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Fergus Highland Games now 72 years young and going strong

By Constance Scrafield

The Thoms family of Fergus, among three generations, have racked up more than 100 years of volunteer service to the Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games.

There is a tradition in a town like Fergus, where the annual Highland Games are an important part of community interest, that families and individuals do volunteer considerable time of their lives to the three-day event that means so much to them and the whole region.

For the last 71 years, pipers, drummers and dancers bring their music; strong men and women come to compete in events of throwing, lifting, tug-of-warring. Living history to watch, enjoy and admire for the four days this weekend: today (Thursday) with a parade in Fergus downtown; Friday, to Sunday for the events. The participants come from all over this area, the province and the country.

There is news from Lee Puddephatt, handling the media for the Festival, that ?this year, the festival has been completely re-branded!?

?There's a new logo, new energy that is modern, fresh,? she went on.

?We collaborated with Intrigue Media to alleviate the old problems with up-to-date technology,? she said. ?Now, you can use your cell phone to see the whole schedule and all the details of the festival.?

?The Highland Herald (the former publication of the Fergus Scottish Festival) is gone. There is a 16-panel brochure pullout with the schedule and very little else ? thank you to the volunteers and a message from the Mayor ? that sort of thing,? she said. ?Simplify, clean it up ? it's good for the sustainability of the festival. We want to bring in younger people too, and this is their way of getting information.?

Added to this is a fabulous line-up of entertainers this weekend. The Red Hot Chili Peppers are back this year as entertainment after the Tattoo Friday evening in the main field.

Over the weekend, Scottish and Celtic groups: Albannach, Rhythmfoot, Shenanigans and Town Pants bring as wide a difference among them as playing Celtic music can be imagined. Tommy Leadbeater, Tony McManus, Kyle Charron, Daniel Carr, Gillebride MacMillan, David Leask, Bob McLean and Bill Bridges are all the individuals offering their considerable talents to the list of entertainment. Quite an impressive roll call. They play at various venues throughout the festival grounds and downtown Fergus at various times.

The very much updated website, www.fergusscottishfestival.com, tells the whole story succinctly, with lots of clarity and definition in the way of a polished and enlightened website, very easy to manoeuvre and understand.

Puddephatt told of growing up in Fergus, where her house backed onto Victoria Park, an early home to the Fergus Highland Games.

?My Scottish grandfather came down from Collingwood every year for the games,? she said. ?They were always a big part of our lives. I've been going since I was three.?

The festival truly has deep meaning for the community.

?It is really a good way to celebrate the contribution the Scots made to this country,? she said.

She explained that while she was at the University of Guelph, she discovered that the archives there hold the largest collection of Scottish history outside the U.K. The Scottish culture, carried here by many, from early pioneers to recent newcomers, has been a lasting influence down the generations. So, all across this land, the kilts do swing, the pipes do blow and strong arms still throw the caber and pull on ropes in opposing directions from other strong arms.

Puddephatt's insistence on the media updating for the festival makes an interesting contrast and balance to the historical and ancient traditions that are all essential within the Games.

The musicians demonstrate the same theme of blending the ancient and the new, taking their bagpipes to exciting levels of music, calling it Celtic Rock.

Rob Thoms, with 32 years volunteering for the festival, had a moment for a chat as well. His father Bill has been volunteering with the festival for 52 years and still assists at the Games. With Rob's sister and his two children coming on board, too, that makes the 100 years of a family's dedication to the festival.

For Thoms, the hands-on aspect of the Board of Directors and all the people involved over the years is important.

?We need to be involved as more than just overseeing the games,? he commented.

He had high praise for the many volunteers, adding that there were still places where volunteers could work, even now.

Their love for the Games goes back to their roots and that is as good a reason for passion as any.

The Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games are on at the Centre Wellington Community Sportsplex, 550 Belsyde Ave. E., Fergus.
A shuttle bus travels to and fro between the festival grounds and the centre of Fergus. All the information is thoroughly presented at www.fergusscottishfestival.com