

 <h2 style="text-align: center;">FAYETTE'S GREAT WATERMELON DAYS</h2> <p style="text-align: center;">FRIDAY AND SATURDAY, SEPT. 7 and 8</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Main Street Carnival By D & N Amusements Friday Afternoon & Evening, All Day & Evening Saturday</p>	
<p>Talent Contest Sat. 7:30 p.m.</p> <p>Open To Any and all Acts</p> <p>1st Prize \$50 2nd Prize \$30 3rd Prize \$20</p> <p><small>To Be Held Downtown, Weather Permitting (Held at High School Gym in Case of Rain)</small></p>	<p>Tennis Tournament</p> <p>Friday and Saturday</p> <p>8 Divisions — All Ages Welcome, Singles and Doubles Categories. Entry Fee \$1.00.</p> <p>Deadline For Entries Noon Thursday, Sept. 6. Contact Walt Griffin, 425-5311 or 425-4209.</p>
<p>Bingo On Main Street</p> <p>Saturday Beginning at 11:00 a.m.</p>	<p>Street Games — Food Stand</p> <p>Saturday on Main Street</p>
<p>FREE SLICED WATERMELON COURTESY STEPP'S MELONS Served From 2:00 p.m. Saturday</p> 	
<p>Kiddy Parade and Balloon Bust Saturday 10:30 a.m.</p>	
<p>Schedule Of Events</p> <p>Friday, Sept. 7</p> <p>Noon-10 p.m. Carnival Rides 4:00 p.m. Tennis Tournament Begins Evening Polka Band at Dahlke's IGA</p>	<p>Saturday, Sept. 8</p> <p>10:30 a.m. Kids' Parade and Balloon Bust 11:00 a.m. Bingo Begins All Day Carnival Rides & Street Games All Day Tennis Tournament Continues 2:00 p.m. Free Watermelon Served 7:30 p.m. Talent Contest - Main Street <small>(High School Gym in Case of Rain)</small></p>
<p>Free Drawing For Fayette "Bucks" During</p> <p>Talent Show — Must Be Present to Win</p>	<p>Beef Raffle</p> <p>Winners To Be Drawn During Talent Contest. Get Tickets From Any Chamber Member.</p>
<p>SPONSORED BY FAYETTE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE</p>	

Page 7 of The Union, published in West Union, Iowa on Thursday, August 30th, 1979



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Fayette Watermelon Days and a story for Black History Month

By Janette Garcia, UIU Archivist

Fayette loves to celebrate “Watermelons Days” (the weekend after Labor Day). Watermelon Days are filled with fun activities, live entertainment, a parade, a silent auction at the Community Library, and of course – watermelons. Watermelon Days began when Atrus “Attie” Stepp volunteered to bring watermelons from his family farm to town to share. But we can trace the story back even further.

Tennessee was where Attie’s father, James Stepp, a mulatto, was born, grew up, married Nelly Grant, had 9 children and lived for the first 34 years of his life. They moved to Illinois in 1875 and had three more children. In 1887, James, now a widower, moved to Iowa with his children, where he met and married Julia Graham in Westfield (now part of Fayette), Iowa.

Julia Graham was born in Fayette County in 1857, the same year Upper Iowa University opened its doors. Her father, Thomas, was one of the first to bring his family from Illinois to Fayette, Iowa and settle in the “Colored Settlement.” Julia’s sister, Diantha Graham, is believed to be the first student of African American descent who graduated from Upper Iowa University, earning a B.S. degree in 1894. Julia married James Howard, and they had two children. She was widowed, then two years later, married James Stepp.

James and Julia married in 1888, and that same year James won first place at the Fayette County Fair for both best watermelon and best muskmelon. Atrus “Attie” Roy Stepp was born in 1895. He married Charlotte Lottie Moore, and together the two generations continued to grow watermelon and other crops. Newspapers continued to report on the winnings of the Stepp family at the Fair for watermelons and other fruits and vegetables over the next several decades. There are also numerous accounts of the Stepp family providing watermelons for meetings and gatherings. An 1893 article called James Stepp “the great watermelon man.”¹ In addition to bringing watermelons to fairs and events, he would drive his wagon with a team of horses and a bell down the streets in the neighboring towns,² evoking those same feelings children in later years would have when they would hear the music played by the ice cream man as he drove slowly by.

The Stepps were not content to just keep planting the same seeds year after year; instead they explored varieties, both in size and taste, while also maintaining ecological consciousness. Attie was interviewed in one article discussing the land they grew their watermelons on. Melons grow best on sandy soil, and he stated that “we have done more to prevent soil erosion in the area than the state has ever done... I was doing a good job of taking care of the land. The land is my greatest friend...”³

The Stepps developed at least five different varieties of watermelon. The “All Sweet” was grown in 1987. A 1939 article discusses two other varieties: “one is a large, round, dark green

¹ (1893 December 20) The Argo, p. 1

² (1980 July 24) The Union, pp. 1,8

³ Ibid

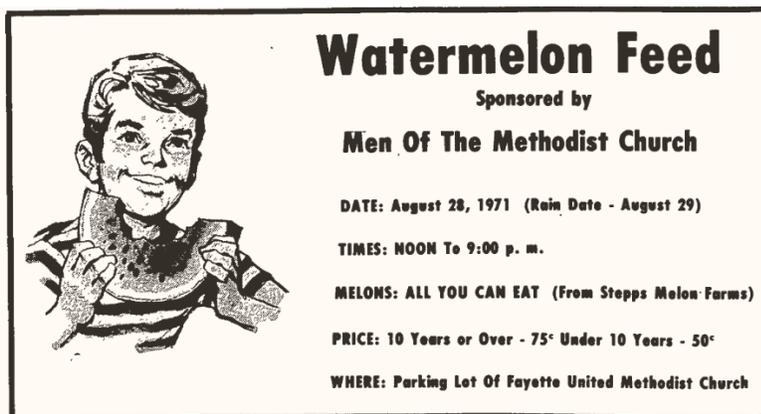
melon, and the other is a yellow-fleshed melon called the Honeydew.”⁴ [Archivist’s note: this is not the same Honeydew found in grocery stores today. The Stepp Honeydew was first referenced in the newspapers in 1927. The Honeydew melons familiar today were not advertised in local grocery stores until the 1950s]. In 1951 another article introduces the new Granite State muskmelon and the "Ice box melon the size of a cantaloupe; and is guaranteed to be as red and sweet as the ordinary watermelon.”

Watermelon sizes grew both larger and smaller since “the Stepps perfected the beautiful, delicious small watermelon of a size to fit our family and our refrigerator.” On the other end of the spectrum, one melon deserved its own story. A pilot from Fayette “landed his light plane on the pasture across the highway [from the Stepp’s stand] to pick up a melon. Henry looked with longing at the Stepp’s prize Black Diamond beauty, weighing a record 70 pounds but decided that was too much load and settled on a 55-pound melon instead.”

The Stepp’s Melon Stand opened on Highway 150 north of Fayette (now Down’s Produce <https://www.visitiowa.org/business/downs-produce.html>)⁵ Fayette is one of the few Iowa areas which raise melons commercially. With the addition of Wayne, Attie and Lottie’s son, three generations of the Stepp family were involved with the industry dating back to the 1880s.



A precursor to the Fayette Watermelon Days was an old fashioned watermelon social at the United Methodist Church in Fayette in 1971.⁶



⁴ (1939 September 7) Fayette County Union, p8

⁵ Advertisement 1969 July 31, The Union, p. 11

⁶ (1971 August 26) The Union, p. 1