

Turkey Rama

By Karl Klooster

Unique in the nation, McMinnville's annual Turkey Rama event celebrates Yamhill County's turkey industry, which in 1986 accounted for more than 90 percent of Oregon's turkey production.

The turkey industry grew steadily in Yamhill County from the late 1930s to the 1960s and then increased dramatically in the 1970s and into the mid-1980s, but competition from larger breeders in California and the Midwest and a recall of tainted turkeys processed at the Willamette Valley's primary plant near Salem caused the industry to fail by the end of the decade.

McMinnville hosted the first Pacific Coast Turkey Exhibit in 1938, a one-day affair with activities and prizes. Each year, the top turkey breeders were recognized, and there was a competition for who had raised the biggest and best turkeys. By the late 1940s, the Turkey Exhibit was one of the largest industry celebrations in the nation.

In 1961, the name Turkey Rama was adopted for the festival. Local merchants held sidewalk sales, and organizers arranged dancing, entertainment, and food vendors. Turkey races, long-since banned because of pressure from animal rights advocates, were popular for years. Over time, the festival has included dances, a children's parade, foot races, a fireman's muster, and bull riding. When entertainment using turkeys was banned, organizers launched the Biggest Turkey contest in 1981, and "Biggest Turkey" candidates competed to raise money for charity. Perhaps Turkey Rama's best known event is the turkey barbecue. In recent years, over 11,000 pounds of turkey are grilled and served during the festival, prompting promoters to bill the event the World's Largest Turkey BBQ.

In the mid-2000s, the future of Turkey Rama was put at risk because of a dispute between the McMinnville Chamber of Commerce and the Downtown Merchants Association. In 2009 and 2010, two separate events were held simultaneously: Who's On Third and Turkey Rama. In 2011, the two organizations held their events at different times—Turkey Rama in July and Who's On Third on Labor Day Weekend.

In 2012, the Chamber of Commerce and the Downtown Merchants Association worked together to present the turkey barbeque at Wortman Park, a vendor village with a food court and beer garden, the Turkey Trot, the Friday Night Street Dance, and the fifteenth annual North Valle Cruzzers Car Show. Currently the fate of Turkey Rama is uncertain after the 2020 pandemic closed the annual festival.

Sources

"Turkey Rama: It's all about the turkey." *Yamhill Valley News-Register*, July 10, 2009.

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