

HILLIARD NORTHWEST NEWS

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OLD HILLIARDFEST

Block party evolved into annual festival

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Block party evolved into annual festival -

The event that came to be known as Old Hilliardfest began in 1985 as a simple block party.

The festival, which bills itself as an old-fashioned street fair, celebrates its 25th anniversary this year with a two-day festival Friday and Saturday, Sept. 10 and 11.

Otie Blankenship, then the owner of Otie's Old Hilliard Inn and Pub, got together with some of the other Main Street merchants to plan an event that would draw shoppers. The result was Old Hilliard Day — a simple get-together of friends and neighbors.

"We were trying to cause some interest or draw some attention to the Old Hilliard area," Blankenship said. "The intent of it was to have a day where we could block off the streets for entertainment. It was just to get some Hilliard residents together and offer some entertainment, sit around and chew the fat and say hello to your neighbors."

This year, the 25th annual Old Hilliardfest will be held along four blocks of Main Street, which recently was revamped with street and landscaping improvements.

Main Street itself has changed significantly over the past 25 years, Blankenship said.

"In those days, we had three or four gift shops, and we were trying to get people to the area," he said. "The IGA (grocery store) was on the corner."

Over the years, planners struggled with the right combination of timing, location and activities, he said.

"It's a lot of trial and error," he said. "We moved it to the first weekend of October, but it got cold. The second weekend of September is one of the best weekends to have it, weather-wise."

In 1993, Blankenship set up subcommittees to help with the planning. New additions to the festival included prize drawings held every hour and booths from local and regional craft vendors. The following year saw the addition of a parade.

The festival continued to expand every year. In 1995, it was moved to the Franklin County Fairgrounds, where a classic car show was held. Hayrides carted people from Main Street to the fairgrounds and back.

The Founding of Hilliard's Celebration was the event's 1996 theme. Old Hilliard Day had a more historical focus, highlighting four houses on the National Register of Historic Places. It was the first year for the Old Hilliard Day 5-mile race.

In 1999, a YMCA fundraiser, Rally in the Alley, was held following Old Hilliard Day.

It wasn't until 2000 that the Hilliard Area Chamber of Commerce took over planning for the event and renamed it Hilliardfest. The Hilliard Civic Association was founded that year to take over the festival.

Ed Daniels, current president of the civic association, began helping to plan the event in 2002.

"I was asked by a friend to volunteer, and I just kept moving up the ladder," he said.

The art-fair portion was added in 2003, moved from its previous date on Labor Day weekend, Daniels said.

In 2005, it was called the Old Hilliard Street Fair. The following year, the entire event was moved to the fairgrounds because of construction on Main Street.

"It got moved down the fairgrounds for two or three years, but that's a little different from being on old Main Street," Blankenship said.

Old Hilliardfest returned to Main Street in 2009 and introduced the Friday night portion of the festival, including Friday Night Lights for teens.

"Last year there was a tremendous crowd up there," Blankenship said. "I think bringing it back to Main Street was a big draw."

Returned in its rightful location with an ideal weather situation, the event drew its largest crowd — more than 7,000, Daniels said.

"I think they did a good job of maintaining it," Blankenship said of the civic association. "I haven't been involved in running it, but it's basically about the same thing we used to do. É It's still going, so that says something."

Daniels said this year's event could be the biggest yet.

"The staff that we've had together for six or seven years has figured out what people like about a street fair or a festival. We try to include everyone," he said.

Blankenship said he definitely looks forward to this year's festival, where he'll sell bologna sandwiches.

"It's a good chance to meet a lot of people," he said.

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