

Hot Navy bean soup served

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The scorching, hot Mississippi heat was a nuisance but that didn't stop Sailors, Marines, and civilians from NAS Meridian as they made the annual trip to Philadelphia on July 28 to participate in Meridian Day at the 121st Neshoba County Fair. Hundreds of fairgoers braved the rising summer temperature as they strolled by booths and tents from the city of Meridian, local businesses, hospitals, colleges, radio, and television stations.

The event, which is nicknamed "Mississippi's Giant House Party", is the site of a week-long gathering of local citizens, tourists, and politicians who enjoy amusement rides, concerts, horse races, and fair food. Many of them spend the week at the fair camping out or residing in quarters established at highly decorative cabins which have been a part of family generations for years.

"I've been coming all my life," said 66-year-old Mack Alford of Philadelphia holding his 4-month-old grandson Joseph Benjamin Walker and enjoying the front porch cabin scenery of the fair with his 3-year-old granddaughter, Emily.

"I just enjoy the family reunions that we have here at the fair."

As part of Meridian Day, volunteers from NAS Meridian served its traditional crowd favorite, Navy bean soup. Unlike last year, which saw a torrential downpour of rain make its way through the fair, the weather was nice but humid. However that did little to dampen the spirits of fairgoers as they continually helped themselves to a hot cup of soup.

Charles Gressett, 72, of Chunky was one of the first in line for the hot soup.

"I've been coming to the fair since I was 20 years old and eating the Navy bean soup for just about as long," said Gressett who was a plumber that worked on the construction of NAS Meridian in the early 1960s. "It's just something different -- I look forward to it. I would eat it no matter how hot it is outside."

Navy bean soup, which has become an iconic status at the fair since the late 1960s, consists of several pounds of dried Navy beans and tasty ham hocks. The soup is prepared by Galley Manager Bill

Jones and his wife, and is placed in large containers for serving. Volunteers transported 60 pounds of soup this year to be served. Although they were served in cups, some visitors brought large bowls and other plastic containers to take their servings back to the cabins for other family members to enjoy.

In addition to the soup, military and civilian personnel from NAS Meridian also handed out free Navy and Marine Corps posters and brochures to smiling children and adults who stopped by the tent. They also answered questions about the military and shared interesting stories. Other favorites among the fairgoers this year included the traditional T-2C ejection seat photo-ops with student pilots and the opportunity to win free VIP Parking Passes for the Golden Wings Over Meridian Air Show which features the Blue Angels at NAS Meridian on March 26-27, 2011. Adults could simply register to win a pass in one drawing and increased their chances of winning in another drawing by correctly answering the question "In what year was NAS Meridian commissioned?"

NAS Meridian Command Master Chief Sharon Laguna, who helped serve soup, said the part she likes about coming to the fair is speaking to the people who stop by the tent. "I especially enjoy talking to the young people, because they are our future," Laguna said.

After stopping by the tent earlier to enjoy some soup, 65-year-old Evelyn Perry of Philadelphia sat on the front porch of her family's two-story, air-conditioned cabin conversing with her daughter Candace Lyn and friend Joyce Dansby. Perry, who has been coming to the fair all her life, said she loves watching the action that takes place around the pavilion.

"It's really neat being on the square watching the children run by and looking at the expressions on the (politicians) faces after they have just spoken to the crowd," said Perry, whose family's cabin sits right behind the fair's pavilion. "They would always have this worried look thinking, 'Did I do a good job or did I speak okay.' It is so amusing."

Alice Rowe, another friend of Perry and a former Miss Neshoba County Fair, said she enjoys the camaraderie. "It's a lot of fun coming here because you get to see old friends and make new ones," Rowe added.