

Bluegrass festival coordinators talk about featured bands

With the bluegrass festival starting Friday, organizers wanted to offer a brief sketch of the bands that will appear throughout the weekend.

Among those returning to the Pickin' On The Plains festival from the area include Larry Booth of Colby, the New Old-Timers of Hill City, Sappa Strings (Wayne and Millie Lauritsen, formerly of Gem) and the Pearce Family of Wallace.

"Each group adds diversity and brings its own unique style so there's something for everyone," said Susan McLemore, one of the coordinators.

Other groups coming and information about when they will perform this weekend follows:

Spontaneous Combustion
Spontaneous Combustion of Kansas City, Mo. is also returning to festival, which will be held at the Thomas County Fairgrounds Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

"The group has been a big crowd pleaser for several years and is back by popular demand," McLemore said.

"They'll be shaking the fairgrounds with their 'Blue-rock,' a very contemporary blend of 60s and 70s rock and roll...at three different performances."

Daytime shows for the group will be on Saturday, at 3:35 p.m. and Sunday at 12:30 p.m.

"A favorite time to catch this band, however, is after dark, when they close Saturday's activities with their show which begins at 10:20 p.m. This late concert is scheduled to wind down at 11 p.m. but if the crowds stay up with them, Spontaneous Combustion is liable to play until who knows when," she said.

The McLemore Family
The McLemore Family, the Colby-based host band for Pickin' on the Plains, will perform at 8:50 p.m. Friday, at 7:10 p.m. Saturday and at 1:40 p.m. Sunday.

For those who haven't made it to the festival yet, Susan and the entire McLemore family said they encourage people to come see what

it's all about.

"There's plenty of shade for the audience under a 4,000-square-foot canopy cooled by water mist," Susan McLemore said.

Cherryholmes
Cherryholmes, a family band from Arizona, will be headliners at the festival. The group was named "Entertainer of the Year" in 2003 by the Society for the Preservation of Bluegrass Music in America.

They have performed on the Grand Ole Opry and are known across the nation as one of the top acts in bluegrass music today, thrilling audiences with their fine musicianship, exceptional vocals and exciting stage show, coordinators

said. The group will perform Saturday at 5:15 p.m. and 8:40 p.m. and again on Sunday at 1 p.m.

The Bluegrass Patriots
The Bluegrass Patriots of Fort Collins, Colo. will also be featured.

The group has been playing together since 1980 with members of the band having developed a distinctive and exciting traditional bluegrass sound and have probably done more than any group in the Midwest to promote bluegrass music and increase its following, coordinators said.

Bill Monroe, the late "Father of Bluegrass" said about the Patriots: "They're a wonderful group, they are fine entertainers, they're good

musicians and they sing wonderful."

Exit 81
Traveling all the way from Russellville, Ark. (which is located on Interstate 40 at exit marker 81), comes the bluegrass group Exit 81.

The band was proud and honored to be selected by the IMBA Talent Committee as one of the showcase bands at the 2003 IMBA World of Bluegrass Trade Show in Louisville, Ky. In addition, Mike Whorton, (mandolin player for the band), was chosen to showcase two of his original songs at the 2003 IMBA Song Showcase.

"On stage or off, Exit 81 plays bluegrass music because we want to share our love of this music with others. We have never considered ourselves professional musicians and never will. If we can make one person's life a little brighter with our music, mission accomplished. All we need is a smile or a toe-tapping and we're right at home," members of Exit 81 said.

Exit 81 will debut in Colby on Friday at 9:45 p.m. followed by two shows on Saturday at 2:45 and 7:50 p.m.

For information, on Pickin' on the Plains, call the Colby Convention and Visitors Bureau at (785) 460-7643. Tickets are available at Colby His Shop, House of Wood Furniture, F&M branch at Dillons and the Colby/Thomas County Chamber of Commerce.

Survey says state's teacher salaries in bottom third of nation

The average salary of Kansas teachers was \$7,741 less last year than those elsewhere in the nation, according to a new survey from the country's second-largest teachers union.

On average, Kansas teachers earned \$38,030 in 2002-03, up 2.6 percent over the previous year, the 1.3-million member American Federation of Teachers said in an annual report. That put the state 39th among the 50 states and Washington, D.C.; Kansas ranked 40th last year.

On average, U.S. teachers earned \$45,771, up 3.3 percent, according to the survey, which relies on data

from state education departments.

"It has a ways to go before it even equals the average national teachers salary," Janet Bass, a Washington, D.C.-based spokeswoman for the AFT, said Wednesday of Kansas. "It's going to have trouble attracting and keeping teachers."

California led the nation in the survey, with teachers earning an average of \$55,693; Michigan and Connecticut followed. South Dakota, with an average pay of \$32,414, was at the bottom of list.

Kansas fared better than most of its neighbors earning more than teachers in Nebraska, Missouri and Oklahoma, which was 50th on the

list. Colorado, however, ranked 22nd.

Still, union officials said Kansas also must compete with states such as Texas, which has an average starting salary about \$5,000 higher.

"Bottom line is, it just goes to show, we remain noncompetitive," said Mark Desetti, a lobbyist with the Kansas-National Education Association.

Gov. Kathleen Sebelius admitted there is room for improvement.

"We owe it to our children to do a better job keeping our talent in the classrooms of Kansas," she said in a statement.

"Taxpayers and parents need to

be assured that school dollars are paying teachers and not funding layers of administrative bureaucracy."

The average salary of a first-year teacher was \$28,855 in Kansas in 2002-03, putting the state 39th in the nation, up two spots from last year. Alaska topped that list with an average starting salary of \$36,035, followed by New Jersey and Washington, D.C. On average, the lowest beginning salary was in Montana, which was \$22,344, according to the AFT numbers.

The cost of living in Kansas hovers around the national average, but Bass said that doesn't justify its

ranking toward the bottom of the list.

"I would hope someone with the job challenges that teachers have, that mid-career they're making more than \$38,000," she said. "We have to place a value on the work that teachers do."

The American Federation of Teachers is the second-biggest teachers union in the country, behind the National Education Association. Aside from public school teachers in grades pre-kindergarten through 12, it also includes paraprofessionals, higher education faculty, and health care workers.

On the national scene

Gay marriage opponents pin hopes on House bill

WASHINGTON (AP)—Unable to ban gay marriage, congressional Republicans are working to contain it, advancing legislation in the House to make sure federal courts don't order states to recognize same-sex unions sanctioned outside their borders.

"When federal judges step out of line, Congress has the responsibility to drop the red flag," Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, said Wednesday as the court-stripping measure cleared the House Judiciary Committee on a near party-line vote of 21-13.

Democrats objected, some strenuously. Rep. Maxine Waters of California called the legislation a political exercise, and Rep. Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin, the first openly gay woman elected to Congress, criticized it as "unnecessary, unconstitutional and unwise."

Even so, GOP officials said the measure likely would be on the House floor next week, and they expressed confidence it would pass.

If so, it would mark a clear victory for gay marriage opponents, who suffered a decisive setback Wednesday in the Senate when the constitutional amendment fell a dozen votes shy of the 60 needed to advance.

Within hours of the vote in which 48 senators voted to advance the measure and 50 to block it, President Bush issued a statement saying he was "deeply disappointed" by the outcome but calling it a temporary setback.

"Activist judges and local officials in some parts of the country are not letting up in their efforts to re-define marriage for the rest of America and neither should defenders of traditional marriage flag in their efforts," he added.

"It is important for our country to

continue the debate on this important issue, and I urge the House of Representatives to pass this amendment," the president said.

Bush wasn't the only one who seemed eager to extend an election-year debate over the issue.

"We know now which senators are for traditional marriage and which ones are not, and by November so will voters in every state," said Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council. "This fight has just begun."

Cheryl Jacques, president of the Human Rights Campaign, which opposed the amendment, expressed little concern about political repercussions. "I think the discussion will continue to play out but I think they played their best hand today and couldn't even get a simple majority," she said of the Senate vote.

Bush's public prodding alone assures the issue will persist into the fall, and Republican strategists have said they hope the issue can be put to use against Sen. John Kerry, the Democratic presidential nominee-in-waiting.

Kerry, D-Mass., skipped the Senate vote. He issued a statement renewing his opposition to the amendment and accusing Republicans of seeking to alter the constitution for political gain.

"The unfortunate result is that the important work of the American people — funding our homeland security needs, creating new and better jobs, and raising the minimum wage — is not getting done," he said.

Bush urged Congress last winter to pass an amendment banning gay marriage, but prospects have never been good that supporters could amass the two-thirds majority in the House and Senate needed to send

the measure to the states for ratification.

Most Democratic lawmakers oppose the proposal, and some conservative Republicans in both houses objected to stepping on terrain traditionally reserved for the states.

The legislation advancing in the House is designed to address the concerns raised by GOP dissidents, and solidify Republican support.

"This simply defers to the states," said Rep. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., chairman of the House Judiciary Committee.

Under the measure, federal courts would be stripped of jurisdiction over federal legislation that gives states the right to decide

whether to recognize same sex marriages.

Republican officials also said it was possible they would stage other votes on gay marriage before the fall elections.

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