

History of the Smithville Fiddlers' Jamboree: 1972-2018

History of the Smithville Fiddlers' Jamboree: 1972-2017

The Jamboree became a reality as the result of a dream and suggestion from Congressman Joe L. Evins to Berry C. Williams that consideration be given to gather a group of area musicians to stage a country music show in Smithville, Tennessee. After much work and planning by Berry C. Williams, he carried out the suggestion of Congressman Evins and on July 1, 1972, the first Smithville Jamboree became a reality. The Jamboree has been held every year since on the Friday and Saturday nearest the 4th of July. The first two-day Jamboree attracted 714 musicians representing 16 states with an audience of 8,000 estimated. Today's audience is estimated to be, 40,000-50,000 people coming and going over the course of the two-day event.

T. Tommy of the Grand Ole Opry and Tom Perryman from Radio Station WVTS were the first masters of ceremonies with WJLE's Ralph Vaughn and Charley Thompson as back-up announcers. Charley Thompson was the coordinator of the first Jamboree.

In 1974, a broader tribute to the Appalachian art and culture was given when 100 artisans and craftsmen were added from 12 states. This has grown to over 300 participants who sell and display authentic pioneer and contemporary crafts under the high standards set by Mrs. Lavelle Smith, Director of Crafts for 21 years and presently by Emma Jean Dudney.

In 1984, James G. "Bobo" Driver, Registrar and Director of Contestants, showed his commitment to preserving traditional country music when he added a new competitive category – "The National Championship for Country Musician Beginners, Ages 12 and Under." This provided an opportunity for young folks to see who was champion with their chosen instrument. This category was originally sponsored by the "Cracker Barrel Restaurants." Cracker Barrel remains the sponsor today. This same year the Jamboree was featured in the "National Geographic Traveler" as well as numerous other nationally-known magazines.

The original stage was small, made from plywood with no backdrop. As years passed, a rustic backdrop was used. In 1985 Lloyd Cole designed and built a portable stage for the contestants with a typical store front displaying Coca-Cola signs, curtains, and lamps. In 1996, a new stage was purchased by money from a grant sponsored by Senator Tommy Burks and Representative Frank Buck. The stage is assembled for use year after year.

In 1989, the Jamboree was incorporated by the help of Neil Dudney, now the Coordinator of the Jamboree.

Since the beginning, the Jamboree has been recorded by television, by several colleges, and even the British Broadcasting Company in 1973. WCTE T.V.-Channel 22 of Cookeville televises the Jamboree annually. Portions of the Jamboree are rebroadcast throughout the year. In 1988, WCTE was linked to public television by the Southern Education Communication Associates making it possible for the Jamboree to be shown all over the country.

For the past sixteen years, the Jamboree has been selected as a "Top 20 Tourist Favorite" by the Southern Tourism Society which includes the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Virginia. The event is also listed by the American Business Associates as one of the top 100 tourist events in North America.

In 1992, the Smithville Jamboree and Crafts Festival was rated fourth-best in the U.S. by "Vacation" magazine for summer vacations. The magazine described the Jamboree as a family event that "is among the top-rated bluegrass, folk, and Appalachian music competitions in the nation drawing 140,000 visitors over two days from as far as Australia."

The first Jamboree consisted of 13 categories of competition with prize money of \$1,200. Today there are 31 categories with over \$12,000 in prize money.

The Jamboree doesn't just happen. It is well-planned and organized by the local merchants and businessmen and women who are dedicated and committed to preserving the heritage of country and bluegrass music and the culture of arts and crafts. The sponsoring organizations are the Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Merchants Association, Rotary Club, and the Smithville Fire Department. The Jamboree is governed by a Board of Directors, and from the Board of Directors, a working committee is appointed to oversee each area of operation of the Jamboree. The Jamboree is financed by contestants and craftsmen registration fees, souvenir booklet advertisers, sales of souvenir booklets, etc. This is a non-profit organization, and Board members and committee members serve without pay. Annual expenses exceed \$50,000.00,

As the result of the dreams and determination of Congressman Joe L. Evins and Berry C. Williams, the Jamboree continues the preservation of country, folk, bluegrass, and Appalachian music and Appalachian arts and crafts. In recognition of their dedication, the beautiful Joe L. Evins Appalachian Arts and Crafts Center was built overlooking Center Hill Lake. The Center is dedicated to the training of self-reliant and self-supporting craftspeople and to preserving the unique qualities of the rich crafts of the Appalachian region.

Each year, as a reminder of the great contribution Berry C. Williams has made to our area, a Junior and Senior Fiddle-Off Grand Champion Title and the Berry C. Williams Trophy Award is given the Grand Champion Fiddler.

In 1993 the James G. "Bobo" Driver family made possible a trophy to be given to the outstanding Overall Grand Champion Beginner Fiddler Musician.

In 1997, the Smithville Jamboree, became "The Official Tennessee and National Jamboree and Crafts Festival and National Championship of Country Musician Beginners, the Smithville Fiddlers' Jamboree and Crafts Festival was among the very first and today the "Granddaddy of 'em all!"