



Tulsa Oktoberfest the History

The year was 1979 and Oktoberfest was born of humble beginnings on the East bank of the Arkansas River in Tulsa. The first Oktoberfest was suggested by Vivian Steele, then public affairs administrator for the River Parks Authority. Original sponsors of the festival were KJRH, the Arts and Humanities Council of Tulsa, The Tulsa Tribune, KBEZ Radio and the River Parks Authority. A few small tents, Master of Ceremonies Josef Hardt, producer-director at KJRH, support from the German-American Club of Oklahoma City and the first Oktoberfest was well underway.

After that first festival, seed money was set aside for the second, which again was held on the east bank in the Model Parks area. During the second year of the festival, 100,000 people attended, more than double the first year's attendance. Oktoberfest patrons consumed 3,500 pounds of knackwurst, bratwurst and sauerkraut. With hamburgers, hotdogs and corn dogs also available, it was apparent the crowd craved German food.

Oktoberfest moved to the West Bank of the Arkansas River in 1981. For many people, festival volunteers in particular, it was an unforgettable occasion. The weather was not kind to Oktoberfest that year and the festival became known as Mudfest. The rains came and stayed. Meetings were held and discussions ensued over whether or not to cancel the festival. The festival went on as scheduled, not for just one weekend, but for two weekends. The Heilbronn Band from Germany played, the Chicken Dance was introduced to festival-goers and ironically, Mudfest for many attendees became the most fun of all.

Where loads of hay had been brought in the previous year to control the mud and water, in 1982, water wagons were utilized to control the dust. For 1982, Oktoberfest was once again located on what is now a portion of the Westport Apartment complex property. The Burlington Northern Railway provided train rides from the festival location to Jenks America. The crowd reached an estimated 250,000 and ate five miles of sausages in addition to mountains of kartoffelpuffer (potato pancakes) sauerkraut and pickles.

Oktoberfest for 1983 and 1984 was on the move once again to a location just south of 21st Street in the Old West Park. The move was necessitated due to the start of construction on the Westport Apartment complex. At the new location, many of the tents were located over existing parking lots and there was no dust or mud to contend with. By this point in time, the festival was established and people found the festival location with little regard to its changed location!

Completion of the existing festival site in 1985 provided Oktoberfest with a permanent home, more space and the necessary infrastructure to allow a growing and maturing festival to better accommodate and serve the ever-growing crowds. Each year brings different bands from Germany, variations in German and European foods, arts and crafts and fun activities for the children. Each year, Oktoberfest donates a sizable portion of its revenues to the River Parks Authority for continuing improvements to the festival site and park system.



Little did Josef Hardt realize that the humble beginning of Tulsa Oktoberfest would lead to a twenty year stint as "Mr. Oktoberfest" for what has become a premier Oktoberfest celebration. Josef would tell you, however, that all was not always smooth and orchestrated over the years. The first year was the hardest to get people involved.

There was a lot of skepticism that this whole thing would be a success. I knew German people in the area. I asked them, Wouldn't you like to help and they said, well, yes, but I didn't blame them. But I felt it would come off.

It was natural for me to get involved with it, says Josef, who was born in Oberhausen (Rhineland), Germany. They needed someone who was crazy enough to do all the crazy things that I did on the stage. The stage area where the band performed measured 10x40 feet. The tent was 40x40 feet, with several picnic tables inside.

In 1981, the tent was 100x280 feet, with 180 picnic tables. You do something for the first or second time and you improve it and you make it bigger and then all of a sudden you find out the crowd is bigger again than you expected.

Duplicating the Munich atmosphere is made easier with the addition of German Bands. They're our number one attraction. Our only problem was, how are we going to top this year, next year? What will we bring over from Germany next year? Let's face it, there are quite a few miles between here and there.

At the end of the 1998 Tulsa Oktoberfest, surrounded by a sea of volunteers of whom many had been at his side through all of the twenty years, Josef retired as Master of Ceremonies of the huge Biergarten. Josef had indeed earned the title of Mr. Oktoberfest in the city which now hosts a festival recognized officially as a premier Oktoberfest in the United States and certainly the "Best Fest in the West" !!



The "Chicken Dance" was introduced in the United States in 1981 by the Heilbronn Band from Germany during the 1981 Tulsa Oktoberfest. For those of you who have many years of Oktoberfest "under the belt", the 1981 Festival has carried the nickname of "Mudfest" for reasons that the uninitiated can only imagine! It must be mentioned, at this point, that the song was not named the Chicken Dance, but der ententanz which translated means the Duck Dance.

Yes Oh Oktoberfest faithful, there was a reason why the song's name was changed in it's city of introduction. It seems that, at the time, there was not a duck costume to be found anywhere in Tulsa, however, a chicken costume was available at one of the local television stations. The station graciously donated the costume for use at the festival and the rest is history! The tune, at that time, was all the rage in Germany and of course the band from Germany would play it for the crowds in Tulsa to enjoy and the chicken would perform and all was well at Tulsa Oktoberfest.

Others, in the United States, may claim the Chicken Dance for their own, however, the Chicken Dance has truly been Tulsa Oktoberfest for the past twenty plus years and will continue to be so for many years to come.



The Oktoberfest Biermeister was introduced to the Tulsa Oktoberfest scene at the 1991 festival. The Biermeister has an interesting beginning born out an Oktoberfest Working Committee member's search in a costume catalog. The catalog was being searched to find a new Chicken costume to replace the original costume which was worn and tattered.

While the search for a Chicken costume replacement was being made, a costume head which bore a striking resemblance to the relatively new Oktoberfest Biermeister logo was seen. The immediate thought was a companion character for the already popular chicken that could roam the festival grounds with the Chicken greeting children and parents as well. The Oktoberfest Biermeister character was born!!

The Biermeister head was obtained and further adorned with a hat and spectacles. A costume of plaid shirt, knickers and knee socks were added to complete the first Biermeister. The first Biermeister costume, however, was not without problems. The first shirts and socks were of cotton material. When washed in hot water and dried, they shrunk!! The Biermeister was and still is a figure of quite some stature. Shrunken shirts and socks would not do. Appropriate material for shirts and new pairs of knee socks were purchased. A member of the German-American Society of Tulsa custom sewed two new shirts and the Biermeister was back in business.

Over the years the Biermeister has been portrayed by just two people. The popularity of the Biermeister and Chicken as they roam the festival grounds together have become an Oktoberfest tradition.



1981 Steins

