

The Fourth of July in Cascade
“You wouldn’t want to be anywhere else”
Written by the Cascade Historical Society

The Cascade community has been coming together for an Independence Day celebration since 1953, when Lyle Dykhuizen set off fireworks in the family driveway in celebration of his 13-year-old son Chuck’s release from Sunshine Hospital, where he’d been a tuberculosis patient for over a year.

Fireworks were illegal in Michigan at the time, but Lyle, a truck driver who bought the fireworks out-of-state, was a member of Cascade’s volunteer fire department. He invited a few firefighter friends, and it all worked out.

From this humble beginning, the observance of the holiday rapidly escalated. The following year Lyle and his friend, fellow firefighter Sybrant Dykhouse, working with the firemen and the American Legion, created a community celebration, with a brief parade featuring the Cascade fire trucks.

By 1955, the fireworks had moved from the Dykhuizen driveway to the gravel pit, behind the complex of businesses now on the north side of Cascade Road. Legion members passed a tin can to collect donations from spectators to cover the cost. The event was particularly memorable when, according to the July 7, 1955 *Suburban Life*, “sparks from a burning ‘Niagara Falls’ [at the top of the hill] ignited an ‘American Flag’ piece and a row of bombs and rockets which were to be the grand finale for the evening at Cascade. . . the ‘water’ of ‘Niagara Falls’ setting the fire instead of putting it out.” The conflagration briefly engulfed the hillside.

In 1960 Orange Street was closed off to create “an attractive well-planned eating and entertainment area.” Booths featured food, games and raffles. That same year there was a water battle between the Cascade and Ada fire departments at the Lions Club Park in the afternoon, and a street dance at Slater’s Mobil gas station after the fireworks. The ever-growing parade was routed down Cascade Road, and ended at Thornapple River Drive for many years.

Every Fourth, local churches served up delicious food to raise funds for various causes. In addition, Cascade Christian Reformed Church (now Cascade Fellowship CRC) valiantly represented our community in the annual “grudge match” baseball game with players from Ada businesses. Before the fireworks began, the organ from the iconic chapel of Cascade Christian Church would be moved to the building’s front steps, where Nancy Gaskell played a concert of patriotic songs. The chapel steps also hosted The Singing Strings, a quartet composed of Ella and Virgil “Red” Kimble and township manager Lee Patterson and his wife Lucy. (Lucy played a traditional bass, but she also made one of her own; some say it looked like a doghouse, others say it was an outhouse; it sounded great.)

Many long-time residents will remember that the holiday also included canoe races and a boat parade on the Thornapple that started at the bridge in Cascade and ended at the backwater upstream from the Ada dam.

Starting in 1973, the parade began exactly as it does now: Sybrant Dykhouse, dressed as Uncle Sam, leads the way, carrying our country’s flag. Sy is the son of the fireman Sy Dykhouse, who along with Lyle Dykhuizen was instrumental in creating Cascade’s first July the Fourth celebrations. He has led the parade for 45 years.

Today the parade route turns west at 28th Street, and culminates at the library's used book sale, assorted food booths, and many attractions for children. Candy is thrown by walkers, and sugar highs ensue. While some floats are now but fond memories—especially the bright yellow Shriners bandwagon, and Ruthie, the gigantic Country Fresh cow—the parade always seems bigger and better than ever.

“You wouldn’t want to be anywhere else,” says Roger Buys, remembering his youth here in the 1970s. “On the Fourth of July, Cascade was the place to be.”

And it still is.

Some of the information for this article came from Suburban Life, a local newspaper published 1955-1968, available for viewing on the Cascade Township website (<http://www.cascadetwp.com/>), at Community > Historical Society > Suburban Life Newspapers.