

The story of Fall Festival dates back a half-century

It was the celebration of the end of harvest that eventually gave birth to the Belgrade Fall Festival.

The first wheat was grown in the Gallatin Valley in 1865 and 20 years later, Belgrade was put on the map as the largest grain-shipping station on the Northern Pacific line. Farmers from outlying areas would come to town to sell their grain after the harvest and organizers in the city decided to hold an event for these hard-working men and women of the hinterlands.

The first Fall Festival was held in the later 1950s, sponsored by the Belgrade Commercial Club, the forerunner to the present-day Chamber of Commerce. According to a 1986 Belgrade centennial history book, Arnold Tholkas, Al Newby and Bill Allen were the Commercial Club's heavy hitters who started Fall Festival. They offered a free barbecue

dinner and "all of the food, money and time was donated." The secret barbecue sauce was mixed by Lee Best, "with a secret recipe he never wrote down." That remains true today.

According to the Chamber of Commerce, Fall Festival as we know it today began in 1963, making it 47 years old this year. The earlier festivals were more or less pot luck dinners and dances, but in 1963, it grew to include a parade, park activities and the homecoming game at Belgrade High School.

The Fall Festival raffle has been an ongoing feature of Fall Festival since at least 1977, when the Belgrade Commercial Club changed its name to the Belgrade Chamber of Commerce. "As the Chamber, it continued to sponsor the Fall Festival and began broadening its purpose," according to a history of the organization.

The raffle, as it turns out, has been a major

part of Fall Festival. Every year, businesses donate items to be raffled and every year, the proceeds are given to a charitable group or organization that uses the money to conduct worthwhile projects in and around Belgrade.

Tracing back to the mid-1980s, it's easy to see some of the impact the raffle has had. According to newspaper accounts, the money has gone for everything from improvements at Belgrade High School's sports fields and facilities to the community library to the senior center to buying Christmas decorations for downtown.

Later, the Chamber's Fall Festival Committee began to select a theme for each Fall Festival, and generally, the theme coincided with the raffle recipients. For example, this year's Fall Festival, which benefits parks, is themed, "Our City Parks... Mother Nature's Wii," to showcase the importance of our city parks. ▶

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