

Changing times

Suburban flavor replaces festival's rural roots

By Casey Hans
staff writer

ONCE REFLECTIVE of its small-town, rural roots, the Farmington/Farmington Hills Founders Festival has changed over the past 25 years to offer a more sophisticated, suburban flavor.

Gone are the parking-lot square dances, rodeos, horse shows and pigeon races.

The carnival-style pie tosses, table bowling and ring tosses have faded into memory.

The former Founders Festival queen has become a more sophisticated Miss Farmington — affiliated with the Miss America Scholarship Pageant.

Other traditions still prevail, though some have changed locations, including the Elks Ox Roast, the annual parade and the pet show in Shiawassee Park.

Many traditions and activities have begun since the first festival began in 1964. With the exception of one year, it has always been held in July, one of

the slower business times for area merchants and a good time for summer sidewalk sales.

For the past several years, the Founders Festival has been sponsored by the Farmington/Farmington Hills Chamber of Commerce, although that group was the first to organize it.

This year's festivities began over the weekend with a Civil War encampment and will end with a Blessings of Liberty picnic and burying of a bicentennial time capsule — both in Heritage Park.

ARTS AND crafts displays, a variety of food vendors and activities at various shopping centers are still part of the current festival, which draws 80,000-100,000 people to the Farmington area each summer.

Local insurance executive Bill Conroy is credited with being the motivator of the original community event.

"He was kind of the grandfather of the Founders Festival," said Farmington veterinarian and festival

activist John Richardson, who has done the pet show for 22 years.

"It (the festival) really was built around the sidewalk sales the last weekend in July, when people wanted to get rid of summer merchandise. Today, they go out and buy things specially for the festival."

Conroy, who was the chamber of commerce president in 1964, said local leaders were looking for a way to tie community events together, including the Elks Ox Roast, the Joycees Chicken Barbecue and local merchants' sidewalk sales. "We were looking for something to hang our hat on," he said. "We were trying to grab hold of something."

WHAT THEY discovered was a

state award for the "First Quaker Settlement," presented to Farmington that year and leading to a name for the new festivities: Farmington Founders Festival. The settlement sign is at Farmington City Hall; beneath it is a time capsule, buried in 1964 and not to be opened for 100 years, Conroy said.

The first festival was a testament to Farmington history, as officials from Farmington, N.Y., were brought to town. Everyone dressed in period costume.

"The festival has evolved the way things evolve," Conroy said. "It was a nice time — the sort of thing where people could be proud of their

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'It's a lot of work — and it seemed like an impossible job to put this thing together. We have revisited that issue every year and have decided it is an important function of the chamber.'

— Jonathan Grant
chamber president



Then-Farmington mayor Sandy Brotherton (left) is pictured with 1969 Founders Festival Queen Kathleen Stock and Gov. William Milliken in this 1969 photo.



WJR-AM radio personality J.P. McCarthy (left) and local personality Soupy Sales show off one of the entrants in the 1969 International Pigeon Races during the 1969 Founders Festival.