

Day worth celebrating

Holiday, festival hold special meaning for work force

By Jimmy Nesbitt (Contact)
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Go Takayama / Courier & Press Patty Ahrens of Jasper, Ind., waves to her grandson, Donovan Garrison, 2, as he rides the 'Construction Zone' carnival ride at the 122nd annual Labor Day Celebration at the Pike County 4-H Fairgrounds in Petersburg, Ind., on Friday.

PETERSBURG, Ind. — For Charlie Wyatt, Labor Day holds a special place in his heart, ranking second only to Christmas as his favorite holiday.

Wyatt, who has been a member of Local 104 of the United Steelworkers union in Newburgh since 1972, says Labor Day is a time to honor all working men and women of the Tri-State.



Beau Johnson, left, and Logan Clore, both 14 and from Petersburg, share stories while eating hot dogs at the Labor Day celebration.



Go Takayama / Courier & Press Annita Henson of Petersburg, with her youngest son, Austin, 2, talks to her friends Jackie Gray, left, and Sherry Gray, second from left, after they came back from one of the rides during the 122nd annual Labor Day Celebration at the Pike County 4-H Fairground in Petersburg, Ind., on Friday evening. Henson's triplets, from right, Blake, Samuel, and Joel, 7, wait to move on to the next ride with Jackie's son, Tyler Gray, 6.

"That's what this is about," Wyatt said. "Because we all are out working for a living."

Wyatt is president of this year's Labor Day Celebration. The 122nd annual observance kicked off Friday at the Pike County 4-H Fairgrounds with carnival rides, food booths, talent and car shows, gospel singing and a demolition derby.

One of the featured events this year is the Indiana State Picking & Fiddling Championships, scheduled to continue at 10 a.m. today.

Wyatt works with a group of around 10 people who meet monthly to plan the celebration. The celebration is being held in Petersburg this year for the first time since 1965. Wyatt said several other cities, including Evansville, submitted offers to serve as host, but Petersburg's bid was the most attractive.

Men and women from companies regionwide came to town to celebrate the Tri-State's long history with labor unions.

Rick Fitzgerald of Indianapolis organized a booth, promoting pro-union federal legislation with handouts, cup holders, pens and T-shirts.

Fitzgerald is a member of Local 700 of Indianapolis, which represents meat packers and grocery stores employees at companies such as Schnucks.

Today's workers owe a lot of gratitude to the unions of previous generations, who fought companies to establish benefits and standards such as the 40-hour workweek, overtime and paid holidays, Fitzgerald said.

"This is what Labor Day really is about," he said.

A few paces from Fitzgerald's booth, Becky and Joe Stoops rested in the cool breeze of fans in their traveling store, Misty's Fun Shop. The couple sell a variety of doodads, from games to lights to toy guns that shoot pieces of shredded potato.

"We like to have stuff that the kids can enjoy and not get hurt," Becky Stoops said.

The shop is named after the couple's late dog, Misty. They previously traveled with a carnival, but now attend festivals as far away as Georgia.

Becky Stoops said her favorite part of the job is meeting children. She told the story of a boy she met a number of years ago with whom she has kept in touch with as he grew older, eventually graduating from high school and later college. She said the boy, now a man, still sends her letters to keep her abreast of developments in his life.

"That's what I like," Stoops said.