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Memorial Day Memories

by Lion Heidi Tice

In 1701 Michigan was a series of Indian footpaths traveling mainly from one great lake to another great lake. One of the most distinctive footpaths started in Detroit and eventually made its way to Muskegon. In 1805 Detroit created a 120-foot right-of-way for principal travel and it was named Grand River Avenue. With the opening of the Erie Canal in 1826, a rush of settlers expanded the Grand River Avenue, and two branches were created, one toward Pontiac and one toward Lansing. The two branches merged back together near Dewitt which was now called the Grand River Road, and then extended toward Newton (now Grand Haven). By 1836 The Grand River Road was the shortest route for people traveling from Detroit to Grand Rapids. After statehood in 1837 improvement to roads were started in earnest, with the majority concentrated in the Lansing area which allowed for the State Capital to be moved in 1847. Michigan Legislature passed the State Reward Truck Line Highway Act in 1913 which started the state highway system. Shortly after that Grand River Road was designated as M-16. In 1926, now US-16, became the first paved highway across the state of Michigan. The highway ended at the Muskegon docks where a car ferry (the SS Juniata) would take cars and passengers across Lake Michigan to Wisconsin, there US-16 connected and continued to the west. In 1941 the SS Juniata was retrofitted and renamed the SS Milwaukee Clipper (called Queen of the Lake) a large updated and safer car ferry that took travelers across Lake Michigan to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. After World War II, the Landing Ship (Tank) or LST 393 was retrofitted to be a car and rail car hauler between Muskegon & Milwaukee and the ship was designated US-16. It made daily lake crossings with cars, engines and railroad cars as cargo until 1973. This ship did not allow for passengers. The retired ship was renamed LST 393 in 2000 and rededicated as a museum at its Muskegon dock.

US-16 route from Muskegon to Grand Rapids became a parade route for the Woodland Auto Tour. This parade was sponsored by Wood TV and featured on TV channel 8. This event is still remembered by some of the Fruitport Lions Family. No one can remember when it started but several can recall watching it in their youth. They recall that on Memorial Day Michiganders would parade decorated autos for miles along the parade route going directly through Fruitport. You guessed it, Airline Highway was the old M-16/US-16 route. In 1962 the I-96 Freeway replaced US-16 with a non-stop travel path from Muskegon to Grand Rapids and beyond. This freeway broke up US-16 in several places and ended the Woodland Auto Tour. (Thank you to Lion Russ Stressman & Lion Tom Christmas for your memories of past events.)

The Fruitport Lions chartered in October of 1948. They added to the Memorial Day parade of cars with activities throughout the week before parade day. They had pony rides, pie eating contests, a blueberry festival and simple rides for kids. After the Woodland Auto Parade stopped, the Lions took up the torch and started a simple parade down the main street of Fruitport (now 3rd Ave) every Memorial Day. The Fruitport Lions are celebrating 75 years of service to the Fruitport Area Community this year. The Fruitport Lions Memorial Day parade has grown to be the largest Memorial Day Parade in West Michigan. This year we want to remember, more than ever, our Veterans. There will be numerous veterans riding as honored guests in jeeps at the front of the parade. We are lining the parade route with banners purchased by family members and friends of the veterans along the parade route and our Cloverville corridor. Fruitport has been granted to have a military vehicle on display near the water tower (Smiley) during Memorial Day (Thank you to 180 TC CO), a color guard made up of serving men and woman in our armed forces and recruitment offices (Thank you to SSG Timothy Hamlin), a Memorial Mile run just before the parade begins and a military fly over down Airline and 3rd Ave as the parade color guard turns the corner. The 4 jets will fly over at 800 feet coming in from the north and heading toward Pomona Park banking right and leaving out over Spring Lake. (Thank you to 127 Airforce Wing out of Self-Ridge Airforce Base, Michigan.)

Come help us celebrate our Veterans, our Community and our Fruitport Lions, Lionesses & Leo's, as we look forward to another 75 years of service.

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