

Springfest in Stow

No matter whether you are young or old, you will cheer, wave, or plug your ears as you hear the cacophony of the heart thumping firetruck horns as the red and white trucks wend their way up Great Rd. from Lower Village to Center School to herald the opening of Stow Springfest, the annual community celebration.

Springfest, usually held the third weekend in May, marks the anniversary of the incorporation of Stow on May 16, 1683, and also welcomes the sometimes elusive Spring. It's been known to snow, rain, overheat or freeze, but this is New England. Since its start in 1967 Springfest has been a day of festivities, food, and just plain fun. It also has been a day of ceremonies marking milestones in Stow history--the dedication of the new addition on Randall Library took place in 1975, and the same year Henry Gardner Day was celebrated to honor Stow's most distinguished citizen of the Revolutionary Period.

The biggest celebration to date was in 1983, the 300th anniversary of the incorporation of this town. The month of May that year was filled with town-wide celebrations. An unending parade featured firetrucks from 10 surrounding towns, festive floats depicting Stow's past and present history, horseback riders carrying our nation's flags, antique cars ferrying distinguished citizens, the Minutemen, Scouts, Bands--and everything else that makes a small town special.

Open house for the new Town Barn was held in 1977. And Stow entered the age of sidewalks with the dedication of the new byway built on Great Rd. in 1983. In 1984 a publication party was held for the new "History of Stow" by Ellie Childs.

Springfest can be viewed as a window on changes in contemporary culture. The first dance in 1967 was the Minuteman Ball, in costume, with an orchestra. Over the years folk dancing, square dancing, street dancing, record hops, Scottish dancing, and school dances have been part of the scene. In the late 70's the Saturday night dance at the Town Barn was started, and it hasn't stopped. Perhaps the most memorable were the Tercentenary Balls in 1983--1,000 attended the four dances in four locations with four different bands.

A band concert on the common in 1968 sponsored by the Stow Lions was one of the early musical offerings. The change in musical taste is reflected at Springfest--bluegrass, guitar, bongo, banjo, jazz, ragtime, folk, rock, lip-sync and school band concerts have filled the air over time. Since the beginning, however, there have been classical concerts, which have now evolved into the well-known Sounds of Stow under the long and dedicated tutelage of Ernest Goldman and Barbara Jones.

Stow Minutemen have always enlivened opening ceremonies with the traditional musket volley ceremony, and Springfest would not be complete without the traditional Firemen's Muster followed by the water polo contest.

Field day events for children, varying from year to year, have been standard features. The most popular ones, running and bicycling, are now organized by the Stow Conservation Trust as major race events. Soccer games made their appearance in 1979. There have been hay rides, lawn mower musters, fishing derby, tennis tournaments, canoe races on Fletcher Pond, bird walks, skateboard contests, lego contests, and balloon releases. A costumed children's parade led by Bagpiper Alan Ferguson was a delightful event for many years. Dog shows, pony rides, sheep shearing, and horse shows also were popular. An auction with Roger Derby was a regular feature, and the library ran book fairs.

Arts and crafts shows have always been part of the festivities, and the Stow Garden Club staged flower sales and flower shows and later added the Art in Bloom feature with flower arrangements complementing art work by local artists. In 1986 the Senior Citizens came on the scene with a crafts display. Historical exhibits by the Stow Historical Society and Stow Historical Commission have become a standard event, and in 2004 local farm history was in the spotlight. Old home tours and historical bus tours were conducted in the early years. Stow West School also held special events.

School plays written by Barbara Hill delighted audiences for a number of years, as did other teacher-written plays. Old timers always remember Alan Ferguson's never-to-be-duplicated plays with titles such as "There's No Place Like Rome," "To Be or Not to Be is a Good Question," and his last work, "Pompositticut Follies," a fanciful interpretation of Stow history. Ecumenical church services also have been part of the weekend.

Food ranks up near the top of the popularity chart at Springfest. Pancake breakfasts, ham and bean suppers, cafes, coffee houses, family picnics, baking contests, pie eating contests, barbecue suppers and ice cream socials have been among the offerings. The Fire Department put on its first Chicken Barbecue in 1980 at the Town Beach, and the Lions Club's Food Truck at Center School has been a favorite eating place for many years.

The name Springfest became official in 2000; before that time the event was always known as the Stow Spring Festival. Tom Shepherd, long time resident, remembers that the Festival was first suggested by Betty Hill, wife of Selectman Arthur Hill, as a means of bringing citizens together during a contentious year in town affairs. Among those on the first committee in 1967 were Shepherd, Frank Waldron, Caroline Collings, Betty Freed, and Bill Woodhead. One of the major decisions was to be sure everyone could take part in all events at no cost or at least minimal cost.

Over the years this community-wide initiative has continued to be the work of hundreds of volunteers. In the 1990's, however, there was a lack of volunteer coordinators, and the Stow Business Association stepped up to coordinate a Crafts and Business Fair for several years supplemented with a limited number of regular events. In the year 2000 volunteer coordinators came forward to run Springfest, and now limited financial assistance comes from the town. Local residents, Debbie Woods and Patti Heron, have been at the helm since that time.

Springfest makes Stow a special place, showing off community spirit at its best, and a community that prides itself in being an old New England village.

Information compiled by the Stow Historical Society

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