

Poultry Days History

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After the turn of the century, Versailles, Ohio became known as the Poultry Capital of the Midwest. Although Versailles is a small village its production of eggs and poultry was recognized far beyond Ohio. This included poultry farmer John Gasson and the Gasson's Poultry Farms which was recognized worldwide and developed a strain of Leghorn chickens, as well as the Versailles Poultry Producers which processed both eggs and poultry beginning in the 50s. Meanwhile, Weavers Bros., Inc., founded by George Weaver in 1929 has continued to grow larger each year as a top egg producer and processor in the nation. Numerous poultry farms operated in the area at that time including Rolls Turkey Farm, Begin Brothers, Swank Turkey Farm, Reigle Poultry, Greenhoff, Ridenour, and the companies that supported them: Alexander Bros Elevator, Rosenbeck Implement, Harvey Hole Implement, Ohio Egg Producers Association, Willowdell Grain and Feed, Amstutz Hatcheries, Sam Sheets, LH Schmidt, Carl Subler Trucking, Buckeye Overall, Versailles Savings & Loan and Worch Lumber. Truckers came to call Versailles "Chicken City". This rich history has been highlighted with the annual Poultry Days Festival.

A group that included Dr. Barga, Paul Gasson, Leo Gunckle, Homer Praker, Ralph Crooks and Verl Cottrell first considered having a poultry show to highlight Versailles's leadership in poultry production but soon changed to a chicken barbecue which now seems an obvious choice. Poultry Days was first held on June 5, 1952 with Dr. Barga as the chairman. Businesses closed early that Thursday at the end of the school year and a community barbeque was held. This first festival was small and community focused but grew quickly drawing visitors from surrounding communities and Dayton. It was first held at the now demolished school located at W. Ward Street, and then in 1954 it was moved to the site of the former high school on S. Center Street where it has remained to this day. The Versailles School Board and the Village of Versailles have remained key supporters. Early festivals were also educational involving agribusiness and 4-Hs while vendors displayed equipment.

The festival began as "Poultry Day" a single day event held on Thursdays until 1962 when it expanded to Wednesday. In 1966 the festival moved to a weekend festival to be held on Friday and Saturday. In 1969 carnival rides were introduced and, in 1972 it was finally expanded to Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Arguably the area's oldest festival, Poultry Days settled into being held on the second full weekend in June.

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Instead of the traditional BBQ dinners we are familiar with today, the expanded festival offered an egg smorgasbord on the first day of the festival beginning in 1962. This was briefly replaced by turkey burgers until 1974 when barbeque chicken was finally served throughout the entire festival. The egg smorgasbord included the popular “chicken crunch as well as” turkey and noodles, and deviled eggs. The first dinners cost \$1.25 and included half a chicken, roll, butter, chips, cranberry salad, pickles and a choice of coffee or pop. In 1955, Mikesells (chips) and Brown’s Sweet Shop (rolls) began supplying the festival. The Chilly Willy orange drink and applesauce didn’t appear until many years later.

The early chicken serving lines were ran by “The Ladies Serving Committee” while the men ran the barbecue pits. Pictures of the first chicken dining tables show they were constructed by building tables over empty chicken crates. A drive through line was added and in 2001 the two were finally combined in the current location. Jerry Bey Jr. was credited for beginning all prepackaged chips, applesauce and cutlery in 1997. Further enhancements have culminated in operation which in 2014 averaged 1,300 dinners served per hour with a peak of nearly 2,000 dinners per hour or a dinner every 2 seconds.

In a festival full of tradition the first “Miss Chick,” Bonnie Sue Besecker was crowned that very first year in 1952 and the festival has continued to recognize vibrant, dynamic young women. The pageant has drawn as many as 112 contestants from throughout Ohio and beyond requiring an extensive judging process that begins before the festival. Today the event is limited to young ladies from Darke and surrounding counties. Thirty-three years after the first Miss Chick a new tradition was born with Trisha Rhoades becoming the festival’s first “Little Miss Poultry Days” in 1985.

As early as 1957 or 1958 a “Grand Parade” was added, originally ran by Colonel Warner Nichols until his death in 1965 at which time John “Red” Elson took over. Red went on to start the successful Antique Car parade in 1973. Both parades continue today and draw in excess of 100 units annually making them among the largest parades in the region. The honorary Grand Parade Marshall position has been awarded to community leaders who are recognized for their contribution and volunteerism in the community. In the late 60s, Dick Gigandet and Bob Christian along with the Versailles Fire Dept. took over the parade which it has organized for nearly 50 years. The Dickman family has taken over the Antique Car Parade previously organized by the Elsons. Over the years there have been many parade favorites including Ralph Baltes’ Baker steam engine and Pop Oliver’s van with its unique horn which was a familiar sound around town festival week.

Over the years the festival included live chickens, ducks, a giant mystery egg, egg art, giant wishbone pulling, and a rooster calling contest. For many years duck races were a familiar sight and sound on the grounds. In the early 1970s Poultry Days worked to break the world record for the largest egg omelet with another attempt in 1982. This culminated with an omelet that measured nearly 9 feet in diameter and required 22,128 eggs, 100 pounds of onions and 100

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pounds of ham that were combined in a concrete mixer. The custom built omelet pan was an exhibit for many years and ended up in the Versailles pool at least once.

Over the years the festival has been strongly promoted by media with early support from DP&L's Marketing Dept. WKEF Channel 22 and WDTN Channel 2 took it a step further by participating in a softball tournament against the local "40 and over club" for several years. Newscasters including Don Wayne, Ed Hart, Mike Gallagher, Gil Whitney and Jim Baldrige made appearances or emceed Miss Chick. Channel 2 broadcast their news live from Poultry Days in 1987. The WHIO helicopter that arrived in the 60s has been replaced by Steve Baker who arrives every year in his SUV to witness the first chicken getting painted on the streets.

Two additional chicken related traditions are the Big Chicken Float and chicken painting. The Big Chicken float was started in the late 80s and was originally purchased by the Versailles Development Association to promote Versailles. The original chicken was replaced in the mid-90s and continues today. While known as the "Giant Chicken" in most parades this chicken was originally on a nest and had to be cut down to maneuver under power lines. Chicken painting started in 1996 under Kent Monnin's Chairmanship to welcome visitors to town and later to designate board members and festival VIPs. The festival theme began in 1987 with "Working Hand in Hand for the Future" and selecting a fun theme has become one of the most challenging tasks of the chairman.

Celebrities have also attended including heart throb Bob Braun who appeared in 1969. In 1964 Geraldine "Jerrie" Mock, the first woman to fly solo around the world that same year flying The Spirit of Columbus, landed by helicopter on the baseball field. In 1985 and 1986 Super Chicken the world's only Skydiving Clown appeared. Versailles native Sam Graves participated in the 1980 festival after winning a national competition for a "Mork from Ork" lookalike search. This makes perfect sense considering Mork came to earth in an EGG! In 1983, actor George Wendt who played the character Norm on *Cheers* came to thank Don Wick, a Versailles High School counselor who successfully created a campaign to save Cheers from being canceled after its first season. After his duties were over, Wendt went around to the local bars and drank with the patrons. Legend has it when the Cheers gang is in the Pool Room "GO TIGERS" is on the chalkboard as a reference to the Versailles Tigers for the help Mr. Wick gave to save the show.

The festival was also a frequent destination for Governors and Senators and those seeking office which continues today. Often they combined these visits with dedications of sports fields or visits to local businesses which over the years included Poultry Producers, Argosy (a division of Airstream) and IE Industries (now known as Midmark).

In 1952 alone it took approximately 125 volunteers to construct and operate the BBQ pits. As the volume of chicken served grew the army of volunteers worked to deliver consistent quality despite the challenges with weather being the worst. By 1970, after 18 years of chicken dinners being

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cooked by local volunteers the festival had outgrown the capacity of these hard working individuals. After an exhaustive search across many states a partnership began with Nelsons who had a small, but growing, chicken barbecue business. Port-A-Pit (now known as Nelson's BBQ) was the only company capable of meeting the quality standards expected by the festival and cooking enough of those delicious World Famous chicken dinners to satisfy demand. This partnership continues with the third generation of the Nelson family and Poultry Days remains their single largest annual event.

For several years a Poultry Days dance was held in the school gym offering both square and round dancing. In 1974, the Social Tent was established as the area's first official social tent serving beer on a closed State Highway. Over the years festival entertainment has changed from orchestras to modern bands. Local musicians with bands like E-Z Rider, Bushwack, The Bumble Bees, Renegade, Free Rider, Eight Ball, Love Junkie and many more have filled the Social Tent with music. True to this day local bands with members barely out of middle school follow in the footsteps of legends like Jimmy Baltes and his orchestra.

In 1974 Poultry Days incorporated, instituted by-laws and the Chairman structure was established. Unique among festivals it provides for a minimum of a six year commitment to become a festival chairman. Doc Barga holds the distinction of being the first Chairman, Jackie Kremer of being the first female Chairperson and Sam Morrison for being Chairman twice. Not to mention numerous fathers and sons, brothers, mayors, and community leaders who have served as chairmen. Jim Phelan was credited with bringing in Nelsons, Carl Nearing and Dick Gigandet created the social tent and Don Lisle lead the festival through 1974 when the festival's future was in question. The festival has had several struggles including a storm and tent collapse in 1981 (reportedly injuring 2014 chairman Shawn Peters) and a tornado touchdown in 2008, which didn't stop several concerned citizens from guarding the social tent despite the storm. Each chairman and board has taken the responsibility of running a quality festival while working to improve the festival each year.

The Poultry Days board has been a small but dedicated group that only in the last few years has grown to 23 members as the organization has worked to expand and improve the festival. This group meets year round planning, preparing and looking for ways to improve the festival while supporting other organizations as well as for the last ten years has conducting an annual Blood Drive.

A group of friends (Mark Simons, Brice Schieltz, Chuck Blinn, John Pohl, Wade Barga, Dan Young, Jeff Warrick Rob Berger, Randy Bey, Bob Batty and Dale Wilker) organized the first Poultry Days Ultimate Frisbee Championship in 1983 after hometown Blue Meanies beat the Diamond Dawgs of Dayton in a grudge match in 1982. One of the later Blue Meanies nicknamed "Brute" grew up to be Chairman Mike Poling. The annual tournament has grown to become a top tournament and one of

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three “bucket list” tournaments drawing several thousand players and friends to Versailles each year. Players from around the United States and international teams have made the pilgrimage to Versailles and experienced a warm welcome from residents and businesses. The event was originally named the Poultry Days Ultimate Tournament but in 1990 it was changed to the Jeff Warrick Poultry Days Ultimate Class after Jeff Warrick and then Dan Goubeaux who succumbed to Leukemia. From this point forward the money raised from the tournament has been donated to the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society of America. This event has developed its own traditions including an Egg Eating contest for charity and strong connection to the Miss Chick Pageant. The Ultimate players vie for Miss Chick to choose them as “Mr. Cluck”. In 2012 after 30 years Dale Wilker transitioned to running other Ultimate events including the College Nationals and the 2015 US Open while Rodger Oakes of Columbus took on the Poultry Days tournament.

Over the years we have seen many contests and events including dog shows, talent shows and the “Tour de Versailles” cycling event. In 1972, there was a 150 plane fly in and the first of several “Chicken Meat” track and field tournaments. There have been treasure hunts, fireworks, Coterie club’s Ice Cream smorgasbord, antique auctions, softball tournaments, a Volksmarch, quilt shows, water ball tournaments, FFA petting zoo, a Tug-of-War, cheerleading, quilting, lip sync and cooking contests including the Ohio Egg Cooking Contest. Many of these events continue including the Cake and Egg Show, Golf Scramble, Flower Show and Art Show. And there have many more recent additions such as the 5K, Hoopin the Coop, SuperFit, and Photography show. The Versailles Community Chorus and later the Towne and Country Players presented productions including Oklahoma, Annie, Carousel, The Pajama Game and The Sound of Music.

The festival also provides an opportunity for area organizations to raise funds, including K of C Bingo, the Rotary Lemonade Stand (which began in 1962), and the Band Boosters, which still operate their food tent to this day. Serendipity Mothers run the vending area and the Versailles Fire Department manages the Grand Parade.

From the very beginning the proceeds from Poultry Days has been invested back into the community to support community projects and school activities including the donations to the Versailles Pool, Life Squad, Worch Library and School Development Association. A wide range of school activities have been supported from sports equipment to band uniforms. The festival began work on its own project and on July 4th 1985 the Festival dedicated Heritage Park. Originally intended to be a new location for the festival the project evolved into a 40 acre park including ponds, walking track, shelter houses and sports fields. The park is also home to several thousand Ultimate players each summer. While Poultry Days continues to fund the park, the independent Heritage Park Board was established to oversee and maintain the park. As the years have passed the organizations long standing support for the community has been illustrated by situations similar to donations to the recent Hole Field project which in part replaced bleachers the festival

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had contributed to in the 1970s. Poultry Days has donated in excess of \$700,000 over the past 10 years.

Overall the festival has become a Versailles area "holiday" where friends and families can gather, some on the festival grounds, some in backyards and porches, but also where visitors are warmly welcomed. This small town village of only 2,687 residents attracts crowds exceeding 50,000 people over the course of the festival weekend. With a record of 26,101 dinners in 2002, the festival is quickly approaching its one millionth dinner sold.

When this project began it was intended as a few paragraphs summarizing the festival but quickly grew as stories were accumulated. In fact more stories, businesses and individuals then can be mentioned in this piece. While many things have been learned from my personal experience attending the festival and serving on the board what I already knew about the festival was reinforced as I spoke with festival old timers and read through dusty minutes and newspaper articles. The businesses supporting the festivals have changed as have the volunteers but the spirit of the festival has remained constant and reflective of the community. More than rides and parades the event has evolved from a festival to a local holiday which reunites families and friends.

To view our growing collection of festival pictures go to www.versaillespoultrydays.com. We encourage anyone with a picture or a story about the festival to email chairman@versaillespoultrydays.com or mail Poultry Days directly at P.O. Box 108, Versailles, Ohio 45380. The 64th annual Versailles Poultry Days festival will be held June 12, 13 and 14th and is only getting stronger each and every year with your support. Come join the tradition.

By Eric C. Stachler, 2013 Chairman

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