

This Day in History... October 12, 1810

The First Oktoberfest

The first Oktoberfest began on October 12, 1810.

On that date, Crown Prince Ludwig (later King Ludwig I) married Princess Therese of Saxe-Hildburghausen. They invited all the citizens of Munich to celebrate with them in the fields in front of the city gates. These fields were named Theresienwiese (“Theresa’s Meadow”), to honor Princess Therese.

It’s unknown who exactly proposed the festival – Nation Guard Major Andreas Michael Dall’Armi and National Guard Sergeant Franz Baumgartner have both received some credit. The celebrations continued through October 18. That day, a series of special horse races were staged to honor the young couple. The races were held at the fairground outside the city. There, a grandstand hosted 40,000 spectators.

Most of the fairgrounds were undeveloped. But there was a special king’s tent where royalty were treated to tastings of beer and wine. Before the races began, locals put on a performance to honor the new couple. These performances included children dressed in the costumes of the nine Bavarian townships and other regions. Franz Baumgartner’s horse won the race and he received a gold medal.

A year later, the festival was celebrated again with the addition of a show promoting Bavarian agriculture. The festival was skipped in 1813 due to the Napoleonic Wars. After that however, the festival grew from year to year. Soon they added tree climbing, bowling alleys, and swings. Carnival booths were added in 1818, with top prizes of silver, porcelain, and jewelry.

In 1819, the festival was taken over by city leaders who decided it would become an annual event. A parade (which was part of the original festival) was added in 1850 and became an annual tradition. Each year, people dressed in traditional clothes walked from Maximilian Street to the Oktoberfest grounds. In the mid-to-late-1800s, the festival was canceled several times due to wars and cholera epidemics.

The first celebration included a horse race attended by 40,000 people. Horse races were included until 1960 before they were discontinued. A horse race was included for the 200th anniversary celebration in 2010.



The festival had its first booth illuminated by electric lights in 1880. The following year vendors began selling Bratwurst. Then in 1892, beer began to be served in glass mugs. In 1910, at the centennial Oktoberfest, it was estimated that 31,700 gallons of beer were drunk. The festival was skipped during World War I and scaled down versions, called “smaller autumn celebrations” were held in the years after the war. In the years leading up to World War II, the Nazis took over the celebrations, calling them the Greater German Folk Festival.

Beginning in 1950, new traditions were created that continue to this day. The festivities begin at noon with a 12-gun salute, followed by the tapping of the first keg. The first liter of beer goes to the minister-president of the State of Bavaria.

Today, Oktoberfest is the largest folk festival in the world, with some six million people traveling to Munich for the celebration every year. It’s held from late September to the first Sunday in October, lasting 16 to 18 days. If the 16th day falls before October 3 (German Unity Day), the festival continues until the 3rd.

Oktoberfest celebrations are also held in countries around the world, for those that can’t make the trip to Germany. La Crosse, Wisconsin’s Oktoberfest, USA is considered one of the largest and longest-running festivals outside of Germany, first held in 1961. Frankenmuth, also known as “Michigan’s Little Bavaria,” held its first Oktoberfest in 1990, and it was the first celebration outside of Germany to be officially sanctioned by the Parliament and Munich. Cincinnati, Ohio’s Oktoberfest Zinzinnati is generally considered the largest Oktoberfest in the US. First held in 1976, it sees about 500,000 visitors every year.

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