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Sherry Curtis, right, looks at the cabinet full of scrapbooks she's compiled over three decades of fish fry fundraisers. When former students return to Liberal for class reunions, Curtis said they often peruse the scrapbooks to reminisce about their days in "That" Liberal Band. L&T photos/Rachel Coleman

34-year tradition of fish fry funds LHS band trips

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Liberal High School Band's annual fish fry is set for Thursday evening, but preparations are already underway at the Seward County Activity Center. Wednesday morning, band students worked to set up tables and greaseproof the kitchen area with thick layers of corrugated cardboard on the floor.

The students weren't the only ones to start early. The "Cheesy Potato Ladies," about 15 in all, planned to gather at Friends Church tonight to peel, cut and prep potatoes; the dish will cook all the next day. Meanwhile, cases of frozen, breaded fish are scheduled to arrive Thursday morning. Around 3 p.m., the fryers will fire up to start cooking the crispy filets.

The massive venture aims to produce big results: hot, fresh-cooked meals for 2,000 or more people, raising enough money to get "That" Liberal Band to Orlando, Fla. in May.

"We could never do it without the volunteers," said Band Booster Chair Shannon Davis, who, with Vice-Chair Elizabeth Irby, has coordinated more than 100 parents, students and supporters. "They're the ones who make it happen."

Davis noted that contributions range from donated stacks of cardboard to finding smarter ways to prepare the food to plain old elbow grease in the cleanup phase of the evening. The last task on the list often takes from 7:30 p.m., when the kitchen shuts down, until 10 p.m.



"Jeff and Jackie Mitchell got us a grant for new fryers last year, and that made a huge difference," Davis said. "It used to be that you would work until midnight or 1 a.m., and come home smelling like a fish, for days afterwards. The new fryers have really minimized that, so the fish cooks faster in three to five minutes. It makes cleanup faster, too."

The fish-frying time is perhaps the only aspect of the project that has diminished. The event is exponentially bigger than the modest community fundraiser that began 34 years ago to raise money for a band trip to California.

“That was the year we went to the Rose Bowl parade,” reminisced Sherry Curtis, retired band teacher who now assists in the band office. “Mr. (Lloyd) Bing came up with the idea. He was a member of civic groups in town that had organized fish fries, and he helped get it started.”

The fish fry succeeded “and it just grew from there,” Curtis said.

Over the years, the fish fry funded trips to various parades and venues across the nation, as well as one memorable journey to London. Liberal High School band members grew up, raised families, and served as fish fry volunteers for their own teenaged children.

“It’s really become a project that the parents head up,” Curtis said. “The Band Boosters get it organized, set up, cook and serve, and supervise the kids.”

Band students sign up for shifts to handle serving the food, cleaning tables and getting things back to normal at the activity center once the event wraps up. Each member of the band is expected to contribute to the effort, though ticket sales and sweat equity; Curtis keeps track of individual work, with a detailed accounting system that records money raised through the sale of Blue and Gold brand sausages, poinsettia plants, and tickets to the fish fry.

“Mr. Burnett gets the kids really involved, because it’s their fundraiser for trips and uniforms,” Davis said. That attitude extends to families of band students as well.

“We’ll have probably 50 parent volunteers for the night, but parents and students are all asked to bring two desserts per student, which we sell for \$1 a serving,” Davis said.

Gone are the days when Curtis left school periodically to zip over to the National Guard Armory to stir the large pot of red beans that simmered a day in advance.

“We cooked them in this huge pot someone made for us specially,” she said. “The recipe came from the gentleman who owned King’s BBQ.”

Curtis no longer counts stirring the beans as part of her duties; in fact, the dish finally disappeared from the menu. Coleslaw, by contrast, stayed the course, though it is not chopped and mixed in a private kitchen, as it was when John Engel was in charge of that side dish.

“The LHS cafeteria makes the coleslaw for us now,” Curtis said.

Thursday’s menu will include fried fish and fried chicken tenders, a concession added years ago to appease “those people who said, ‘Oh, I just don’t like fish,’” Curtis recalled. Organizers also substituted hush puppies for bread, and switched from corn on the cob — “too messy,” Curtis said — to regular, cut corn.

One especially popular change was the substitution of cheesy potatoes for the perennial french fries.

“People really like those cheesy potatoes,” Curtis said.

The Liberal Band Fish Fry will open its doors at 5 p.m. Thursday, and serve until 7:30 p.m. The Liberal Jazzmen will provide musical entertainment throughout the evening. Tickets will be sold at the door for those who did not purchase them in advance; prices are \$12 for adults, \$6 for children ages 5 to 12. Children ages 4 and under may dine free of charge.

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