

Clatskanie's July 4th Traditions

From rolling pin throwing to fireworks, Clatskanie has a long history of Independence Day festivities

By Deborah Steele Hazen

"I believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be celebrated by pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other..."

Thus wrote John Adams, a member of the committee which was responsible for writing the Declaration of Independence, signed on July 4, 1776. Of course, it was Thomas Jefferson, not Adams, who did most of the writing, but the man who was to become the second president of the United States, and the father of the sixth president, argued long and hard for the Declaration's passage. Adams expressed his excitement regarding the signing of the Declaration in a letter to his beloved wife Abigail, and those words have set the tone for 4th of July celebrations for the past 239 years.

Since the first pioneers came to the Clatskanie area they have participated in 4th of July festivities, although the kinds of events have varied over the years. Old photographs at the Clatskanie Historical Museum, and the archives of *The Clatskanie Chief* tell of July 4ths of days gone by - baseball games, picnics, celebratory cruises on the sternwheelers that plied the waters of the Clatskanie and Columbia rivers, patriotic parades with horse-drawn wagons and "floats" decorated in red, white and blue bunting.



A 4th of July schedule from the mid-1930s lists a parade of the American Legion Junior Drum & Bugle Corps - then the pride of the town - marching down Nehalem Street at 8:30 a.m. That was followed by a firemen-only water fight - presumably with water hoses - over the bridge leading into the park. Then, a series of other competitions began - a horseshoe pitching contest, bicycle race, running events of various lengths for boys and girls in different age groups, a 60-yard dash for women, a 100-yard dash for members of the American Legion and Kiwanis Club. A three-legged race, open to all, was the finale racing event. The winners in most of those races won cash prizes - \$1 for first place, 75 cents for second and 50 cents for third. The men's, women's and 3-legged races paid \$1.50 for first place, \$1 for second and 50 cents for third - not bad for the height of the Great Depression.

The races were followed by a rolling pin throwing contest for women only, a greased pole climbing event, open to all, and a greased pig contest, the winner of which won the princely-sum of \$3. The men's team winning the tug-o-war won a case of beer. Rounding out the morning's events were swimming races - one for girls and one for boys - on the Clatskanie River.

As 4th of July celebrants rested from their exertions, the Westport-Wauna Band played a concert in the city park, and the attendees dined on picnic lunches topped off with free watermelon and free coffee (if you brought your own cup).

Baseball was the main event for the afternoon, beginning with contests for base-running, throwing for accuracy (open to catchers only), and infield ball-handling. At 2 p.m., a baseball game between the adult "town teams" from Clatskanie and Cathlamet began.

After the game, the American Legion opened its "dugout," a name taken from the trenches that World War I veterans dug in France. The Legion-sponsored "dugouts" of the mid-20th century were a kind of home-grown carnival with roulette, "chuck-a-luck," craps, black jack, a dice game, "beano", wheel of fortune, dart games and "Jitney" dancing, during which men paid for the privilege of dancing with female volunteers. All of the proceeds of the "dugout" benefited the Junior Drum & Bugle Corps.

Also, beginning at 1 p.m. on the 4th, the Avalon Theatre - located in the I.O.O.F. hall - began showing movies and continued them throughout the afternoon and evening hours. Topping off the day, upstairs in the ballroom, was a dance.

The first of what might be considered the modern era of 4th of July celebrations in Clatskanie took place in 1959, the year of the Oregon Centennial. The community had been celebrating since the actual 100th birthday of the state on Feb. 14, 1959, when the men participated in a beard-growing contest, adults and school children alike wore pioneer costumes and acted in history plays.

Inspired by the thousands of acres of local dikelands, Clatskanie adopted a "Little Holland" theme to welcome tourists during the centennial summer of 1959. A tourist kiosk in the shape of a windmill was built and placed on the corner of Highway 30 and Nehalem Street. Young ladies from pioneer families were named to a Clatskanie Centennial court, and were dressed in Dutch girl costumes.

1959 was also the first of the big 4th of July barbecues in the park which benefited the Clatskanie swimming pool - built the year before in the wake of several tragic drownings. Since then, Clatskanie's 4th of July celebrations have always included a parade, and until recent years, a barbecue, along with a variety of other activities in the park.

From 1959 through 1966, the celebrations were sponsored by CARE, the Clatskanie Area Recreation

Endeavor, the non-profit organization which operated the pool until the Clatskanie Park and Recreation District was formed. The 4th of July barbecues and bingo booth were the main source of income for the operation of the swimming pool for those first eight years.

In 1967, the Clatskanie Chamber of Commerce took over the responsibility for the planning of the festivities - collectively called the "Clatskanie Scramble." That year also marked the first of the modern-day courts of local high school girls. The "Scramble" name lasted through 1974. The celebration was then christened Clatskanie Heritage Days and has continued as such for the past 40 years.

The logging shows and fireworks displays were added as on-going features of the 4th in the 1980s. When the Chamber entered a period of dormancy during the late '80s and early '90s, an independent committee of dedicated volunteers took over the duties of planning and organizing the events, but as their energy flagged, the Chamber reformed in 1992 and again assumed the leadership.

While Heritage Days is under the Chamber's umbrella, the celebration is successful each year only with the support, cooperation and participation of other organizations such as the Clatskanie Cruisers Car Club and the Clatskanie Kiwanis Club, public agencies such as the City of Clatskanie and Clatskanie PUD, local businesses and citizen volunteers.

The cost of Heritage Days is covered entirely by fundraising events and donations. All who enjoy Clatskanie's hometown 4th of July celebration are encouraged to help support it. Tax deductible contributions to the fireworks display or logging show may be sent to the Clatskanie Foundation, P.O. Box 243, Clatskanie, OR 97016.