

Labor Day Festival is coming back here, where it all began

The Labor Day Association is making final plans for this year's festival; returning the event to the city in which it started 98 years ago.

This annual festival is possibly the oldest Labor Day celebration in the United States, according to Barbara Arnold, an association spokesperson. It is the oldest in Indiana, she said.

This year's celebration will include a beauty contest, golf tourney, a country western concert, professional motorcycle races, a talent contest and the Labor Day Battle.

The festival will be from Aug. 31 to Sept. 3.

Arnold said the parade will be known as the Labor Day-Courthouse Centennial Parade. It will be the only event conducted jointly with the Courthouse Centennial Celebration, Arnold said.

Association members are meeting each Thursday in August to complete the final details, Arnold said. Admission to the grounds will be free, she said, and only a

few events will have an admission fee.

"People can go any day and not spend a dime," Arnold said.

Arnold noted that the first festival was held eight years before Labor Day was declared a national holiday. From 1930 to 1949, the attendance never dropped below 30,000, she said. In 1949, an estimated 75,000 people attended the festival.

The first celebration was very similar to our present day festival, according to a news release. It was sponsored by the Knights of Labor, an organized labor group representing coal miners in Indiana before the United Mine Workers of America was formed in 1890.

That first celebration was followed 13 years later with a festival at Hosmer, Ind. Hosmer was a small town beside the Wabash-Erie Canal which depended on the Little Coal Mine.

Since the first festival, the location has been on a rotating basis. 1984 will be the 36th time

Princeton has served as its host.

Princeton has hosted the festival more times than any other community. Boonville hosted it 19 times. Evansville, Oakland City, Fort Branch, Petersburg, Mt. Carmel, Ill., and others have also hosted the festival.

Participation reached its peak in 1936 when over 10,000 miners reportedly marched in the parade. From 1931 to 1949 film crews from every major movie studio in the United States filmed newsreels on the event, Arnold said.

The Labor Day Association has obtained a print of the festival in the 1930's, Arnold said. It is kind of exciting, she said, to see Princeton on the newsreels along with Adolph Hitler and the other big news stories of that time.

Although the festival was very big in the past, participation has dropped in recent years. Arnold said the association's 2,200 members are working to rebuild the celebration to its former level.