

A Good Luck Smooch



Tory Buck puckers up for her meat market goat at the Minnesota State Fair just prior to the 4-H competition on Aug. 23 in hopes of giving her a smooch for good luck in the show. She received a blue ribbon with her animal. Buck, 19, is in her final year of 4-H with the Lemond Snappy Boosters 4-H Club of Steele County.

STAFF PHOTO BY RICK BUSSLER

Wilker picked state runner-up senior citizen

BY RICK BUSSLER
PUBLISHER

The great Minnesota get together has turned into great recognition for a senior citizen from Steele County.

Vern Wilker of Owatonna was named one of three runner-ups for the male outstanding senior citizen at the Minnesota State Fair Aug. 29. Wilker, along with Carol Prokopec of Blooming Prairie took part in the awards program representing Steele County.

Out of a pool of nominees from each county, winners are selected for their outstanding commitment to community service since reaching the age of 65.

The outstanding senior citizen awards went to Judy Popp-Anderson of Alden, representing Freeborn County, and Lowell Johnson of Fort Ripley, representing Crow Wing County.

In addition to Wilker, the runner-ups included Susan Hayes and Marn Flicker, both of Itasca County and John Rheinberger of Washington County.

Wilker is a member of the Exchange Club of Steele County. He has worked with youth by getting the youth camp ready each year for the Elks Club campers, teach-



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Vern Wilker of Owatonna was named runner-up of Minnesota Outstanding Senior Citizen of the Year at the State Fair last week.

ing farm safety, teaching geography to elementary-aged children, walking in parades to hand out flags to children and doing radio announcing for the Steele County Free Fair.

Some of Wilker's other talents are singing and auctioneering. Wilker, 79, is a member of the Steele County Pork Producers and serves on the board at United Prairie Bank. He is also a member of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Meriden.

"Volunteering is very fulfilling," Wilker says.

Bruce Kubicek of the Steele County Exchange Club said, "Steele County is blessed with lots of folks who do a lot of volunteering."



STAFF PHOTO BY RICK BUSSLER

Stacy Burton of Owatonna cooks up another batch of tater tot hot dish on a stick at the Minnesota State Fair in Falcon Heights. Burton operates Ole and Lena's stand, which is owned by Dave and Renae Jenö of Owatonna.

Vacation on a stick for Owatonna woman

BY RICK BUSSLER
PUBLISHER

For Stacy Burton, her vacation is mostly all work.

Burton takes off 14 days from her normal routine as a mother and civic booster around Owatonna to work at the Minnesota State Fair. She's in charge of operating Ole and Lena's, a food trailer owned by Dave and Renae Jenö of Owatonna. Their specialty is churning out thousands of tater tot hot dish on, what else would you expect at the fair, but on a stick.

"It's like a vacation for me," said Burton, who has been operating Ole and Lena's for the past 17 years. "It's the 12 days of fun," she said of the State Fair. But, she admits, it is a lot of hard work.

During the State Fair, Burton puts in at least a 12-hour day starting at 7 a.m. And there are usually a few surprises along the way. One morning last week at 6:30 she found herself in a real sticky situation, to say the least. A shelf broke in one of the refrigerators, and Burton had milk splashed all over her head and face. "It was part of the fair experience," she said.

She is surprised at how many customers come early in the morning to eat

hot dish. "We hear that it's the most Minnesotan thing at the fair, and that people like to start out their day with hot dish," Burton said.

Burton doesn't venture very far during her stay at the State Fair. She stays at the fair's campgrounds on the north end. There are seven of them living together in the camper for two weeks. "You get to spend real close quarters with them," she said with a smile. "We've all become family," she added.

"I'm like the mom of the camper," Burton says. Before she heads off to make tater tots on a stick, Burton cooks up a crock pot meal every morning for them to enjoy so they don't have to rely solely on fair food.

Operating at the State Fair isn't the only celebration for Ole and Lena's. They also venture to the county fairs in Steele and Freeborn, Owatonna Crazy Days, Straight River Days in Medford, Ellendale Days, Fourth of July in Blooming Prairie and even a fair in Iowa.

The festivals start at the end of May and by the time the State Fair finishes on Labor Day, well, Burton is more than honest about how she feels. "We're just wiped out," she says.

Burton has three children at home ages 11, 9 and

5. She said it's hard to be away from them for so long, but cell phones have eased the pain allowing them to see each other. "We have to video conference every night, especially for the 5-year-old," she said. Her husband takes care of the kids when she is away.

Because of its location to home, Burton enjoys the Steele County Free Fair the most. She gets to go home every night. "It's like going to the fair without really going to the fair," she said. The Steele fair also allows her to see many people that she knows. Burton was born and raised in Owatonna.

Her favorite part of operating the stand is the people. "You're meeting new people every 10 seconds. You get a wide variety of people," Burton said. She also likes organizing in the stand to make everything function smoothly. "I love organizing. It's what most people hate."

When she's not running the stand and taking care of kids, Burton is active in the Owatonna community. She is a part-time bartender at the VFW Club. She has served as president for the VFW Auxiliary, involved with the Crisis Resource Center and Rachel's Light. She is also a member of Associated Church in Owatonna.

It's no horsing around



STAFF PHOTOS BY RICK BUSSLER

There is no horsing around for the Pittman family of rural Steele County as they get their Percheron horses ready for show at the Minnesota State Fair. Top: Marc Pittman sprays down his horses to get them clean prior to saddling them up with all the saddle gear. Right: Marc's father, Roger Pittman, helps wipe down the horses. The Pittman Percherons have been in existence since 1991, and they compete in various shows around the state.

