

Annual Siloam Springs Heritage Festival June 27, 2009

hosted by the Siloam Springs Museum

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The History of the Siloam Springs Heritage Festival

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Celebrating the ways of times gone by has long been a tradition in Siloam Springs, a Northwest Arkansas town near the Oklahoma border, whose historic downtown and tree-filled parks make it easy to forget the heavy traffic speeding by on nearby Highway 412. The Siloam Springs downtown is a National Register Historic District. Most buildings in the district were built between 1894 and 1930.

This year (2009), the **Annual Siloam Springs Heritage Festival** will take place in Twin Springs Park and the First United Methodist Church's Fellowship Hall, just a stone's throw from the park and directly across the street from the beautiful, turn-of-the-century mansion that once belonged to Fred Bartell. This family-friendly event celebrates Siloam Springs history, community, regional and American history, and traditional lifeways.

The tradition of having a citywide celebration on or around June 24 started 129 years ago. Siloam Springs was platted in March of 1880, and the local Masons' celebration of St. John's Day on June 24, 1880, became a citywide celebration of the new town. Siloam Springs was incorporated on December 22, 1881, but kept June 24 as the date for the **Annual Picnic and Homecoming**.

The June 24 Annual Picnic and Homecoming has been celebrated in a variety of ways over the years. Music has been an important part of the event from the beginning, with performances by community bands and choirs. At one time the parade was considered "the heart of the day." A broadside for the 1917 celebration boasts a hot air balloon ascension and parachute leap twice a day. At that time it was billed as the "Biggest event in Northwest Arkansas average annual attendance 15,000."

The carnival is fondly remembered. Photos in the Siloam Springs Museum's collection show the Ferris wheel arriving in town for several years. In some years Broadway Street was blocked off and the rides were set up in the street. Merchants held sidewalk sales and politicians gave speeches. The whole town took part in the festivities.

The 1952 celebration, dubbed "Silver Strike Jubilee" and "Frontier Days," was probably the grandest. This event celebrated the opening of the Pluss Poultry plant (now Simmons plant #1) and also celebrated all Siloam Springs' industries and their economic contributions to the town. People came from all around the region to see the dunking booth, square dancers, the frontier false front town in Twin Springs Park and the parade. The parade featured a huge number of stages, surreys and other horse-drawn rigs, but the highlight of the Jubilee was the silver dollar payroll

Universal International filmed this celebration and the payroll distribution for use on a newsreel. The newsreel including this footage is no longer available, but the Siloam Springs Museum did get a copy of another film made at that time, "Siloam Springs: The City with a Future to Share," which includes some Silver Strike Jubilee footage, and some home movies of the Jubilee.

In 2004 the Siloam Springs Museum was awarded a grant from the Department of Arkansas Heritage to fund a special event for Arkansas Heritage Month, which is in May. Each year the theme for the Arkansas Heritage Month changes. That year's theme was: "Arkansas Heritage: Find It On Main Street." The event planned by museum staff was: **"A Stroll Down Memory Lane,"** and it took place May 15.

It took place in Siloam Springs' downtown historic district and featured **living history performances** by then Mayor "Moose" Van Poucke, Jr. (who portrayed 1903 Siloam Springs mayor Col. D. N. Steele) and Johnny Lee (who portrayed Jim Davis, Siloam Springs' police chief in the 1950s); a **walking tour of the historic downtown; performances of traditional music** by Siloam Springs residents Bill and Deanna Lisk (a.k.a. Two Cents Worth) and old time banjo playing by Clarke Buehling of Fayetteville.

Another highlight was a **Victorian Tea Party**, catered by Suzy Ferguson, that was held in the Sager Creek Arts Center adjacent to Twin Springs Park. Olive Loucks, a well known local woodcarver sold her wares and **demonstrated wood carving techniques** in Twin Springs Park and Mary Ellen Wilkinson, a professional **story teller** who lives just over the border in Oklahoma, entertained children and adults alike with riveting tales.

The "Stroll Down Memory Lane" event was such a success that the Siloam Springs Museum decided to make it an annual heritage festival that would take place on a Saturday near the traditional June 24 celebration.

In 2005, the first Annual Siloam Springs Heritage Festival was held in Twin Springs Park and the Sager Creek Arts Center. It offered all the activities that took place during the May 2004 festivities, and then some! **It was called the Siloam Springs Annual Picnic & Rodeo and took place Saturday, June 18.**

The Siloam Springs Annual Rodeo and Parade, hosted by the Siloam Springs Riding Club, has taken place every third Saturday of June for more than 45 years. **The Annual Picnic planners joined forces with the Siloam Springs Rodeo that year to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the founding of Siloam Springs.** A new activity was added in 2005; a children's historical costume competition. The costume categories were: Native American, Frontier, Civil War, Victorian, and Ozark Mountain. **Becca Bacon Martin, the entertainment editor for the Northwest Arkansas Morning News,** played the role of Pearl Starr, the daughter of the infamous "Outlaw Queen" Belle Starr. Pearl gave birth to the first of her four children in Siloam Springs and went on to become a well known manager, or "madame" of a Fort Smith house of prostitution.

The second Annual Siloam Springs Heritage Festival took place in Twin Springs Park on Saturday, June 17, 2006. The Tired Iron of the Ozarks club put up a fascinating and noisy, attention-getting display of vintage and antique engines, vehicles and equipment. Flintknappers joined in the festivities as well. Using flint and antlers they demonstrated how arrowheads, scrapers and other stone tools were made in the prehistoric era. Sunny weather prevailed after some morning showers. An estimated 1250+ people came to the festival.

In 2006, the informally structured Heritage Festival Planning Committee, which consisted of paid and volunteer staff from the Siloam Springs Museum, Main Street Siloam Springs, Inc., the Sager Creek Arts Center and Siloam Springs Parks & Recreation Department, decided to become a 501(c)3 nonprofit heritage organization in its own right. The name chosen for this organization was the **Siloam Springs Heritage Conservancy.** All of the planning committee members became board members and new officers were elected.

Cynthia K. Lee, the Siloam Springs Museum's full-time community outreach coordinator, stepped down as the Heritage Festival Planning Committee's president after serving in that role from 2004, and Jennifer Ludemann was voted in as the Siloam Springs Heritage Conservancy's president. Suzy Ferguson continued on in the position of vice president and Marie Ent assumed the duties of secretary. **The Siloam Springs Heritage Conservancy hosted the 2007 third Annual Siloam Springs Heritage Festival.**

The 2007 the Annual Siloam Springs Heritage Festival participants and visitors had to contend with heavy rain all morning and into the early afternoon. The rain location for vendors and musicians was the Community Building, located almost a block and a half from Twin Springs Park, the festival's usual venue.

In 2008 the Siloam Springs Heritage Conservancy was once again the official host of the Annual Siloam Springs Heritage Festival. Don Warden, the Siloam Springs Museum director, and Suzy Ferguson assumed the primary responsibilities connected with coordinating the festival. **They decided to cancel the festival that year.** It had been scheduled for June 21, 2008. **The decision was later made to dissolve the Siloam Springs Heritage Conservancy and to have the Siloam Springs Museum become the sole hosting organization for the Siloam Springs Annual Heritage Festival.**

The 2009 Annual Siloam Springs Heritage Festival is taking place Saturday, June 27, from 9 a.m. To 5:30 p.m. in Twin Springs Park and the nearby First United Methodist Church's Fellowship Hall. **It is the first Annual Siloam Springs Heritage Festival that has been hosted solely by the Siloam Springs Museum,** even though museum staff have always played a strong role in planning and supporting the festival.

This year's Heritage Festival attractions include: a lively line-up of traditional music performances; frontier re-enactors engaging in fighting and feuding; living history performances; a guided walking tour of the historic downtown; arts and crafts vendors and demonstrators; a tasty variety of foods, snacks and beverages and much more. Please check our Heritage Festival website at: www.siloamspringsheritagefestival.org and click on the "2009 attractions" link to keep current on our latest festival participants and activities.