

# Looking back at how the National Cherry Festival came to be

BY SARAH HENRY  
Record-Eagle staff writer

The National Cherry Festival, with its eight days of airshows, food vendors, contests, fireworks, parades, bands and other entertainment wasn't always as spectacular an event.

In fact, the earliest northern Michigan cherry history started back in 1837, according to Dr. Gary Kaberle, former National Cherry Festival president and Cherry Marketing Institute director.

A Presbyterian missionary man named Peter Dougherty first had the idea to plant cherry trees in the Traverse City area, Kaberle said.

Old Mission Peninsula flourished with apple trees in the 1800's, as well as some peach and plum trees, but no cherry trees existed at that time.

"Everyone told him he couldn't grow cherries (this far north)," Kaberle said. "We think maybe a peddler came by selling trees, and that's how it started."

In the 1850's the state of Michigan granted Native Americans the right to own land, however, they weren't allowed to own land on Old Mission Peninsula, so they migrated to the Omena area on Leelenau Peninsula,

Kaberle said.

"Omena used to be New Mission," he said. "And we still have Old Mission, named for the mission started by Peter Dougherty."

In the later 1800's, cherry trees started becoming popular to grow on Old Mission Peninsula. In 1914, the cherry crop was so abundant that it surpassed the apple crop.

Also in 1914, the Record-Eagle printed an article stating that for the first time, 240 freight cars transferred cherries down south.

like Detroit and Chicago."

In 1925 and 1926, the first ideas for a festival were stirring. The Festival was originally called the Blessing of the Blossoms, a one-day religious prayer ceremony for a good crop, as well as a civic blessing.

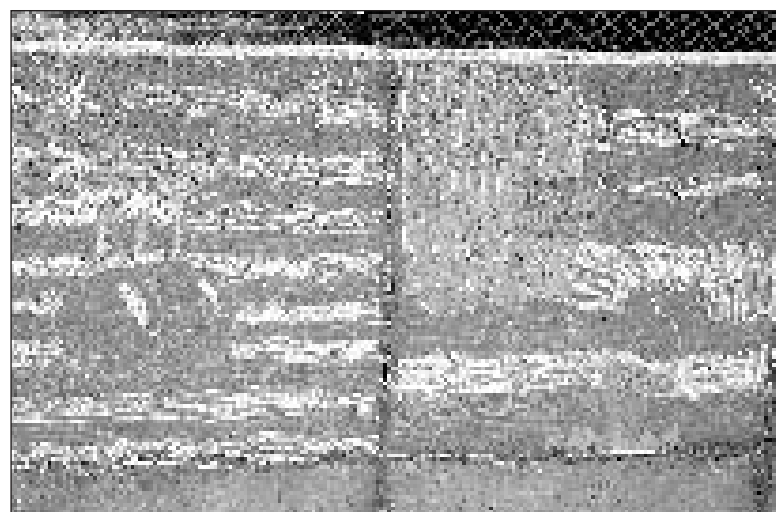
In 1925, 72 women's names were compiled, and the first Cherry Queen was drawn out of a hat, Kaberle said.

"The rules were she had to be local, and she had to be photogenic," Kaberle said.



"Before then, cherries couldn't be shipped very far and stay fresh," Kaberle said. "With the refrigerated freight cars, the market could be expanded to places

Jay P. Smith, the editor of the Record-Eagle during that time period was the first general chairman for the Blessing of the Blossoms. He held the posi-



tion for two years, according to Kaberle.

In 1927, the cherry crop dwindled for a short period, and no ceremony took place to celebrate cherries or their blossoms.

By 1928, Traverse City was growing. Local business leaders in the area realized the cherry business was on the verge of booming, and they wanted a way to draw people to Traverse City and promote the fruit.

"They had to make a reason for people to come north, because we really aren't on the way to anything," Kaberle said. "They wanted to have a premiere festival like Mardi Gras or the Tulip Festival."

In 1928 the first Cherry Festival was born, and in

the early 1930's the state legislature declared it a national festival.

The Festival continued to grow and extend its boundaries over the years. It now boasts an eight-day extravaganza, with a small paid staff, a fleet of volunteers and for the first time, a real place to call home in the National Cherry Festival office on Sixth Street.

Michigan produces 75-80 percent of the nation's tart cherries, a source of important anti-inflammatory properties, and 40 percent of the sweet cherries.

"The Festival offers the opportunity to showcase our community to our guests," Kaberle said. "And it celebrates the red fruit itself, which says, 'Celebrate.'"

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