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sweet source



Photograph by Raymond O. Gibbs

Rush Springs' Unique Watermelon Festival

By Keith Long

A mid-winter drive through the silent, Sunday-afternoon streets of Rush Springs reveals a few hard facts about the southern Grady County community. When U.S. 81 was re-channeled around the western edge of the town a couple of decades ago, it took all of the traffic and most of the commerce with it.

There are no pizzerias. No golden arches. No fast-food, sack-'em, grab-'em, run-and-eat-'em drive-throughs. No loud, glass-plated, neon-brightened truck stops. No citified country convenience stores. There is one stop-n-shop with a lone, 18-year-old female attendant with a cheerful "Hi ya" and a just-as-cheerful "S'long." There are two coffee shops — Jerry's, which is located in the old City Cafe site, and T. C.'s, which is located where it's always been. Both are closed for Sunday, awaiting Monday morning's stir-and-chatter club.

Any business that is open is on the highway loop-around. In the heart of Rush Springs, at the corner of Old 81 and Blakely Street, traffic consists of an occasional Ford pickup occupied by some high-school kid and an overworked stereo, which echoes strains of Led Zeppelin up and down the two-block business district.

What the winter afternoon does not reveal are the resources that have kept Rush Springs a viable community over the decades while more robust and pretentious towns have fallen to rubble. For below the community runs a river of the purest and sweetest water in the state. And, wrapped like a scarf around the north and west sides of the town, lies a stretch of hardy, replenishing sandhills.

The two geologically grafted features come together to produce one undeniable fact: Rush Springs is watermelon



country. And once a year, on the second Saturday in August (August 12 this year), Rush Springs asserts its title as "Watermelon Capital of the World" with an annual watermelon festival, complete with a melon queen coronation, a carnival, politicking, arts and crafts, and about 50,000 pounds of fresh watermelon for a throng of 15,000 people. The community lives for that single day, and even sleepy, mid-winter days are significant in these parts because it brings the harvest one day closer.

Rush Springs' fresh water and productive soil was never much of a secret. W. S. Nye points out that when the Wichita Indians were forced away from Medicine Bluff by a malaria epidemic in 1850, the small band relocated at the fresh springs which bubbled up near present-day Rush springs (W. S. Nye, cited by Carbine and Lance, *THE STORY OF OLD FORT SILL*, OU Press, p. 15). And when a stage line was established between Fort Sill and Caddo sometime around 1875, Rush Springs was designated as the last nightly stopover before reaching Fort Sill because of the availability — and reliability — of fresh water (Nye, p. 279).

It didn't take long for settlers to take advantage of the area's melon-growing capabilities. Hobart Ragland, in his *HISTORY OF RUSH SPRINGS*, records that although very little land was in cultivation in 1893, by 1901 local

farmers had organized an "Oklahoma Fruit and Melon Growers Association" (Rush Springs, *Gazette Publishing Company*, 1952, pp. 51-52). Ragland quotes James I. Crawford from a September 8, 1937 interview in the *CHICKASHA DAILY EXPRESS*: "We loaded from ten to sixty-one (rail) cars daily, the latter number being our record. We hardly ever loaded less than thirty or forty cars" (p. 52).

Raymond Gibbs, a longtime Rush Springs resident, banker, and goodwill ambassador, notes that the local melon trade loaded up more than 600 boxcars during the 1928 harvest, and that didn't include an ever-increasing percentage of melons shipped by highway.

Gibbs, who began work in Rush Springs as a banker, has been personally involved with the history and development of Rush Springs since that time. Although he sold his interest in banking in 1979 and retired as Chairman of the Board of First National of Rush Springs in 1983, he still keeps an office adjacent to Jerry's Cafe and stays abreast of community news.

According to Gibbs, it was a natural that Rush Springs would organize a festival around its watermelon harvest. The event has grown in commercial appeal since it began in 1940, Gibbs admits, but it retains much of its home-grown quality.

"We still reserve all the booths and concessions for groups in this area, such as the high-school band, the senior citizens center, and the FFA," Gibbs notes. "It's a chance for them to bring in some money. And there's still a lot of friendly competition from the local families to see who can harvest the biggest melon. Bragging rights, I suppose."

Gibbs recalls the meeting that eventually spawned the festival tradition:

"A gentleman by the name of Calvin Horn stood up at a Lion's Club meeting; he was the vocational-agriculture instructor at the high school and lives today in Maysville. I'm not really sure

of the year, but it must have been in 1935 or 1936. Horn said, 'We need to have a watermelon festival. We've got a product here that people will come from miles around to see. It'll be a good way to bring people together, and it'll help our farmers promote and sell their crops.' Well, right away, there were those among the Lions Club who thought the idea was a good one."

It wasn't until 1940 that the Rush Springs Lions — who still stage the festival today — put the first melon feed together.

"There are several things I remember about the first festival," Gibbs said. "Of course, at the time we really didn't know what to expect. We hoped to draw a crowd of 2,000 or so people. But we weren't prepared for what happened."

Gibbs said that he and a few other businessmen from the community made a promotional trip to Oklahoma City just prior to the 1940 event. "We talked with the *OKLAHOMAN*, and the newspaper also controlled one of the major radio stations at that time. The radio people liked our idea and agreed to give us some free publicity."

The radio promoted the free watermelon feed for several days leading up to the festival, and Gibbs said that the result was overwhelming.

"We had about 10,000 people that day. We had never imagined it could have been such a success. We ran out of everything. We operated a little hamburger stand and by mid-afternoon we were sold out. We ran out of hamburger meat and hamburger buns and mustard and everything else you can put on a hamburger. We went all over the area trying to buy more supplies, but we couldn't meet the demand that day. After the festival was over and we tallied everything up, the Lions Club lost around two or three thousand dollars on that first event."

But Gibbs and the rest of the community had seen the light. They knew they had struck something big. Im-

mediately, plans were made for the next festival.

"Another highlight of that first festival — I remember because Ada Mae Timms was the queen that year — was that Governor Red Phillips was set to speak that evening," Gibbs continued. "We didn't have a lot of buildings or any kind of structures around. We had a truck set up in the middle of the park for the speakers to stand on. But about the time Phillips was ready to speak, it began to rain — a cloudburst. We decided to move the program to the high-school auditorium, and the whole party of people went up there.

"Phillips — who was a burly fellow and must've weighed 250 or 260 pounds — finally got his speech off. Then when he and his political buddies — he'd brought several big names with

him — were ready to leave, the battery on their car was dead. So here it was, maybe 9:30 or 10:00 p.m., and it would take a couple of hours for someone to drive to Chickasha to get another battery.

"We were all standing around wondering what to do with the time, and Phillips says, 'Let's play some dominoes.' Someone produced a set, and the next thing you know the Governor, the director of the Highway Commission, and a number of other dignitaries were playing dominoes in the middle of the bank building. They were having a high time, chiding each other for silly plays, and accusing the Governor of not counting his spots correctly. And there was a big crowd of townspeople pushed around to watch the game. Everyone was really enjoying themselves — I think we were all sorry

when the guy got back with the new battery."

So it goes with the Rush Springs festival. Every year has its own unique flavor. This year, when upwards of 15,000 people flock into Jess Davis Park, the festival may not conclude with Governor Bellmon shuffling the bones for a game of Forty-two in the village square, but chances are good that something just as delightful is likely to happen. ■

KEITH LONG, originally from Grady County, has an M.A. in English from OSU, and is now in his first year as Instructor of English at SOSU.



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