

Family reunion without in-laws; Tri-State Bluegrass Festival

By Jody Grismore Vance

We know what to expect when the Apple Festival is at the fairgrounds – and we've had over a 100 years of experience with the Noble County fair. But twice a year since 1990—on Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends – the Tri-State Bluegrass Festival pitches camp there and, well, we're not so well versed in its protocol.

The main point is this: It can be a destination for enjoyment. Northern Indiana Bluegrass Association President Jim Winger compares it to a family reunion atmosphere, only here you don't have to share genes or put up with in-laws – here the connection is music, playing or listening.

Three concerts are scheduled and the one on Thursday night emphasizes the welcome the festival has for anyone who wants to experience Bluegrass music. It is free...and the 4-H is sponsoring a chicken dinner fundraiser over at the Log Cabin. Winger says, "We hire the talent and put on four to five hours worth of music...and we don't charge a dime to come in on Thursday."

Winger hopes that people realize the festival is family-oriented and says, "We have kids there...and I think we are a very safe event."

And, in fact, young people will be performing at the free Thursday concert, including the Doerfel Family from New York State. Ten kids are in the family and the lead guitar player is 10. Winger says, "He is awesome – a great big Martin guitar, can't hardly get his arm over it—and he just picks the tar out of that thing."

Other young performers are from the Northeast Indiana Suzuki Guild—that is, kids who play violin. Each spring, this group, most often associated with Beethoven and such, is taught old time fiddle tunes, which they perform for festival-goers. The Northern Indiana Bluegrass Association is a non-profit organization and the money they raise goes to scholarships and educational related aspects of music. The Suzuki Guild, for instance, has received a \$3,000 grant.

Thirteen bands—what Winger calls "a variety of first class talent"—will appear during the weekend and continues to say, "We go from the old time to the very classical bluegrass to the somewhat progressive bluegrass. You can expect a little bit of everything in the festival."

And over the years, Winger had heard a consistent theme in the comments: "People never know what to expect, but they know it is going to be outstanding."

This year one of the bands is Special Consensus which has toured internationally and been nominated for a Grammy. Winger says, "They are very well known...and other groups are from Virginia, Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Colorado. They are coming from far and wide along with some adjacent states."

The stage show Thursday is between 5 -10 pm. Friday's show is from 6:30- 10:40 pm—\$7; Saturday is a full day of music from 11 am -10:30 pm—\$12; Sunday is another packed day starting at 11 am and ending at 10:40 pm—\$10. People can also buy weekend tickets for \$20 and Winger says, "We have a very reasonably-priced event. If you look at 31 hours of music for a \$20 ticket—you can't play that on a jukebox."

Anyone under 15 accompanied by a parent is free and if you buy a ticket for one night, you don't have to leave until the following morning.

This last part illustrates another aspect of the festival – only part of the music is on stage. Winger says, "It's kind of a duplex thing. There are two things going on—the stage events and what's going on in the campsites."

Playing at the campsites—open play—is called a picking jam. Winger says, "If you look at the north side of the fairgrounds, there's hundreds of campers up there each day and night—and sometimes all night they are around the campfires singing bluegrass music. On Saturday night it is not unusual to find 15 to 20 jams going on up through that area."

Wingers notes that people have been a little reluctant to go up through the campground and says, "I think you will find it's a very friendly place." Indeed, people are welcome to join a jam. He says, "If they are not a real good picker, we do what we call the second tier which is typically where you stand back a little bit and go ahead and play along."

Saying that Bluegrass is a "niche" music, Winger also states, "It's wonderful music." Its roots come from Kentucky and Tennessee and as demographics became more fluid, the music has reached out across the country, lifestyles and professions. Winger says, "We have doctors and lawyers...One of the gentlemen who comes has done archeology digs in Lebanon and Israel and written several books and teaches at a college."

Not only is the festival for the enjoyment of players and listeners, it is also a fundraiser. The Northeast Indiana Bluegrass Association is a non-profit organization and money goes to scholarships and traditional American music programs in the schools.

Winger explains, "We've exposed about 15,000 area students with this traditional American music program." The program – oriented toward students in the third to ninth grade—focuses on common questions: What is bluegrass? Where did it come from? What instruments are used? How is it composed?

Winger adds, "We do other things with the finances that basically are focused on youth. One of the things we're doing this fall is a teacher's accredited workshop. We did that last year, with 25 area teachers who had an interest in learning more about Bluegrass and passing knowledge on." The group is highly attuned to the future of Bluegrass and to young people. Winger says, "When somebody says, 'Well, \$12?' we think, 'Well, right, the money goes to pay the bands and what's left to the youth.'"

Anyone going will find a full line of concessions and Winger mentions the Moose, the Avilla Lions Club, the American Legion and other specialty food booths, such as caramel corn, ice cream and a hot dog wagon.

You will also find a few crafters relating to music – people selling straps and strings, instruments and tuners.

The festival organizers do ask that people leave pets at home when visiting the fairgrounds.

Free wireless Internet service is being provided by locl.net. this year so people will easily be able to keep up with email and posting pictures. (Actually, I'm kind of tempted to go out with my laptop and camera and do a little live blogging.)

On the website, www.BluegrassUSA.net (capital letters not necessary), you can click on Tri-State Festival and see all the details about the Memorial Day Event and the corresponding one on Labor Day. Included with schedule information are bios of the bands and mp3 downloads to pique your interest.