

For 90 years, people have packed Main Street Mechanicsburg for Jubilee Day

- **By Joseph Cress, The Sentinel**
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Jubilee Day in Mechanicsburg.

Michael Bupp/The Sentinel

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The newspaper ad promised the start of an enduring legacy for generations to come.

“Saturday May 10 will be a day long remembered by the people of Cumberland County,” reported the May 8, 1924 edition of The Harrisburg Telegraph.

“Something new and yet an idea that means a great deal to the citizens of this thriving community,” an advertisement said.

When the first event was held in Mechanicsburg 90 years ago, it was originally known as the Farmers and Merchants Jubilee Day. It was introduced to acquaint the public with local businesses using similar selling points in use today.

The 1924 ad touted Mechanicsburg as being a desirable place to live with excellent schools, numerous and varied industries and good accessibility to major population centers.

It fostered pride in features which no longer exist, such as trolleys and the Irving Female College, or were a bigger deal in 1924 such as modern lighting, gas and electricity.

“Everything was local at that time,” said Steve Zimmerman, museum director with the Mechanicsburg Museum Association. “It was for the merchants to display their wares and show what they have for sale.”

His grandfather Merle Zimmerman ran a Western Auto Store on Main Street from 1937 to 1976. As a boy growing up in the 1950s, Steve would hang out by the display in front of the store every Jubilee Day guiding customers with questions to sales staff with answers.

It was a day for local business owners to hand patrons promotional items like yardsticks along with tickets for different kinds of prize giveaways.

“We had a cage and a couple guys who would turn the wheel,” said Ray “Skip” Hutter Jr., who chaired the Jubilee Day organizing committee for three years during the 1950s.

A local boy or girl was usually selected to be the official ticket picker of the grand prize during a ceremony held on the Square before a mob of spectators. Back then, the crowd numbered upwards of 10,000.

“We probably had about 15 prizes,” said Hutter whose father was the town burgess from 1938 to 1954. The top prizes were TV sets and a trip to Florida.

Jubilee Day has developed into such a tradition over the decades that former Mechanicsburg residents from across the country schedule vacation time around the one-day street fair. High school reunions are organized around the event.

“You get to see an awful lot of friends you have not seen for years,” Hutter said. “People you have not seen for years. It brings people into town. It gives people something to look forward to.”

Some youth saw Jubilee Day as an opportunity to commit mischief on a grand scale. Hutter remembers how local kids used to buy up all the squirt guns from a Main Street five-and-dime and then head out on a watery rampage.

“It was a real pain in the butt for police,” Hutter said. “I got squirted usually by someone I knew.”

A lifelong Mechanicsburg area resident, Richard Snelbaker, remembers how a mime dressed as a house painter used to stand absolutely still in front of one of the hardware stores. “All the kids in town heckled him to try to make him smile.”

Then as now, Jubilee Day was an opportunity to sample a wide variety of food sold by vendors, churches and civic organizations. “You could make a meal out of just walking up and down the street,” Snelbaker

said. “My own kids would meet me there. I could turn them loose and they did not get into trouble. I don’t know how many gold fish we won throwing ping-pong balls.”

The idea for Jubilee Day goes back to 1923 when a group of local businessmen attended a town-wide celebration in Gettysburg. They were so impressed by what they saw they decided Mechanicsburg needed a fair of its own.

The men formed a committee headed by the late J.A. Bushman, Manny Westhafer, H. Clay Ryan and Russell to organize it as a street fair to thank local residents and surrounding farmers for the previous year’s patronage.

Though the first event was held in May, organizers would later schedule it in late June. By then, school was out so children and farmers were in the midst of a traditional lull in their springtime workload.

For the first two years Jubilee Day was confined to a section of West Main Street from Market to Frederick. In 1926 the Automobile Dealers and Merchants Association, principal sponsors of the event, decided to expand the exhibit section from High to Arch streets on Main Street and on Market Street from the railroad crossing south to Locust Street.

Association leaders decided it was time to create a permanent year-round organization to run Jubilee Day. Thus was born on Oct. 10, 1927 the Mechanicsburg Area Chamber of Commerce.

“The event started first and we went from there as opposed to the other way around,” said Jeff Palm, executive director of the chamber.

He added that back then Mechanicsburg Borough was surrounded by farmland.

The early years of Jubilee Day celebrated this tie to agriculture with livestock and farm equipment displays and the judging of chickens, butter, eggs, corn and cattle. This connection to farming gradually faded over the decades as commercial development came into the outlying townships.

The chamber continued to hold judging of the Cumberland County 4-H livestock divisions until 1973. Over time, Jubilee Day has played host to flower shows, wildlife displays, industrial exhibits, craft demonstrations, baby parades, bicycle races and annual contests for the honorary Jubilee Day Queen.

By the mid-30s, the chamber shortened the name to just Jubilee Day and settled on always holding the event on a Thursday. It had been a tradition for Mechanicsburg businesses to close early on a Thursday afternoon as a way of giving their employees time off to compensate for having to work late on Saturday evenings.

Since then, Jubilee Day has become a part of the seasonal circuit of events for the vendors of this region who see it as an extra opportunity to sell their wares before the weekend, Palm said.

The traditional June date was only changed twice. In 1928 it was moved to August so the celebration could coincide with the borough's celebration of the 100th anniversary of incorporation. Almost 50 years later, Jubilee Day was held on July 1 to salute the Bicentennial. There was no Jubilee Day from 1940 to 1945 because of World War II and the need to ration fuel.

Jubilee Day has been held rain or shine except for 1955 when the event was totally out (Editor's note: The 2020 and 2021 events were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Those interviewed agree the event that started as an opportunity for town merchants to showcase their wares became steadily much commercialized over the decades. This first started to happen in the mid-to-late 70s when many businesses moved out of the downtown to the shopping centers and malls being built in the outlying townships.