

Celebration hails region's rich history|**DAILY POLL**

By Garret Mathews (Contact)

Originally published 07:24 p.m., August 31, 2008

Updated 07:25 p.m., August 31, 2008

Gary Fritz won't blame you for not knowing about the rich history of the Labor Day celebration in Southwestern Indiana, and that the event once was on the road map of Hollywood movie companies.

The third generation coal miner was aware only partially, but nowadays he's one of the prime movers.

"In the late '40s, attendance climbed to around 75,000," says the 59-year-old Fritz.

"Movie companies sent crews by train to film the celebration for newsreels."

These days, hosting duties for the four-day affair usually rotate between Gibson, Warrick and Pike counties, although Vanderburgh County recently got in the mix.

The one constant over the decades has been the Labor Day parade that often has more than 6,000 participants, many of them union members.

This year's festival opened Friday at the Pike County Fairgrounds in Petersburg, Ind.

This year's parade begins at 10 a.m. today. The parade has been known to last close to two hours.

Fritz, a Spurgeon, Ind., native, was a professional motorcycle racer as a young man and later owned a motorcycle dealership.

In the mid-1970s, he changed careers and became a surface miner for Peabody Coal Co.

In the 1980s, Fritz became an organizer for United Mine Workers of America. He served stints in Appalachia and the Midwest before moving to union headquarters in Washington, D.C. He took early retirement in 2003 and now works for the National Nurse Organizing Committee in Chicago.

"I was active in the union (United Mine Workers of America), and in 1979 the Labor Day Association asked me to help put on the celebration. It was in bad shape and had become just a Boonville event. A group of us decided to get more active and see if we could make it better."

The next year wasn't much of a revival.

"The Gibson County Fair had a racial incident between a black kid and the police force. Everybody was on pins and needles. Law enforcement was very concerned about the upcoming Labor Day celebration."

Attempts were made to book the Beach Boys as the featured entertainment act.

"The group's price had come down, and we were negotiating," Fritz recalls. "The Sheriff's Department threw a fit because they felt that such a concert would get out of hand. It sounds laughable now, but it wasn't back then. The Beach Boys ended up going elsewhere."

In 1981, Fritz and the other organizers decided to research the history of the Labor Day gala.

"We were under the impression it began in 1923, but we later found out the start goes all the way back to 1886. The information about the Fox and Paramount newsreel coverage came to the forefront. That got us some publicity, and we saw some forward momentum."

In 1931, Fox Movie Town sent a film crew to the Labor Day event in Princeton, Ind. Throughout that decade and the next, most of the major movie studios came to Southwestern Indiana to cover what had become one of the largest labor celebrations in the country.

"It peaked out around 1950 because of the advent of TV," Fritz says. "People no longer had to go to the movie theater to get their news."

Bill McConnell, 86, was mayor of Princeton from 1960 to 1971.

"People today have no idea of the tremendous crowds the celebration drew back in the old days. You had mayors come from all over to walk in the parade as well as lots of dignitaries from the state level. You had floats from Warrick, Pike and Vanderburgh counties, and one year we even brought in a calliope.

"Emge was big back then, and their employees would dress out in white and with their special caps. It was very colorful."

McConnell was in the hotel business for many years before retiring in 1983.

"The crowds have died down in recent years because people have other things to do. But I have a lot of memories like the guy who cut out a 4-foot log, stuck an ax in it and carried it from downtown to the fairgrounds. That was quite a spectacle."

McConnell also recalls the newsreels taken of the Labor Day bash by the leading film companies of the time.

"One that sticks out was the Pathe movie outfit. There were hundreds and hundreds of coal miners, and their crew did a lot of interviews. You would go to the movie theater just for the purpose of seeing how Princeton was represented in the newsreels."

At the National Archives, Fritz found copies of newsreels that were filmed in Mount Carmel, Ill., Vincennes, Ind., Princeton and Boonville. He incorporated the black-and-white material into a videotape that serves as a history lesson on past celebrations.

Fritz, who is still active in the Labor Day Association, says the Pittston strike in southwest Virginia against the United Mine Workers of America in 1989 and 1990 "helped fire up people for the Labor Day celebration. Little by little, we got other union groups involved, and the festival went back to four days."

The association decides in the fall where the next year's celebration will be held.

"You've got your Evansville and your Boonville and your Princeton, but it could be in Sullivan (Ind.) or in Mount Carmel (Ill.) or even Henderson (Ky.)."

Fritz was a strike coordinator for the United Mine Workers of America in the 1990s. The union "loaned me out" to noted independent filmmaker Barbara Kopple on a video project. He met film producer John Sayles whose "Matewan" was sympathetic to early union organizers.

"Am I a rabble-rouser? I didn't think of myself as a radical. I was more like somebody who saw what needed to be done and did it," he said.