

As festival gets older, it's getting bigger; major bluegrass acts make trip to Colby

By Sam Dieter

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Going into its 18th year, the Pickin' On the Plains Bluegrass and Folk Festival attracts bigger and better acts as it rolls along.

"It's gotten bigger and bigger every year," said Leilani Thomas, facilitator of the festival committee.

The festival runs from Friday evening to Sunday morning. Bands will play from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. on Friday. On Saturday, amateur musicians will have a chance to play from 10 a.m. to just before noon. Then the bands will start up again and run until 10:30 p.m.

Sappa Strings will play at 9:30 a.m. Sunday, and at 10 a.m. there will be a "Bluegrass Gospel Homecoming," a musical service which started last year with a performance of a dozen musicians at one time. Rhonda Vincent will wrap up the festival at 11:45 a.m.

The event started out as a small group of friends gathering together every summer to play. As it became more organized, it has grown to include nationally known acts and hundreds of people in the audience.

Thomas, director of the Colby Convention and Visitors Bureau, said she had already sold a box of 500 tickets by the start of this month. Tickets are sold at the Chamber of Commerce office and at the Farmers and Merchants Bank branch in Dillons.

"We expect to have a very big crowd here because of Rhonda Vincent and (the band) Blue Highway," Thomas said.

Along with those headliners, the festival includes some of the same bands that have been showing up year after year, including Sappa Strings, Larry Booth and the McLemores, whose sons, Brandon and Blake, are part of the band Driven.

Over the years, more and more big names have signed up to play, drawing out-of-towners who camp at the fairgrounds in their RVs. The five-man band Blue Highway has two Grammy nominations and has won a Dove



Rhonda Vincent, who grew up in Missouri, has been recognized as a bluegrass musician and singer since 1974, including when she was crowned the official queen of the genre in 2004. Look for her at this year's Pickin' On the Plains Bluegrass and Folk Festival.

Award, considered one of the biggest in gospel music. Vincent has built a reputation as a singer and talented musician who can play several instruments. And like Blue Highway, she has a following around the country.

People connected to the festival get in touch with the groups they meet over the years by talking to those they know in the music world. Thomas gave a lot of credit to Larry Booth's wife, Jo, for building relationships with out-

side groups at events such as the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield.

"She really is the one who does a lot of the getting in touch with the folks and seeing if they'd be interested in coming in," Thomas said.

This has led to bigger and bigger names being attracted to the festival here, Thomas added. It has gotten to the point that the festival books all its acts a year in advance.

As the festival gets a bigger budget each year, she added, it has been able to take on bigger and bigger acts. She said she could not think of any act the festival wanted, but could not get, in part because of the talent of lesser-known groups.

"There're really good bands out there that are newer and really aren't all that expensive yet," she said.

The festival usually approaches a band to ask them to come, Thomas said, although some act have expressed an interest in coming here.

"We do get some of that, like demo tapes and that kind of thing," she said.

This year's festival includes nine groups. Marshal Allen Bailey, the official marshal of Dodge City, and his wife, Cowgirl Janey, will return to emcee the event and probably do some picking as well when they get the chance.

As it grew, the festival has come to include other attractions. Time has been set aside on Saturday for the junior music showcase, when beginning musicians take the stage. It will start at 10 a.m., when young musicians can play, followed by other beginners. There will also be workshops again for people who want to learn to play better. Food vendors will set up shop on the fairgrounds, with other vendors in the 4-H building.

The festival is hard work to organize, but the audience that comes each year makes the effort worth it, Thomas said.

"To see people come back year after year," she added, "it becomes almost like a family."

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