

Happy Days Date to '31 at Picnic

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by Bill Bartleman

Former Kentucky Governor, AB (Happy) Chandler believes he played an important role in making the Fancy Farm Picnic the important statewide political event it is today.

"I guess I was one of the first candidates for statewide office to ever go to Fancy Farm." Chandler said in a recent telephone interview. "I ended my 1931 campaign for lieutenant governor down there. I won that election and thought Fancy Farm was good luck, so I kept going back."

On Saturday, the residents of the small Graves County community will celebrate the 100th consecutive picnic, and Chandler, who was 82 years old earlier this month, will be there. It will be his first appearance at the picnic since 1971 when he was running for governor as an Independent.

"I remember visiting Fancy Farm in 1935 when I was running for governor," Chandler, who now lives in Versailles reminisced. I closed the campaign down there (at the picnic). I remember dancing, first with Mama (his wife), and then the rest of the girls. I guess it was the right thing to do 'because I got all the votes in Fancy Farm and won the election."

Albert Cash, local postmaster, remembers Chandler's 1935 visit and agrees he made an impression. "Happy danced with every girl in the place, and everybody thought that was great," Cash said. "When the dance was all over, he was sopping wet."

Cash said Chandler was attired in a white suit, along with his dancing, helped voters remember him on election day.

Chandler also said his 1955 visit to Fancy Farm was important to his victory in the Democratic primary election on his second try for the governor's seat.

"After we had won, Mama and I were going to Hot Springs, Arkansas, for a brief holiday, and the only place we stopped after leaving Louisville was Fancy Farm," Chandler said. "I remember a fellow named Carrico (Aubrey) came out and made a speech for Mama and me. It really got to us, I think everyone in town came out."

Chandler admits the picnics were more exciting prior to 1956 when they were held the week before primary election. The General Assembly in 1956 changed the primary date from the first Saturday in August to the fourth Tuesday in May.

Ironically, it was Chandler who pushed for the primary date to be changed. His close friend and political ally, Fred Morgan, a former state representative from Paducah, said Chandler didn't like campaigning during the hottest days of the year.

Although the picnic still attracts most of the state's top politicians and serves as the unofficial kickoff for fall election campaigns, Chandler said the picnic was at its peak in the 1940's and 1950's.

"People used to listen to what you had to say back then, and what you said at a place like Fancy Farm was important to your campaign," Chandler said.

The former governor said politics and campaigning isn't as much "fun" as it was because candidates now depend on television for most of their campaigning.

"I like to think I made a modest contribution to the prestige and popularity of the picnic," Chandler said. "When I last spoke in 1971, one of the newspaper people down there said I was the best she ever heard."

"In Kentucky and in this section of the county, the Fancy Farm Picnic is very important," Chandler said. "It has become a legend in its own time."

"I've got nothing but fond memories about Fancy Farm," Chandler continued without a pause. "It's probably the last old-fashioned get-together around where the old-time politics still goes on. I guess I am the last of the old courthouse, stump-speaking politicians left."

"People used to say that Alben Barkley was the best stump speaker, but I like to think I was right up there with him," Chandler said. "I don't think there is anyone around, other than him (Barkley), who has ever been in my class when it comes to speaking."

"I hope to liven things up this year," Chandler said of his planned appearance. "I'm going to talk good about a couple of youngsters like (US Senator) Wendell Ford, and I'm interested in (Lt. Gov.) Martha Layne Collins. I also think this young Barkley fellow (Agriculture Commissioner Alben Barkley II) is a level-headed youngster."

Chandler will be on the speakers platform with most of the state's top politicians. Most of the former governors have confirmed they will attend, as well as most of those elected to statewide office.

The political speaking, which is scheduled to begin at 2PM on the front lawn of St. Jerome Catholic School, will be highlighted by representatives of the two major candidates for president.