade’s legacy is part of a festival that now fuels nearly half of Quad City Arts’ annual programming — a reminder that when a community invests in celebration, it’s really investing in its cultural future.

Thirty-three years later, the parade (this year to be held on Nov. 22) stands as proof of what happens when creativity meets community — and when the right investment lets both rise together.

