

Tomato Fest to Mardi Gras

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Randolph County was founded in 1818, which is also when they celebrated their first Tomato Festival, also known as Fiesta De Tomate. This festival was put in place to celebrate the Mexican American's harvest of tomatoes by Gerardo Nunez. It hosted a parade around the town square and started off with the Mexican National Anthem. It consisted of horsemen carrying the Mexican and American flag, small Mexican dance groups, small Mexican bands, horse drawn carriages, wagons, and carts. The participants dressed up in different outfits associated with Mexican culture and sombreros. Along the square, toys and clothing were sold, as were pinatas for the children to hit. This tradition was celebrated for many years and soon became history.

Eventually, as this tradition continued, an outbreak of the Rheumatic Fever was quickly spreading across the United States. Rheumatic Fever was a common cause of children dying, so the community started to bring pumpkins and auction them to raise money towards the Rheumatic Fever Foundation. Due to the auction, the festival quickly received the name: Pumpkin Fest.

In 1933, a new tradition was brought into Winchester: a party called Mardi Gras. They had many contests including a costume contest that began on Halloween night. It held contests for the largest families costume, the prettiest masked woman, a prize for the best dancers, the largest group costume that looked alike, and a prize for the oldest person in costume. Almost 5,000 people participated in this event each year.

In 1972, the festival introduced pageants. There was at least one candidate from each high school in Randolph County and only one winner who would be awarded a scholarship to the crowned King and Queen. Julie Warner was crowned the first Queen at the Pumpkin Fest.

Expanding their horizons, Mardi Gras added new activities to their celebration in 1944, including a pageant contest on Tuesdays; booths set up for toys, fundraisers, and clothing on Wednesdays; live music and giveaways to any citizen who attended Mardi Gras on Thursdays and Fridays; and a large parade took place around the town square which included the local band, floats for local business, and the King and Queen nominees for Mardi Gras.

The Mardi Gras has not had any major changes throughout the years, however, the 2000's introduced a variety of carnival rides to town. Sticking with the traditions, the Mardi Gras scholarship is awarded to a King and Queen who have applied, but now the candidates must attend Winchester Community High School. There are also still many opportunities to support local businesses around town. Today, people flock the entirety of Main Street and the Town Square to experience the fun of the event and make long-lasting memories.