History of the Rattlesnake Festival

By Gary S. Hatrick

The Rattlesnake Festival has drawn thousands each year for a weekend of Florida fun. Though it has undergone many changes, the festival continues to fulfill the original purposes to entertain and to give to the community.

The festival has something for everyone, from live snake and reptile shows to wooden gopher turtle races, hundreds of craft booths, children’s activities, live entertainment, the five-mile Rattlesnake Run as well as a variety of foods and refreshments.

The first Rattlesnake Festival was held as a community project of the San Antonio Junior Chamber of Commerce. One of the founders of the festival, Eddie Herrmann recalled the beginnings of the festival. “The Jaycees were sponsoring something called “Fun Day” and it had run it course so we needed something to replace Fun Day,” recounted Herrmann with a grin. “So Willy Post had just enlisted as a member of the Jaycees and he said, ‘Why don’t you boys have a rattlesnake round-up? They’ll be coming from miles around. He said put a girl in a bikini in a glass case and let the spiders crawl all over her. People will love it.’”

Herrmann and some of the others decided that Post had a good idea, except for the girl in the glass case part, and the wheels started rolling. “I thought rattlesnakes live in gopher holes and we could involve gophers (gopher turtles, that is) and the gophers could be something the kids could play with and we’d have the adults involved with the rattlesnakes. We ended up having the first event November the fourth, 1967.”
The festival included a snake show, food, education displays and arts and crafts. Arts and crafts had to be strictly hand-made in those days. Later, at Herrmann’s suggestion a fixed date was chosen to hold the festival. “Father Ernest Schultz was a weatherman and he researched which weekend was historically the best weekend for weather and we came up with the third Saturday of October,” Herrmann said.

In the mid-70s, the Jaycees gave up their charter and the festival would have come to an end, but Herrmann, Jack Vogel, another founder, and the others wouldn’t hear of it and R.A.G.E (Rattlesnake and Gopher Enthusiasts) was established as the sponsoring organization.

In the early days, the festival was a rattlesnake round-up with people capturing rattlesnakes to enter competitions for size, weight and appearance although no rattlesnakes were slaughtered. Real gopher turtles were also used for the races. Children and businesses would paint them and compete for trophies. In the mid-eighties, however, environmental concerns changed all that.

The day of environmental awareness was coming upon us,” said Vogel. “The first indication was when the gopher was listed as a species of special concern. The game commission had jurisdiction and they started sending game wardens to the festival, not harassing us but watching. Of course they were watching the snake things too.”

Festival planners tried to make the event more wildlife friendly, but eventually changed the festival from the emphasis of a rattlesnake round-up to an educational event. Live gopher turtles were no longer permitted, but a track with wooden turtles coaxed by ropes invented by Herrmann was used for the races. The same set-up is used today.
Notable stories and happenings are too numerous to mention, but the local and soon to be famous, Bellamy Brothers, were the featured entertainers in the festival’s second year, not long before their number one hit “Let Your Love Flow.” Another event, the Rattlesnake Run, was added in 1979.

The Rattlesnake and Gopher Enthusiasts (R.A.G.E., Inc.) managed and grew the event successfully until 2012. Festivals were now numerous and the competition for vendors and attendance was fierce. Volunteers also became scarce and R.A.G.E. planned to discontinue the event, but in 2013, a cooperative of Rotary Clubs called the East Side Eight rescued the event as R.A.G.E had done many years before and ran the event to benefit local charities. Later the San Antonio Rotary Club assumed sole responsibility for the festival. After the 50th festival in 2016, however, the San Antonio Rotary Club announced that the 51st festival was cancelled, and the annual event discontinued. Local news sources reported the decision, and an era appeared to be over.

The Thomas Promise Foundation, however, asked for, and gained permission to resurrect the venerable event. The Thomas Promise Foundation administers a food program providing weekend meals for qualified students in all east Pasco County schools and beyond. For many, that food is their major source of nutrition for the weekend. They also help with field trips, school clothes, and sports expenses for kids that might otherwise do without. They felt it could be a good fundraiser for the foundation.
Like the phoenix rising from the ashes, Thomas Promise Foundation brought the event back to life and the 51st Annual San Antonio Rattlesnake Festival was held in 2017 at the San Antonio City Park. With a new lease on life, the Rattlesnake Festival earned enough that year to provide 43,000 meals to needy children.

Eddie Herrmann, by then ill with age, had received the news that the festival would end with sadness but had accepted that all things must come to an end, said his son Eric Herrmann, but he was thrilled to hear later that the festival would continue through the Thomas Promise Foundation. Herrmann was admitted to hospice care a few days before the third weekend in October and as children played on the Gopher Racetrack of his design, Hermann, surrounded by his loving family, passed away just a few hours after the 51st festival had closed for the first day, Oct. 21, 2017. He was 71 and Eric said, he was happy that his legacy was in good hands.

Thomas Promise Foundation representatives had intended to keep the festival the San Antonio City Park, but after the 2017 festival, they realized that the logistics of the San Antonio City Park would not allow for the growth and change necessary to keep pace with the multiple festivals of the times. They met with Clark Converse, General Manager of the Pasco County Fairgrounds and a deal was struck to bring the festival to that site. The fairgrounds provided needed parking, space, and the opportunity to extend the hours and activities of the festival and it was only 4.4 miles from the original site.
The decision was controversial as expected, but since the festival had been discontinued before the Thomas Promise Foundation took it over, the foundation felt justified in making changes that would allow the festival to flourish. It was also not a new idea - former R.A.G.E. board members said that the decision to move the festival to the fairgrounds had been considered by R.A.G.E. more than once in the past.

The foundation chose to keep as much tradition as possible by keeping the traditional weekend and naming the wooden gopher turtle races The Eddie Herrmann Gopher Turtle Race. At the city commission’s request it dropped San Antonio from the name, but kept the Rattlesnake Run at the park.

So, The Rattlesnake Festival lives on! It has changed over the years, but the basic festival purpose, to educate and to raise funds for the community and especially children, is still the same. Thomas Promise Foundation organizers feel that Herrmann, Vogel, Post, Fr. Schultz and the others who helped launch the festival will be proud of what has become of their “Fun Day.”

(Gary S. Hatrick is a 25+ year veteran of the Rattlesnake Festival. He has watched these events unfold having served as a children’s entertainment vendor, a newspaper vendor, a reporter, the Rattlesnake Festival official photographer, the Miss Rattler Pageant official photographer, a R.A.G.E. board member, A Zephyrhills Rotary Club member (part of East Side Eight organizers in 2013), and now, a Thomas Promise Foundation contributor/Rattlesnake Festival organizer. The first portion of the history comprising the first two pages was written Oct. 13, 2010 at the request of Eddie Herrmann and his family after a first-hand interview conducted with Herrmann and others at “Ralph’s” San Ann Liquor and Lounge. It is republished with few changes other than updating the first two paragraphs.)