

Way We Were
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Happy Birthday 'Murica

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The Wild West was no more in Park City by the mid to late 1900s. Times were changing rapidly and the once prosperous town of Park City, Utah was falling into disrepair. Mining was an occupation of old, the price of silver had dropped drastically, and the new focus was on creating a resort town out of the immense snow. Though the economy was in a time of transition, those who stayed in Park City rarely meshed with the hippies who flocked to it except for the annual tradition of the July 4th Parade.

The Independence Day celebration in July of 1971 actually occurred on the 5th of July, and lives in infamy to this day. However, no one seems to know exactly what happened or how. In fact, the Park Record did not even cover the event, so the sole print media source for that day fell on the shoulders of the Salt Lake Tribune. The Museum's oral history collection contains a few transcripts of the event as well.

Jim Santy's oral history interview summarizes the day as follows, "One Labor Day, it was either Labor Day or the 4th of July, one of the hippies threw a water balloon into one of the police cars. A bunch of guys in one of the beer joints saw it happen. Well they came out and they grabbed onto that hippie. Then a few more hippies came along, and I don't know if they were all hippies of course, but that's what everybody called them, and they started to pound on each other. It started a little bit of a riot until it filled up Main Street. The state called out the riot squads from the Highway Patrol, so they all showed up in their helmets and their riot gear to close off the poor old town. On the 4th of July, and that was one of the biggest business days of the year. So that's the way it started. "

While Santy's interview looks to be a complete and accurate picture of the day's events, each source seems to narrate a different story. Exactly who the hippies threw water balloons at changes for every account of the day. Some suggest it was an old-timer, others a police officer's wife, and some even suggest that it wasn't hippies throwing the balloons at all, but harmless children.

Regardless of the details, it is confirmed that the event was considered a riot. The State Highway Patrol came into town to manage the mischief, and for a period of time no one could get in or out of Park City. It is clear that the tumultuous time leading up to this event likely had a hand in the way it all escalated and unfolded. Perhaps, then, the July 4th riot could be considered the climax in this town's history which led to the acceptance of change from a mining town to a skiing industry.



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Credit: Park City Historical Society & Museum, Park Record Collection

Caption: Happy Birthday America!