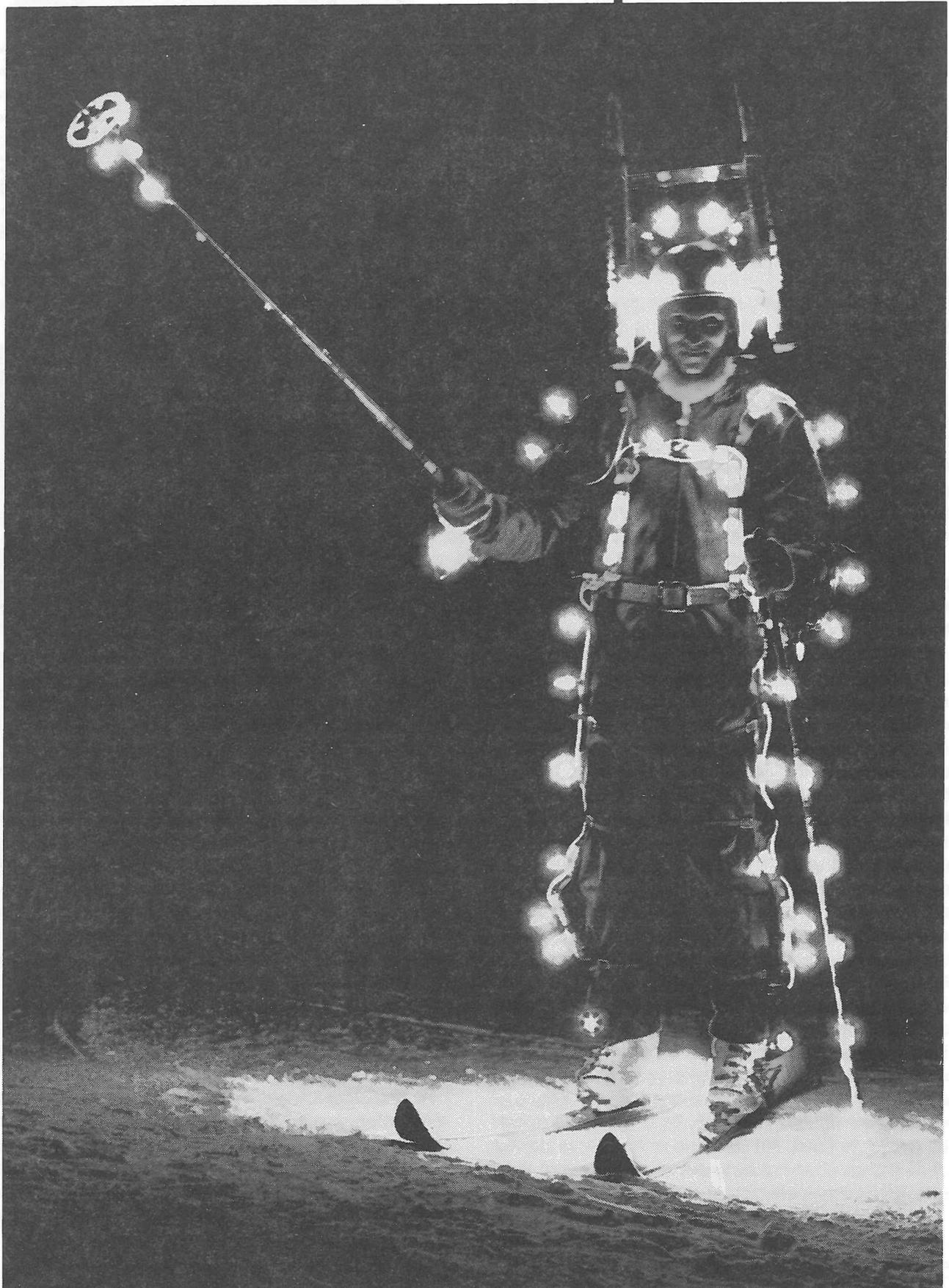


# Winter Carnival Spectacle



**Steamboat's Lighted Man** I would like to thank the Pilot photographers  
by **Terry DelliQuadri**

## Claudius Banks

For the past forty years residents and tourists have been thrilled by a local tradition at the Winter Carnival night show. This spectacle is put on at Howelsen Hill, the first ski area in Steamboat. The performers are the local junior ski racers and ski patrolmen. The highlight of the show is a man lighted with bulbs and fireworks. Claudius Banks and his son, Jon, have delighted audiences for years in this ostentatious tradition.

Claudius has been a regular performer at the Steamboat Springs Winter Carnival Night Show since 1938. Most of the locals remember him as the one who always skis down the slope with balls of fire shooting out and different colored lights showing his outline on the hill. I, Terry Delli Quadri, went to talk to him when he came to ski Steamboat and to watch his son, Jon, ski as the lighted man carrying on the family tradition.

Claudius told his story. "I was a tinkerer all through my life. I was always building something electrical. Anything you could have imagined I could have made, that is, if it was moving and electrical. I had electric trains when I was growing up. In fact, I still have a lot of those trains that are operational. Some of them are 60 years old, real collector's items. I had them all wired, so that they would run automatically through their stops and blocks, and they'd switch tracks. I never did the whole complete sequence though. There were so many ways to run it that it was kind of like a calculator. I had 17 locomotives and 165 cars running on 600 feet of old gauge track. I had it in a garage until the kids grew up and started going to college, then I didn't have anybody to help me run the trains. Now I've taken it all apart. It's around the garage where people can see it. I used to show it to all the Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts. The thing got to be quite famous down in our part of the country.

"I've also made a reindeer and a sled with lights, so it looks like they are walking. I could put an American flag up with lights to make it look like it is waving in the wind. I remember one time in high school they wanted an electrical ball. They wanted it to make one complete turn while people were dancing around the room...I hooked one up and wired it. That was just one of the projects I did. All through my life I've done a lot of things that not only pertain to lighted skis, but a lot of other electrical things too.

"I didn't start to ski until I was a senior at the University of Utah. Then I joined the Wasatch Mountain Club and started to do cross-country stuff. The first time I was in Steamboat was in 1935. I had heard about Winter Carnival, and I wanted to check it out. The advertising was different in those days. They used to send out



### Claudius and his lighted helmet

cards to all the communities. We got announcements in Utah advertising the carnival. I drove up here and looked the hill over. There wasn't much here at the time. They had a little rope tow up the side. If you wanted to get up the jumping hill you had to walk.

"The first time I saw the night show was in 1936. They didn't have too much going on at that time. They had the torch parade, the fiery hoop, and a couple of other things. I got to thinking that instead of carrying those flares I could put electric lights out on the end of my arms. I didn't know if it would be what I wanted or not. I didn't know if it would be as spectacular as the torches. I put something together and tried it out on our hill down in Vernal. It didn't satisfy me enough with just the two lights, so I decided to light up my skis and possibly my body. I wrote them a letter telling them I had an outfit that showed the outline of a man on the hill pretty well and that I thought it might work into the night show. They wrote back telling me they would like me to try it out.

"The first time I performed was in 1938. That night I only went about halfway up the hill. It was so darn heavy in those days, with the clumsy old storage batteries, stiff skis, and everything else. That gave me quite a bit of trouble. I managed and everybody came over to see what it was. I guess it was quite a sight.

"I used to take my suit of lights to a lot of places. In fact, the demand was so great that I couldn't keep up. I've taken it a number of places and performed for a number of individuals. In those days I'd put on the suit for ski parties. I did

it for special service clubs in different areas. I never dressed like that for the publicity. A lot of people wondered at my motives. Sometimes I would just decide to go to an area and run it without anybody knowing we were there. The people would see the lights and all the make-up and try to figure out what was happening. As the years went on I decided to perform only in Steamboat. For the last 15 years Steamboat is the only place I've taken the suit. We just kept it for here, so Steamboat Winter Carnival had something special that nobody else had.

"The old suit was considerably different than the ones we have now. It was constructed with miniature flashlight cell batteries. I had about five hundred to start with. I skied for two or three years with that suit before I got the idea of putting on the helmet. I made a helmet that had all kinds of lights on it. It was a big spiral that was lit six feet above my head. Then I got the idea that the thing ought to flash, so on the pedestal above the helmet I made a windmill sort of thing. When it was all wired up and I was going down the hill this thing would revolve and spin and flash. It would flash all kinds of colors on the hill. The spectators thought that was really something.

"After I had done this for two or three years I got to thinking that maybe I could carry some fireworks with this. I had had the idea before about the rockets, but I was a little leary. I thought they would burn the suit and set me on fire or something. The next year I took the helmet apart and took all of this windmill stuff off and made two stacks and rewired the top. I made a place there where I could hook on Roman candles. That's when I started to get the complete suit.

"Through the years it gradually progressed and I added more to it. I started to make lighted slalom poles. I made several sets of those during the years. The first group was just straight slalom poles that were about six feet high. I think I put about ten of those on the hill at one time. In later years I extended the length of some and made them really long. They were about ten feet long or more. I also put some big hoops on top of them. Some people in this area may remember that. The hoops were fastened to the top to give more light. Along with those hoops I had five separate hoops that we skied with for years. Individuals would carry these and they looked like big balls of light hanging in the air. I used those hoops for about ten years. I couldn't have people saying that all I did was come down the mountain. I try to never put the same show on twice. I would either change the routine, the lights, or if I had two people I could crisscross.

"Another thing I did was make big lighted signs. I made one when Colorado was going to have Olympics. That one was big. It was about



## **"It's really a part of the carnival."**

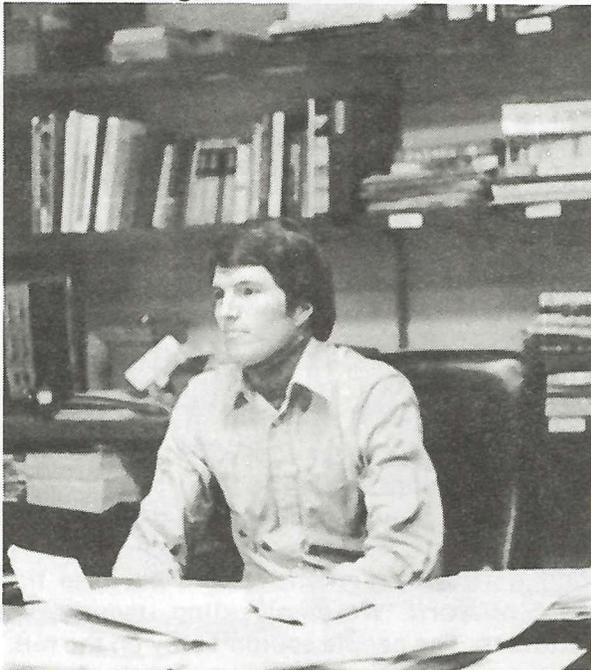
three feet high. I made different ones for whatever happened to be the theme of the Carnival that year. The last one I made was 'Ski Town U.S.A.' That was three years ago. We didn't get to light all the letters because there was a blizzard. We were skiing under severe conditions. The people couldn't stay on the hill. It was too cold, windy, and everything else. I've made all kinds of things through the years. Stuff like 'Steamboat,' 'Howdy,' 'Welcome.' I usually put the year up there too. It's a lot of work. You can't build those in an afternoon. I'd start something new for the Carnival in September. I usually had it done by the first of the year so I didn't have to mess with it for the first month or so. It takes a lot of work, planning, and hours, just for a five or six minute show."

I talked with Claudius about audience changes over the years. "It seems like years ago when I put on a show the whole town was there. They've changed the complex over there, and there's not as many places to park. I think there's just as many people interested. Every once in a while someone will call and ask me if I'm still doing the show. For example, just last week I had some people call from Hopkinsville, Kentucky to ask if I was still doing the show. They said if I were they were going to come to Steamboat. It's something that's developed through the years and it's just part of the community. I don't know if we forgot about it for one or two times whether other people would notice or not, and a lot of people don't know the lighted man on the street, but they know him on the hill. If I mention the lights I don't have any problem getting identified.

"The only thing I ever had in mind was to get all my children to follow in my footsteps. I've

had a dickens of a time getting anybody to do it. They're all afraid of it. I've caught on fire a couple of times, and I guess that scared them off. I had to coax and coax, and finally I talked Jon into doing the show. After he started he got a kick out of it. I also got another of my boys, Kent, to try. That's how we happened to get three of us on the hill at once. That really lit up the hill."

## Jon Banks



### **"It's a part of Steamboat."**

Jon Banks, a native of Utah and an avid skier since he could walk, started skiing in the Winter Carnival night show when he was six. He helped his dad with the show, but didn't actually perform as the lighted man until 1971. Since then he has performed every year, alone, or with his father, and once with his brother.

I talked with him about the lightable suit and he explained, "The suit I am using today has pieces of the original suit in it that we've reworked. We've added to it considerably, but the body part is still pretty much the same. The battery pack weighs about 35 lbs. I really don't know how much the whole thing weighs, but we carry the helmet, Roman candles, lights, and poles. If you're lying down you don't get up with it on.

"One of my big fears is tipping over and staying tipped over. The Roman candles on my helmet are continually spewing sparks. As long as I'm moving the sparks are dropping behind me, but as soon as I stop they come right straight down on my head. Also there's the batteries and the acid; that's dangerous, especially if there's strain on the batteries causing them to boil. It also releases a lot of hydrogen and oxygen which is very flammable. So if we fall down or get stopped in one spot it can be a very bad situation.

"The skis we have now are old Head metal skis. They're good skis and I suspect they will be good for many years to come. They'll last forever if I use them once a year. We used to mount the lights on the wooden strip that was attached to the ski. That made them handle differently. Now we mount them on a flexible rubber strip which makes it a lot easier.

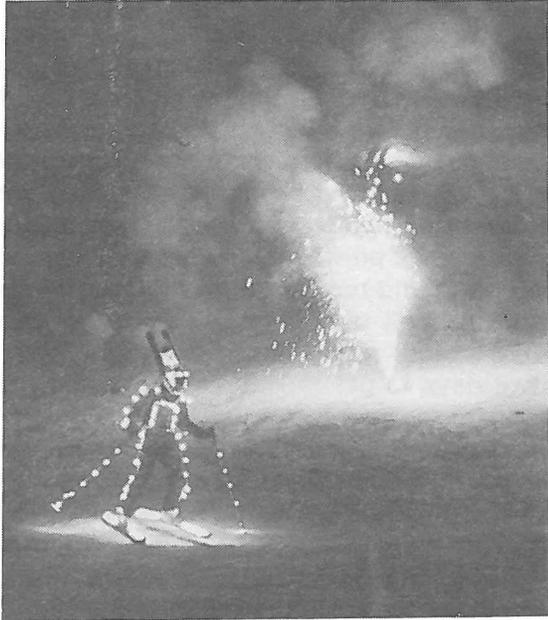
"I'm looking into getting new bindings. Once they released before I could stop. I was out of them, and into a full front flip before I knew it. It didn't really hurt the equipment, but a few lights got knocked out. As a matter of fact I walked down the hill with all the lights on and nobody even noticed. Everybody thought I was skiing. The bindings were set up ahead of time, and there shouldn't have been any problem. We check the bindings religiously now. Sometimes they wouldn't hold, and I wasn't doing anything that should have made them release. That once, as far as I know, has been the worst incident so far. Once my dad was skiing on some ice and he did a full turn around. Those skis don't work very well when you get on ice."

I was thinking that this would be an expensive operation, so I asked Jon about it. He said, "The Winter Sports Club has been very helpful. When we used to have to come up here from Utah they would find lodging for us. Normally they pay for the fireworks which we get through special permits. We use commercial fireworks designed for commercial display. When we started there weren't very many restrictions, but now there are a lot. One thing that helps us is that we've been doing it for so long. We've used almost the same fireworks all along. The fireworks have changed very little, although the fireworks we used to get burned twice as long as the ones we get now. Now they only run for three or four minutes, so we have to carry twice as many as before and stop to change them halfway down. We use mostly Roman candles, but we do use some fountains and things like that.

"The suit is kind of expensive. Everytime I think about buying something for it, I kind of sit back a little bit. I've been thinking about building a new battery pack for it, but it's going to cost me at least sixty or seventy dollars. I don't know what the wiring will involve. Fortunately it's things I've had around. I used to collect a lot of things. One thing that really helped me out was old pinball machines! They're full of lights, sockets and numerous other parts for the suit. I add to it slowly, so the time accumulates but the dollars don't. I'm planning to start from scratch and make the whole thing over again.

"Three years ago I made a much lighter helmet with a much lower center of gravity. It used to be a real problem to ride the lift. One of the reasons it was hard was the old helmets. It was hard to hang on to, keep track of, and carry

separately. Now I can wear the helmet and put the fireworks on when I get to the top of the hill. It's much, much easier. The new helmet also keeps the sparks from rolling down into my collar. One year I had a fireball go down my neck. Fortunately I had a heavy turtleneck on. It burnt a hole in my turtleneck, the t-shirt under that, and in my back for awhile. Finally we got it out at the bottom of the hill. So we've learned a bit through trial and error.



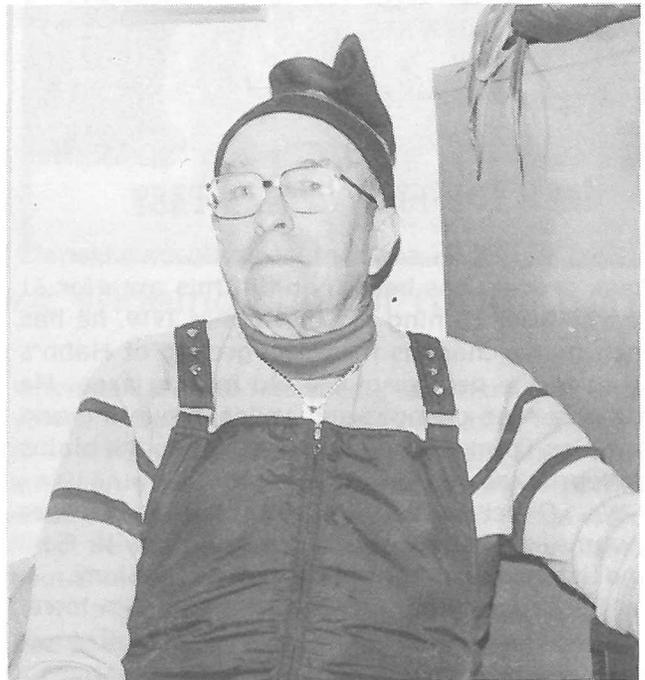
## **“There’s been a lot of additions and subtractions.”**

“We always have people up on the hill to help. We can’t do anything but work the switches. The light bulbs have to be put in, the skis put on, and the fireworks put in and lit. We need at least two people along with fire extinguishers. That’s a good policy. One of the nice things about the fire extinguishers we use is that they are sodium bicarbonate fire extinguishers which also neutralize acid. So if the batteries leak, rupture, crack, or something like that, the fire extinguishers will keep you from being eaten up by acid. I also wear a flame retardant suit which is very comforting as I am going down the hill.

“The only time we turn the lights on is when we’re going down the hill. This puts quite a load on the batteries. The batteries I’ve got will run the suit for 45 minutes continually. Normally a run takes ten to twelve minutes. In order to make the thing last I have to ski relatively slow. I could just bomb it, but people don’t come to see a two minute show. They appreciate the show more if it lasts.

“For a couple years I didn’t know if I would be continuing the tradition or not because it was a big load. But it seems like it’s all worth it once I get on the hill and get started down. The crowd enjoys it, especially the kids. They love it; they really, really do. It’s a part of the Carnival. It’s

been a part of it for so many years. It hasn’t changed a lot, but it’s still not the same as it used to be. It used to draw a lot more people. It used to be more of a local event. Everybody in town came over to see the Carnival Show. There’s still local participation but it’s more of a hardcore group. The new local population, the people who’ve come to Steamboat over the last five to ten years, aren’t as in tune with what’s going on. To me the Carnival wouldn’t be the same without it. I’d have a hard time living in Steamboat and not being a part of it. If I continue to do the performance I would like to improve my routine. I’d like to put variety in it. Something like lighted slalom poles. Some years it’s been really elaborate, and some years it’s been a little more mellow. There’s been a lot of additions and subtractions. It’s lost a little bit. That may be good, or it may be bad. We’ll have to see. We’ll know in time.”



## **“It’s pretty much a do-it-yourself project.”**

Claudius and Jon have established a tradition in this area for highlighting Winter Carnival with their ingenuity and performance for years. After talking with both Jon and Claudius I began to understand the energy and training that is necessary for this one night flaming tradition. I realized that Claudius’ future dream, wanting to perform as a lighted family, would definitely be appropriate for a grand finale.

I would like to encourage our readers to come see this spectacular show and especially to meet the man behind all the lights. He has established a Winter Carnival tradition that is well worth watching. His innovation of lighting a hillside with himself is one that will be remembered in this valley’s history.