

# Hermiston residents celebrate Juneteenth

By **BRYCE DOLE**  
STAFF WRITER

Tina Thomas remembers the day in the early 2000s when she marched to Hermiston City Hall on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Nearly two decades after President Ronald Reagan signed a bill designating it as a federal holiday, the city still didn't recognize it.

The march closed city hall. From then on, she said, the city recognized the holiday. Reflecting on that day, Thomas said one word comes to mind — change.

“What else can you say but, change,” said Thomas, who is Black.

More than two decades later, Thomas had a new reason to celebrate. She joined several dozen community members who flocked Saturday, June 19, to McKenzie Park for the first federally recognized Juneteenth, the holiday commemorating the end of slavery in America.

“We're celebrating a freedom that was years short of what it should have been,” said Thomas, a lifelong Hermiston resident. “I just think about that. How our forefathers had to keep working for two years when they really didn't have to. And now we're able to celebrate that every year. And now it's a federal holiday.”

Juneteenth, otherwise known as Emancipation Day, Black Independence Day or Jubilee Day, commemorates the day in 1865 when Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger rode into Galveston, Texas, and told African Americans the Civil War was over and they were free — two years after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipa-



Virginia Garcia, left, Dolores Veliz and Bonnie Gracia serve food during a Saturday, June 19, 2021, Juneteenth celebration at McKenzie Park in Hermiston. On June 17, President Joe Biden signed a law to make Juneteenth a federal holiday.

Bryce Dole/Hermiston Herald

tion Proclamation. About seven months later, the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery in the final four states that had yet to do so, was ratified.

Last week, President Joe Biden signed a law that made Juneteenth a federal holiday. It was the first newly established national holiday since President Reagan added Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 1983, celebrating his role in the civil rights movement.

“All Americans can feel the power of this day,” Biden said at a ceremony at the White House, “and learn from our history.”

That's why the event in Hermiston was so special for several Black community members. To them, it was another small step in an ongoing reckoning with the nation's past.

“At the first Juneteenth, they didn't have much,”

said John Carbage, president of the Hermiston Cultural Awareness Coalition, a nonprofit group that hosted Saturday's event. “So they took the little bit they had and put it all together, and made it into an event, a festival. So that's what this is all about. Taking a little and making a lot.”

The day began with a speech from Carbage calling on residents to remember why they were there before they bowed their heads in prayer. For the rest of the day, residents from across Eastern Oregon and Washington lounged in lawn chairs and chatted at picnic tables as the smell of grilling hamburgers and hot dogs filled the air. A DJ played rap, pop, soul, funk and R&B as children played games nearby.

It was the second time the coalition held a Juneteenth event. The first

was two years ago, before the pandemic halted last year's festivities. Carbage said he hopes to make the event an annual celebration in Hermiston.

Growing up in Arkansas, Carbage has been celebrating Juneteenth for about 30 years. But none of those celebrations, he said, were as symbolic as this one.

“This means we're not going unnoticed,” Earl Wilson, a production manager at Lamb Weston, said of Juneteenth becoming a federal holiday. “Our people meant something, and we should be recognized for it. We celebrate the Fourth of July and Independence Day. And we weren't free during that time. When we were freed, we should recognize that also.”

Though Juneteenth has garnered increased national attention during the past year amid the

protests against racial injustice and police brutality, many Americans still know little about the holiday, according to a new Gallup survey.

The survey of randomly-selected participants, released Tuesday, June 15, showed more than 60% of Americans know either “nothing at all” or “a little bit” about Juneteenth. It also showed about 69% of Black respondents said they knew about Juneteenth, compared to 31% of white respondents.

Carbage said he knew little about Juneteenth before he went to college. He attributes that to growing up in Arkansas, where his history classes refrained from teaching about race.

That's why it's essential to bring people together on days such as Juneteenth, Carbage said, to promote education.

# Residents asked to conserve water

By **JADE MCDOWELL**  
NEWS EDITOR

The city of Hermiston has reduced watering of its parks by 10% in response to a chlorine shortage across four states.

Oregon Emergency Management released a statement addressing the shortage, noting that equipment failure at a plant in Longview, Washington that supplies most of the Northwest's chlorine will “temporarily limit the availability of chlorine for cities on the West Coast.”

Many cities use chlorine to disinfect their city's tap water and treat wastewater. According to the American Chemistry Council, 98% of U.S. cities use some type of chlorine disinfection process to make their water safe to drink.

The malfunctioning plant, Westlake Chemical, does not anticipate being back online until the end of June, OME stated, and so the department is reaching out to all municipal water suppliers to assess the status of their chlorine supply and see where supplies need shared. According to Oregon Public Broadcasting, some cities, including Medford and Forest Grove, only have a two-week supply on hand.

On its Facebook page, the city of Hermiston said it planned to save about 150,000 gallons of water by watering its properties 10% less, and encouraged residents to take their own steps to reduce water use.

“We're asking residents to be similarly mindful of their own water use as we monitor the situation,” the city wrote. “Every gallon saved helps us conserve our current chlorine supply.”

The city did note that it is still operating the Hermiston Family Aquatic Center.

According to Oregon Emergency Management, cities with a surplus of chlorine for their drinking water will provide mutual aid to cities with a shortage.



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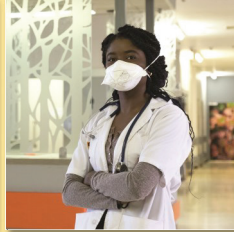
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