

Island Festivals

By Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly

As an Island historian, I am repeatedly asked why Vashon has a Strawberry Festival when there are no large strawberry farms on the island and, except for the Rotary Club strawberry shortcake booth (which imports its strawberries to the island), there are no strawberries at the festival.

The first strawberries were commercially grown on Vashon in 1890, and by 1901 15,000 crates of strawberries were shipped off the island. By 1909, 120,000 crates were shipped from the island. At this point, strawberries were an important commercial crop for island farmers and would remain important until increased competition from California berries, changes in work laws for pickers and the retirement of many older farmers led to the collapse of large-scale commercial strawberry farming on Vashon by the early 1980s.

During the 1890s into the early 1900s, there were occasional festivals held at different communities around the island, but there does not seem to have been any island-wide festivals because Vashon was still largely a collection of isolated water-based communities with few connecting roads. To celebrate the rise of the strawberry, the first Strawberry Festival was held in 1909. It was not until 1912 that it became an annual event sponsored by the Vashon Federation of Clubs. Thus, we have two contenting dates for the First Strawberry Festival, 1909 and 1912. At about the same time, strawberry festivals began in many other Puget Sound communities including Bellevue, Burien, Burlington, Marysville and Richmond Beach.

In 1923, Miss Melissa Jaynes was crowned the first Strawberry Queen when she was 101 years old. This began the tradition of an annual Strawberry Queen, which morphed into Miss Vashon and continued into the 1972 when the last Miss Vashon was selected.



Strawberry Festival 1920's at Burton - University of Washington Digital Archives
Tables are set for the Strawberry Festival at Burton

In 1923, the fifth annual Vashon-Maury Island Strawberry Festival was held at Ellisport and drew over 2,500 attendees. This means the first annual festival was held in 1919, which creates issues with the 1909 and the 1912 "first" dates. In 1926, the Strawberry Festival was moved to Vashon town where it has remained except for the early 1950s when the festival parade went from north to south and ended at Vashon High School.



Vashon Festival, 1949 -Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Muauem
Mukai's Vashon Island Packing Company parade float.

During World War II, the festival was suspended to support the war effort. After the war, the festival was restarted in 1946 when its name was changed to the Peach Festival, as peaches had become an important crop. The peach blight in 1948 and 49 ended that short run, and in 1949 it was called the Vashon Festival, until it changed to the Harvest Festival in 1951, and then from 1952 until 1983 it was named the Island Festival. In 1958, the Vashon Chamber of Commerce was prepared to drop its support of the Island Festival because of a “lack of enthusiasm” for the event. However, cooler heads prevailed and the Jaycees sponsored the Island Festival until it was renamed the Strawberry Festival in 1984, which it has remained ever since.



Strawberry Festival, 2012. Terry Donnelly
The Festival Parade and crowds fill Main Street in Vashon Town

This year there are few commercially grown strawberries on the island and there will be few strawberries at the festival, except for the Rotary Club Strawberry Shortcake and for the original Marshall Strawberries sold by the Friends of Mukai. Still, as we prepare to celebrate either the 104th or the 101st or the 94th Strawberry Festival (depending on your preference for “first dates”), we will all celebrate the Vashon Strawberry Festival in our own unique Vashon way.

Bruce Haulman is an Island historian.

Terry Donnelly is an Island based landscape photographer.