

Tradition started with one mayor and one pickup truck

Editor's Note: The following was first published as an editorial headlined "Common ground" in the Aug. 25, 1992, edition of the Hermiston Herald.

A three-hour drive west on Interstate 84 can sometimes seem like a trip to another world, but a few hearty souls led a voyage of exploration Friday, which could reap untold rewards.

Representatives from Eastern Oregon — and Hermiston in particular — set off on a journey to negotiate a treaty of sorts with Portland city officials. The Hermiston-area ambassadors carried gifts to give to leaders and residents of Portland in a gesture of good faith and friendship.

The party carried products common to our native soil — watermelons, onions, potatoes, carrots and other produce. The group was warmly received in that somewhat foreign land known as Portland.

The trip was purely a promotional tour and that is nothing to be ashamed of because there are many people west of the Cascades who remain ignorant of the people, places and products produced in Eastern Oregon.

Hermiston Mayor Frank Harkenrider is to be commended for successfully capturing the attention and interest of Portland Mayor "Bud" Clark, city employees and the metropolitan media.

With two pickup loads of produce donated by area farmers and businesses, Harkenrider, Clark and their colleagues have done more



HERALD FILE PHOTO

Frank Harkenrider (left) gets help from Bob and Skip Walchli in loading up a pickup with watermelons to take to Portland City Hall in 1991 for the first watermelon "tailgate party" to promote Hermiston area agriculture.

to educate the masses in the Willamette Valley than a hundred press releases and promotional pamphlets could ever hope to achieve.

Harkenrider and the civic, agricultural and business leaders of the Hermiston area have distinguished themselves as ambassadors for the entire region.

This area is defined by more than the area contained within the city limits of Hermiston and deserves recognition for more than its crop of watermelons.

Although Clark will be gone from Portland City Hall next year, hopefully the next mayor of Oregon's largest city will be equally receptive to accepting a visit from one of the state's largest agriculture-producing areas.

With any luck, the Hermiston-Portland giveaways will be annual events that will continue. The potential for an exchange of products and ideas between the two cities can serve to better educate residents on both sides of the mountains. Although the differences between east

of the smaller cities," he said. "It's a way to build goodwill."

Smith, Mayor Dave Drotzmann, several city



HERALD FILE PHOTO

Then-Mayor Frank Harkenrider of Hermiston sits behind the desk of then-Portland Mayor "Bud" Clark. Clark, with the gray beard, is behind Harkenrider, along with other members of the Hermiston delegation that made the trip to Portland in 1992 to promote Hermiston watermelons in Portland. Also pictured (left to right) are: Beverly Harkenrider, Pam Quick, Gary Quick, Ed Brookshier, Sandy Cassens, Portland Mayor "Bud" Clark, DuWayne White, Glenn Youngman, Pat Wheelhouse, Pete Wheelhouse and Jonnie Cassens.

and west, large and small, are profound, we share much in common.

Thanks to mayors Harkenrider and Clark, we have discovered common ground.

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The tradition, which started with one pickup load in 1991, did continue and it grew to a small convoy of trucks and people. It also moved from Portland City Hall to the space known as Portland's living room, Pioneer Courthouse Square. It evolved from giving melons and produce to city staff and officials to give

councilors, the Harkenriders and other city officials will be in Portland on Friday. Speeches and seed-spitting contests

away produce in the square to the public, who happened by or turned out specifically for the event. But the tradition ended after the giveaway in 2007.

However, this weekend the tradition returns, thanks to the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce and city of Hermiston. And most particularly with the thanks and generosity of many of the same farmers and ag companies, like the Walchlis, Bellingers, and Bud-Rich who donated produce in those early years, contributing again and still.

between Hermiston officials, Portland Commissioner Dan Saltzman and state Rep. Greg Smith will start at 11:30 a.m. in

Today, there is a whole foodie culture boom in Portland, fueled by people with a profound interest in knowing where their foods came from and how far it has traveled to their market or table. It is further heightened by celebrity chefs preparing signature dishes built on a foundation of Northwest foods and flavors.

There couldn't be a much better time to return Umatilla and Morrow counties, and the foods grown here, to center stage in Portland, where Harkenrider and Hermiston farm-

ers put it 24 years ago.

May this be the revival of an annual tradition that is still ongoing and that we are still talking about 24 years hence.

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Pioneer Square, followed by a produce giveaway.

They will be giving out watermelons, potatoes and cantaloupes donated

by Walchli Farms, Bell-

inger Farms, Bud-Rich Potato and a fourth grower that wished to remain anonymous.

MELLONS:

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"They're associated with good times and happy children."

Pat Walchli of Walchli Farms said the giveaway helps promote the community. These days you "don't see many places in the Northwest where people don't know about Hermiston watermelons," he said, and it's good that even though the watermelons are the main draw the city is giving away locally-grown potatoes and cantaloupes too.

"It just makes people more aware of what's growing in the Northwest," he said.

Shirley Parsons, president-elect of the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce, will be helping pack up produce to send to Portland on Friday. She said she went to a few produce giveaways and jumped at the chance for the chamber to be involved in restarting the tradition.

"It's exciting. It's fun," she said. "People lined the streets when they knew we were coming before ... My hope is that Portland understands Hermiston is wonderfully famous for our watermelons but we're so much more."

A lot has changed since Hermiston ended the Portland giveaway in 2007. Hermiston returns to Portland this year as the biggest city in Eastern Oregon, with state champion football and wrestling teams and a growing list of new construction around town. For the first time since Harkenrider's first trip to Portland, Ed Brookshier is not city manager.

Byron Smith, Hermiston's new city manager, said when he heard about the tradition, and heard that Portland Mayor Charlie Hales had expressed interest in starting the watermelon seed-spitting rivalry again, he liked the idea.

"I think it's kind of a cool thing for the biggest city in the state to have a relationship with one

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