

## THE LARGEST TWO DAY FESTIVAL IN THE STATE

Photo credit  
to the Issaquah  
History Museum.



### Salmon Days

#### SMALL FRY

Issaquah's Salmon Days festival was spawned in 1970, as a result of the Issaquah Chamber of Commerce's search for a good replacement to the town's once-popular but now aging Labor Day Festival. Earl Robertson, president of the Issaquah Chamber in 1970, suggested a salmon festival to spark new life into the community. The idea made sense: People were already trekking to Issaquah in the early fall to watch the salmon make their annual return to Issaquah Creek to spawn, why not throw a party to welcome the salmon home?

The first festival, called simply the Salmon Festival (renamed Salmon Days in 1971), opened in downtown Issaquah under warm but smoggy skies on Saturday, October 3, 1970. It was a small event, taking place almost entirely on the hatchery grounds. The 1970 festival included the Kiwanis salmon barbeque, puppet shows, and a children's parade complete with performances by J. P. Patches the clown.

The Greater Issaquah Chamber had hoped for 10,000 people at the first festival, but 20,000 reportedly came. Still, the festival failed to reach people from out of town until 1980 when Salmon Days became a Seafair-sanctioned event. That brought Seafair clowns, pirates, and floats and more importantly, out of town visitors to the celebration. By 1980, in addition to the children's parade, there was a Grande Parade.

#### BIG FISH

Salmon Days bloomed in popularity during the 1980s. Attendance grew from an optimistically estimated 65,000 at the 1980 festival to 150,000 at the 1988 festival. Staffed solely by volunteers for its first 15 years, during the 1980s the festival grew so large and so fast that in 1985 it joined the Northwest Festivals Association (a group that helps organizers plan and execute community festivals) and in 1987 hired its first paid festival director. By 1988 the Grande Parade had become such a big event that people complained that the parade was too long and also delayed the start of the Children's Parade.

The 1988 Grande Parade was memorable for another event. At the 1987 Salmon Days festival, bundles of standard-sized balloons marked "Issaquah Salmon Days" were released from Memorial Field. One of the balloons made it into the jet stream, where it flew halfway across the country before landing fully intact the next day in a field near Newman Grove, Nebraska, about 110 miles northwest of Omaha. A man working nearby found the balloon and took it home for his 2-year old son. Curious as to what "Issaquah Salmon Days" meant, the family investigated, learned of the festival, and wrote the Issaquah Chamber of Commerce to tell them of the balloon's journey. As a result, Pepsi-Cola (a festival sponsor at the time) flew the young family of three from their home in Nebraska to the 1988 Salmon Days festival, where they served as Grand Marshalls for the Grande Parade.





Photo credit to the  
Issaquah Reporter

## Salmon Days Today

Salmon Days regularly draws 150,000 to 200,000 visitors a year, bringing with it, an estimated \$7.5 million dollars annually to the local community.

The Kiwanis salmon barbeque remains a perennial favorite, as does the Grande Parade, which typically features more than 100 entries, including floats, clowns, marching bands, equestrian entries, school groups, and dance teams. This year the festival reported over 50

different food vendors, 300 arts and crafts vendors (and another 65 non-profit vendors), 36 musical bands play on three stages, a new Farmers Market with 30 produce booths, a family friendly entertainment and beer garden, free activities for children in the Field of Fun, and 5K run put on by the Rotary. Salmon Days has grown and it literally takes a village to put on the event. Salmon Days is now the largest community festival in the state and over 600 volunteers donate more than 12,000 hours of labor.