

AUG 7 2007

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Hermiston produce a big hit in Portland

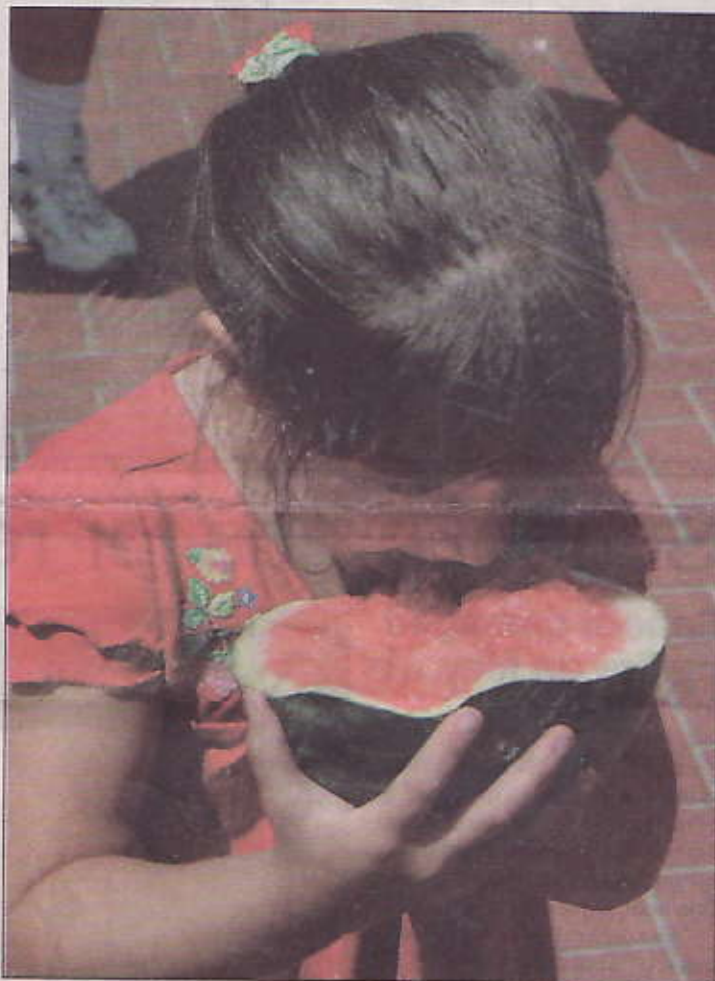
Tailgate party attracts crowd in Pioneer Square

By Karen Hutchinson-Talaski
Staff writer

PORTLAND — The line snaked around Pioneer Courthouse Square in Portland for nearly the whole block — everyone was in line for the chance to snag a fresh Hermiston watermelon, cantaloupe or five-pound bag of those famous Eastern Oregon potatoes — thanks to the generosity of Hermiston farmers.

For the past 17 years, Hermiston melons and potatoes have made their way to Portland, to be given away to whoever wants to stand in line. The watermelon trip was born out of a friendship between former Portland Mayor Bud Clark and former Hermiston Mayor Frank Harkenrider. The giveaway was originally staged on the steps of Portland City Hall — it was Mayor Vera Katz who suggested it be moved to Pioneer Courthouse Square. This year, 10 1,000-pound bins of melons made their way to Portland along with a pick-up load of potatoes in five-pound bags.

For Dolores Ortega and Jeanne Devon, being first in line was not a first-time thing — they both have been first in line three times before. Ortega has been coming to the Tailgate Party for seven years.



Herald photo by Karen Hutchinson-Talaski

Five-year-old Megan Stein of Hermiston dug right into a watermelon at the Mayor's Tailgate Party on Friday.

"I love to come to this," Ortega said. "Hermiston people are very friendly and very giving."

Devon says having fresh produce is "thrilling to seniors."

"This is just so wonderful," she said.

Produce is not just given away in the middle of

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Party

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downtown Portland. Local agencies like FISH Emergency Services receive the bounty of Eastern Oregon as well. Ken Lane, who works for FISH, says their agency helps 22,000 families a year with emergency food, clothing and household goods.

"We have a good relationship with the city of Hermiston," said Lane. "We received 1,200 pounds of potatoes and we are already giving them out."

As he looked at the line waiting for produce, he remarked on the people.

"I see some of our regular clients here," Lane said. "The people of Hermiston have been very generous to us."

Part of the festivities of the Tailgate Party was the seed-spitting contest. Portland City Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who was filling in for an absent Mayor Tom Potter, gave it his level best but could only spit his watermelon seed 17 feet against Lt. Col. Bob Stein from the Umatilla Chemical Depot, who spit his seed 17.9 feet. Doug Hamrick from Washington Group

International, the contractor for the Umatilla Chemical Agent Disposal Facility, spit a seed 18 feet but was beat out by returning champion, Hermiston City Councilor Jackie Myers with her seed spitting coming in at 22 feet. Mayor Bob Severson spit his seed farther than he has ever done — nearly 9 feet. And he had been practicing, too.

"This is a great annual tradition," said Saltzman. "It has been 17 years that Hermiston has shared (with us). We appreciate it."

Severson said he had never seen so many people before.

"This is a great day," he said.

When it was all over, everyone who lined up had received something to take home from Hermiston. Some received a little bit more than what some people considered their 'fair share' — this despite Hermiston's assistant city manager Ray Jones saying only one per customer.

All in all, says Saltzman, the tradition is a good one.

"We thank Hermiston for their generosity," he said.

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Herald photo by Karen Hutchinson-Talaski

People lined up around a city block to get the chance to take home a Hermiston watermelon, cantaloupe or sack of potatoes. From left Megan Stein, Lt. Col. Bob Stein, Phil Houston, and Doug Hamrick pass produce to waiting arms.

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