
DAVE BARRY | INAUGURATION DAY

Lawn Rangers: mowers and shakers

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It is a great honor to march in an inauguration parade. So when a group I belong to called the World Famous Lawn Rangers of Amazing Arcola was selected to march at Barack Obama's inauguration, our reaction, as Americans, was: "The organizers of this parade must be smoking crack."

I say this because we are not a traditional marching unit. We are an extremely random group of middle-age guys who carry brooms and push specially decorated show lawn mowers, which we use to perform synchronized broom-and-lawn mower maneuvers that always get a big crowd reaction (usually: "Huh?"). As you can imagine these performances require intense mental preparation, by which I mean beer.

I joined this group in 1992, when founder and leader Pat Monahan invited me to the small central Illinois town of Arcola to march with the Rangers in their signature event, the Arcola Broom Corn Festival, celebrating the town's proud heritage of having corn out the wazoo.

But the Rangers will march in pretty much any parade that will have them. In 2003, when they marched in the St. Patrick's Day parade in Chicago, they encountered Barack Obama, then running for the U.S. Senate. Obama picked up a toilet plunger -- in addition to brooms, senior Rangers carry plungers, symbolizing authority -- and brandished it over his head. A photograph was taken of this moment, although at the time nobody realized it was historic.

ACCEPTED?!

When Obama was elected president, Monahan remembered the photo, and decided to apply for the Rangers to march in the inaugural parade. Incredibly, we were accepted; as you read these words, the person responsible for that decision is probably en route to Guantánamo. But the point is that on Inauguration Day, the World Famous (and Extremely Cold) Lawn Rangers pushed their show mowers up Pennsylvania Avenue and passed in review before President and Mrs. Obama. I'll get to their reaction later, but first here's an account of what it's like to march in an inaugural parade.

5:45 a.m.: In the frigid early morning darkness, I head for the Washington, D.C., subway, which is already packed with people going to the Mall to see the inauguration. I head for the Pentagon, where I hook up with my fellow Rangers. We are looking sharp in our uniforms, which include T-shirts, suspenders, cowboy hats, Lone-Ranger style masks, and -- tying the whole look together with a bold fashion statement -- bright-red polyester graduation gowns. Also on hand are five Ranger women dressed as Abraham Lincoln (including beard) who will carry

banners informing the crowd that we are World Famous.

There are 56 of us, jammed into a school bus with a seating capacity of 46 (there are many flatulence jokes). We join a line of other band buses in a Pentagon parking lot, creeping forward until we reach a security checkpoint, where we are screened by military personnel. One of the Rangers has the following exchange with a security screener:

SCREENER: What's this?

RANGER: It's a toilet plunger.

SCREENER (after a pause): OK.

NO REHEARSAL

After the screening, we go into another tent, where we're given box lunches, which most of the Rangers wolf down immediately, even though it's only 9:30 a.m. All around us are military units and marching bands wearing immaculate matching uniforms; next to them, the Rangers, hunched over their box lunches, dribbling sandwich crumbs onto their graduation gowns, look like homeless people.

It occurs to me that the other parade groups have been practicing their routines for months, if not years; whereas we have not yet even discussed our upcoming performance. I ask leader Monahan if he plans to tell the Rangers what they'll be doing.

"It's too early," he says. "I find they forget."

About 11 we get back in our bus, form into a motorcade with other buses, and, with a police motorcycle escort, head for Washington. As we cross the bridge by the Lincoln Memorial, we are stunned by the vastness of the crowd, which stretches everywhere as far as we can see.

"I had no idea there was so much interest in show mowers," says Monahan.

As the bus creeps along, we listen to the inauguration ceremony on the radio. We celebrate the swearing-in with a special Lawn Rangers cheer: "Mow-bam-A! Mow-bam-A!"

At about 1 p.m., after two hours on the bus, we reach a staging area, where we get off the bus and race to a row of Port-A-Potties to stand in line with a wide variety of parade participants, including Eskimos, native Americans, military men in kilts, a mariachi band and a man dressed as Abraham Lincoln. Even here the Rangers manage to look out of place.

Next we check out our mowers, which were trucked in from Arcola. The mowers have been elaborately decorated to express various themes. One has a beer keg mounted on it; another has a commode. There are tributes to Eureka College, the Washington Monument and (Why not?) the Boston Celtics. One mower sports a large stuffed beaver. ("When you take that to a bar after the parade," a Ranger informs me, "it's a real conversation starter.") There's also a mower displaying

a large blow-up of the historic photo of Obama waving the plunger. The mower assigned to me has a miniature bed on it, and a sign that says, "EMBEDDED REPORTER."

Each of us is also issued a broom, which we will carry in the parade with our mowers to denote Arcola's stature as America's Broom Corn Capital.

After we've checked our equipment, we spend four hours standing around outside while our blood temperature gradually declines to the level of a Slurpee. The start of the parade is delayed; the sun is going down; the wind is picking up. The Rangers, shivering in their graduation gowns, vow that in the unlikely event that they are ever invited to march in an inaugural parade again, they are going to disregard the no-alcohol rule.

THE MOMENT

Finally, the parade begins. In the staging area, directed by military personnel, we slowly inch our mowers forward, waiting to be sequenced into the parade in our assigned slot (Section 4, Element 14). At about 5:30 the element ahead of us, a high-school marching band, is sent out, and then we hear the command, "Lawn Rangers, move forward!"

And move forward we do, forming roughly two columns as we make the turn onto Pennsylvania Avenue, looking like a cross between a yard sale and a fraternity initiation. By now it is dark, and the parade crowd is sparse, consisting largely of police officers on hand to control the nonexistent parade crowd. But we put on a show anyway, executing our two precision lawn mower maneuvers: "Walk the Dog," which involves turning your mower in a full circle; and "Cross and Toss," which involves switching sides with your column partner. Since we have not practiced, our first few efforts are rusty, but the spectators are clearly impressed, as indicated by their laughter.

As we move up Pennsylvania Avenue, the crowd picks up a little, but we can still see basically every face. Every now and then my column partner, Bernie Casella, shouts to a spectator, "Thanks for coming!"

Finally we turn a corner onto a brilliantly illuminated street. Ahead we can see the reviewing stands set up in front of the White House, and the special enclosed area for the presidential party. This is it. With renewed energy, we push our mowers forward, and suddenly there they are, looking at us from just a few feet away: President and Mrs. Obama, and Vice President Biden. The president is pointing to the mower with his plunger picture, and saying something to the first lady. And they are laughing.

Whew.

We perform a precision lawn-mower maneuver for the presidential party. In a few seconds it's over, and we're moving on, back into the darkness, and the cold. But we're feeling good. Because we have made a statement here tonight. Our statement is: Yes, an inauguration is a serious event; but it is also a time to celebrate the diversity of this great nation, which includes all kinds of people, some of whom are clowns.

The president seemed to get that. On behalf of all the Rangers, I say to him: Sir, we wish you the best in dealing with the many huge challenges you face. And if you ever want to march with us again, we will keep your plunger warm.

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