“All Roads Lead to Stanberry” has been the Fourth of July motto for this small northwest Missouri town for most of its history. Founded as a railroad town in 1979, Stanberry has been hosting Independence Day celebrations almost since its beginning. The July 5, 1899, edition of *The Stanberry Headlight* described the joy of a victorious baseball game and the disappointment of a cancelled hot-air balloon ascension. As the years passed, all the requirements for a classic home-town holiday were crammed into the multiple-day event: parade, barbecues, music, games, a lemonade stand, concerts, and fireworks. Beauty pageants and baby contests. Carnival rides, ring toss games, and talent shows. You can almost hear “Seventy-six Trombones” playing in the background.

To fully appreciate the tradition, it is necessary first to visualize the setting. If the founders of the town did one thing right, it was establishing the city park in the middle of the business district within sight of the railroad station. Wildflowers surround the newly-renovated bandstand at the park’s center. This particular model stands on a tall concrete base and sports a sturdy roof. Its octagonal shape forms the hub of a wheel of walkways. At one corner of the park, an antique horse trough still stands and is still used by the Amish members of the community. Just behind it is a train caboose, the only existing remnant of the railroad. An old cannon (carefully restored by local veteran Lloyd Poff) proudly guards the opposite corner. A playground, a shelter house, and croquet and volleyball courts fill a third quadrant. The rest of the area is a grassy, tree-shaded area, just right for lawn chairs and concessions.

The earliest official celebrations involved patriotic speeches and musical numbers. In 1899, according to *The Stanberry Headlight*, the oration presented by a Rev. Mr. Stockdale was “patriotic, sensible, entertaining, instructive, and full of genuine Americanism.” A reading of the Declaration of Independence was another staple of early celebrations. Music was and still is central to the proceedings. The bandstand served its purpose well for both local and visiting musicians. In 1902 the Stanberry band was followed by the Salvation Army Band, a special and unusual treat for the citizens. In the years before television, the programs became quite elaborate and varied, including vocalists, dance groups, and comedians. Nearby amateurs and area professionals alike formed the entertainment. Radio artists from St. Joseph’s KFEQ and groups like the Rainbow Quartet from Kansas City provided name recognition. Regional country western groups such as the Union Mill Opry and the Midnight Specials were popular in the 1970’s. One year the “old fiddlers” competed for honors, and in recent years the talent show has drawn attention to home-grown artists. This year a community band presented a traditional concert, including, of course, “The Stars and Stripes Forever.” Throughout the years, country music, big band classics, Sousa marches, gospel songs, and pop hits have created a rich soundtrack.

The parade always draws a crowd of both participants and spectators. Lawn chairs line the route from the school past two churches, the library, the post office and into the downtown area where it circles the park. People stand and applaud as the lights atop the sheriff’s car announce the arrival of the honor
guard and the American Legion float. They may be followed by a decorated four-wheeler or a flag-painted pick-up. Organizations and families enter the parade to show off their patriotism and community pride. Bicycles, golf carts, and vintage autos and tractors are interspersed with marchers selling raffle tickets or touting their favorite political candidate. The shiny fire truck is always a hit, and the giant new farm equipment makes a racket as it rumbles past. Everyone is tossing out candy. The horses, of course, bring up the rear.

Games and competitions remain essential elements of the goings-on. Races, baseball games, and beauty pageants draw both participants and fans. Some years have featured “Miss Stanberry,” a young lady to preside over events. Some years, however, “Miss Stanberry” turned out to be a hairy middle-aged man enjoying some temporary notoriety. Foot races, potato sack races, and greased pig contests are fairly common, but the 1926 “Fat Women’s Race” seems to have been a one-time event. Baby shows are a consistent and beloved piece of the entertainment, and the Little Miss and Mister Stanberry winners ride the parade in convertibles. In more athletic endeavors a favorite has been the Walkathon, first mentioned in 1935 and overseen by “Tubby” McCarty, longtime businessman. It involved a man and a woman walking a set number of tours around the park while holding hands. Given the size of the park and the slope of the streets, the ten to fifteen laps were a grueling test of endurance. It has been eclipsed since 1981 by the Wildcat River Run, organized in the early days by local marathon runner Ralph Pierce. It offers a one-mile “fun run” plus the more serious two-mile and 6.2-mile runs. In 1974 the local golf club established a popular four-person best-shot golf tournament, and a corn-hole tournament has recently joined the line-up. Events which have come and gone and come again include a frog-jumping contest, a pedal pull, bicycle races, swim meets, a dunking pool, and cow-patty bingo. Anyone with an idea for a competition and the willingness to see it through can probably add it to the agenda.

In 1931 the carnival came to town. That changed everything. The Rice-Dorman Carnival set up rides and concessions, and the crowds responded. Although the specific carnival company changed over the years, the basics included things like the Ferris wheel, the Tilt-a-Whirl, and the Swings. The best deals were the afternoon matinees which featured ten-cent rides for kids, but to enjoy the full atmosphere of neon lights, calliope music, and the smell of popcorn, a nighttime visit was necessary. Young men won teddy bears for their girlfriends, and small children sticky with cotton candy darted through the crowd. Sadly, the carnivals gradually faded away. The last known year for a carnival visit was 1985. However, the children have not been forgotten. Today giant inflatable slides and bounce houses provide the thrills and spills.

Fireworks are, of course, necessary to a successful celebration. For many years, those fireworks were informal and often illegal. In spite of town ordinances against them, outbursts were inevitable, so much so that newspaper articles sometimes commented on a relatively quiet year. The July 8 Headlight reported in 1948 that although that year’s celebration had been a mostly quiet one, “one young fellow who attempted to fire a cracker in the park found himself in the city bastille and he later paid a fine for his misdoing.” Shooting fireworks in the country was legal, though, and for twenty-plus years beginning around 1960, the August and Helen Sager family operated a firework stand just south of the city limits. It became a go-to destination. Children saved their allowances for weeks in advance in order to buy their favorites. One long-time resident remembers picking wild gooseberries and selling them to his mother in order to finance firecrackers and carnival rides. Professional fireworks displays have been major
attractions off and on throughout the years, and in recent decades the Stanberry Volunteer Firefighters have staged a highly popular one. Its location on the hill near the golf course, the swimming pool, and the ball fields provides plenty of access and visibility. People watch from pick-up beds, golf carts, blankets, and even their own back yards as the booms echo across the town.

The weather is one element beyond the best planning. In wet years, the mud forced activities out of the park and onto the blocked-off brick-paved streets. Dry years curtailed the fireworks. The most dramatic weather event occurred in 1932 when a sudden wind storm hit just as events were winding down. That week’s Headlight reported that the storm had approached tornado level and that in its aftermath “Stanberry presented a scene as desolate as foreign battlefields were pictured during the war.” Damage to the park itself was extensive with large trees completely uprooted and small branches fallen everywhere giving the appearance of “the work of giants with mighty axes.” Miraculously, no one was seriously injured.

As the Independence Day celebration became an engrained piece of Stanberry culture, it also became the centerpiece for reunions. That aspect of the holiday became apparent in 1947 when hardware store owner Paul Daniel asked out-of-town guests to sign a visitors’ log placed at the Lions Club stand. One hundred ninety-four people from all parts of the country signed it. The Fourth of July proved to be a perfect time for scattered friends and relatives to gather. Today it is a popular time for class reunions as well as family events. A visit to the parade is a chance to visit with old classmates and friends from distant times and places as well as to meet new spouses and new babies.

The success and longevity of the Fourth of July traditions in Stanberry haven’t just happened. Hundreds of volunteers provided hours of planning and execution. Early newspaper reports cited “committees” without providing details. In 1924 “the Band” led by Professor Folk was recognized for its leadership. In 1932 the volunteer firemen took charge and maintained that position for fifty years or so, led for many of those years by C. W. Coverdell, the town jeweler. Under their leadership the festivities thrived and the crowds grew. The firemen financed the events by serving meals as well as by passing the hat at the fireworks displays. By around 1990 they were being assisted by the Chamber of Commerce. Eventually the firemen focused on the fireworks while community volunteers took over other activities. Today the Stanberry Fourth of July Committee provides the coordination and motivation while individual groups sponsor specific events. The committee membership changes a bit from year to year and many people work quietly behind the scenes, but for quite some time Jeff and Tracy Osborn, along with their sons Reid and Grant have played a large role. A quick glance at this year’s list of event sponsors reveals the following groups: the Baptist and Methodist Churches, the Ministerial Alliance, the high school FCCLA, the Golf Club, the Athletic Booster Club, the Community Betterment Organization, the Itchweed Island musical group, and the Fire Department in addition to the committee itself.

These familiar traditions have become an essential part of the town’s character. Recently they helped carry the citizens through the sorrows and stress of the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021. While activities were curtailed significantly, most outdoor events went on as usual as friends and neighbors waved and called to each other from a distance. Through good years and bad, this determined small town has produced over a century’s worth of celebrations and memories. It remains the highlight of the summer for many present and past residents. So hit one of those roads leading to town and join the crowd for the Fourth of July in Stanberry, Missouri.
Acknowledgements and thanks to


Matt Pearl, Pearl Publishing, Inc. and Newspapers.com for providing digital access to these newspapers.

Brent Johnson and Megan Jennings for photographs.
Figure 3 - American Legion Float (Lloyd Poff on Tractor)

Figure 4 - Kendall Misemer Entry in Parade
Figure 5 - Bryce, Charlotte, Olivia Jennings Greeting Kylee Rundee on Horse

Figure 6 - Little Mr. and Miss Contest. Whittaker Lindner in Crown
Figure 7 - Stage Show Local Musicians

Figure 8 - Crowd gathered in City Park for Stage Show
Figure 9 - Trinity Jensen and Friend Dancing to Stage Show Music

Figure 10 - Baby Show Winners Carson Holtman and Kourtney Meyer