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Erick's Annual Honey Festival: Bee There

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ERICK'S ANNUAL

What do you get when you cross a bee with a lion? A Bee-a-Lion, naturally, and a prize-winning float a few years back that promoted the Erick Lions Club and the Erick Honey Festival all in one package.

The impressive Bee-a-Lion float is just one example of the way Erick folks put their hearts into the sweetest festival in Oklahoma. A sampling of parade entries in any given year might include California raisins coming out of their box to sing "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," horses and a buggy driven by Ervin Stehr of Clinton, a clown named Lynn pulling a wagonload of children known as the Honey Bunch, or a beehive swarming with a bevy of bees including the Queen Bee, Little Honey Bee, and Little Stinger contestants.

At age six, Erick's festival is a healthy youngster and still growing. However, few know the full extent of travail that went into its inception and birth. "Our biggest obstacle was getting the town in favor of the festival in the first place," Maxine Wilhelm says.

Maxine, along with her husband, Olin, operated the Wilhelm Honey Farm since 1962. From the very first year, they had what they termed Open House, during which they displayed candles and arrangements and conducted special tours. July was the month chosen that first year, but Oklahoma summers are not conducive to comfort, and the next year November was decided upon. Maxine felt that November would not only provide cooler temperatures but that it was close enough to Christmas to attract holiday shoppers.

As the years passed, the crowds grew and the Wilhelms' vision began to grow with it. They had learned through a beekeeper's newsletter about a city-wide honey festival in Lebanon, Ohio that attracted festival-goers from all over the United States. Why not attempt the same thing in Erick, Oklahoma?

Maxine says, "I would tell individual members of the Chamber of Commerce, "If you would work with us on this, it could be a really big event."

Reception from these small-town friends and business associates, while sympathetic, was not overwhelmingly in favor of what seemed a monumental and perhaps even

impossible venture. After all, they pointed out, Lebanon abounded with beekeepers; Erick had only one. Lebanon, as county seat, boasted over 7,000 population; Erick's was just over 1,200.

So Maxine and Olin's request for an official city-wide festival was shelved again for lack of enthusiasm. "On our twentieth year," Maxine says, "we got mad!" She laughs, so it is understood that they were not angry in the usual sense of the word, but simply more determined than ever.

There was a visit to a Chamber meeting. As fate would have it, the president at that time, Lane Chaney, was young and energetic and enthusiastic. "He picked up the idea and ran with it," Maxine says. "The rest is history."

Although no official statistics are available, it has been estimated that from six to seven thousand attended the festival last year (1987). There were perhaps two thousand fewer in 1988 because of the strained economy, but enthusiasm did not waver and festival-goers were not disappointed. There were scheduled events to please every taste — from the Parade and the Antique and Classic Car Show to the Honey Cooking Contest, the Quilt Show and Sale, the special exhibits at both the 100th Meridian Museum and the J. D. Martin Honey Farm, the three-act play presented by the Red Carpet

HONEY FESTIVAL: BEE THERE

By Margie Snowden North

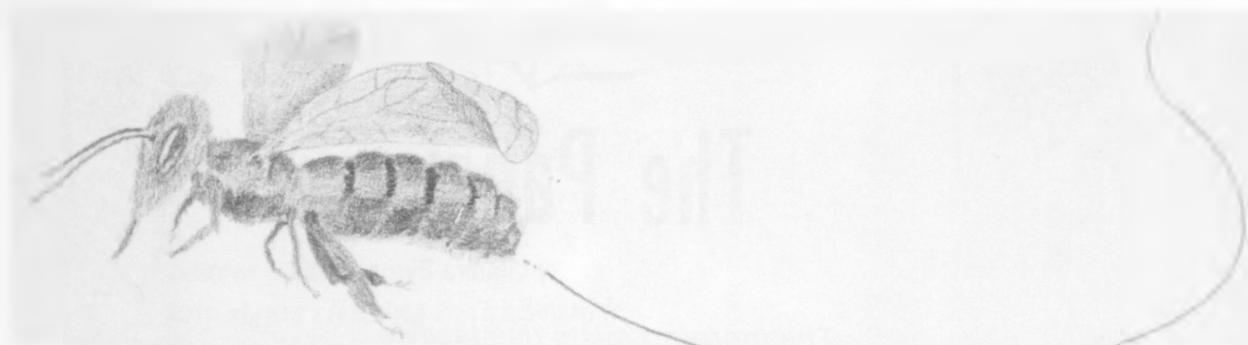


ILLUSTRATION BY KEDRON SMITH

Community Theater of Elk City, and, of course the ever-popular Arts and Crafts Show which has grown from 25 booths the first year to 90 this year.

Present Chamber president, Lonnie Olson, like Lane Chaney, is young and enthusiastic and doesn't mind expending energy on behalf of the festival. He and Chamber secretary, Glenda West, sent press releases to 40 area newspapers including THE AMARILLO DAILY NEWS and THE DAILY OKLAHOMAN. They invited TV coverage and talked with at least two magazine editors about feature stories. The results have not all panned out; "If we can't prove to the news media that it's big, they won't cover it," Lonnie says.

But some publicity has been achieved and word of mouth has played a big part in the success story. Consequently, on the second weekend in November of each year, activity buses and numerous other out-of-county (and some out-of-state) vehicles can be seen pulling into Erick and spilling out eager festival-goers, all of whom soon find that Erick's Annual Honey Festival is a honey of a place to be.

(Side Bar) In January of 1988, the Wilhelms sold their honey farm to J. D. Martin, OU track and field coach for 25 years, and one of Erick's favorite sons. On the Friday evening

before the 1988 festival was to begin the next day, J. D. and his wife, Vina, and her son and his wife, Rick and Teri Gardner, were doing last-minute chores when a calamity occurred. Just as they finished cleaning one end of the Candle Shop, the other end was struck by lightning, which caused a fire that took the Erick Volunteer Fire Department three hours to bring under control.

Although the new Honey Farm owners lost two rooms full of Christmas wreaths, candles and arrangements, and a night's sleep, they participated fully in the festival the following day. They greeted visitors who were quick to understand their predicament, enjoyed brisk honey sales, manned a booth at the Arts and Crafts Show, and won First in Theme Float in the parade with J. D. depicting the harried beekeeper trying to protect his "bees" and keep the honey bear from stealing his money. They began rebuilding and reorganizing immediately after the fire and are eagerly awaiting next year's festival. ■

MARGIE SNOWDEN NORTH of Erick keeps busy with a variety of activities, including being "idea girl" and regular writer for WESTVIEW.