

All things Celtic being celebrated in Olcott

Against the backdrop of Lake Ontario, thousands are expected to converge this weekend to celebrate all things Celtic at the 10th annual Niagara Celtic Heritage Festival and Highland Games in Krull Park.

The festivities run from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Saturday and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday and boast three stages with continuous entertainment.

The festival will showcase singers, musicians, dancers, athletes, re-enactors, clans and vendors with a wide variety of offerings.

"This is one of the fastest-growing festivals in the area," said Victoria Banks, a volunteer since the festival's inception a decade ago. "We have seen many festivals die out. But we've been very lucky to survive in the festival world, because it's tough competition. We rely on the sales of this year to support next year's festival.

"We've grown [by] about a thousand people each year and can expect up to 10,000 for the whole weekend," she added.

The festival's centerpiece is music, provided by entertainers from throughout North America. The weekend boasts rock, folk and traveling musicians; step and sword dancers; and bagpipers.

This year's Saturday night "Ceilidh," or party, which begins at 5:30, features Penny Whiskey, the McMahon School of Irish Danc and Vancouver's the Town Pants. The Grand Finale Concert at 3:30 p.m. Sunday stars Celtic rockers Seven Nations from Florida.

The festival will launch the sale of the "Discovering Celtic Cuisine" cookbook and will also offer baking competitions for professionals and amateurs alike.

On Saturday only, a limited number of ticketholders will enjoy a unique medieval dining experience under a private dining tent, produced by the 13th Realm.

The local tourist schooner Black Pearl will play a role in the festivities this year, delivering "Bonnie Prince Charles" to the shore at 11 o'clock each morning, as part of the re-enactment of the Jacobite Rebellion. The re-enactment focuses on the Scottish rebellion of 1745. Led by Prince Charles Edward Stuart, the rebellion effectively ended at the Battle of Culloden -- the last land battle fought in the United Kingdom.

Highlighting the festival, the Highland Games include professional, amateur and open categories for both men and women and will feature caber pole toss, sheaf toss and stone throw. The centuries-old "strongmen" competitions take place both Saturday and Sunday.

In addition, descendants of the original families of Scotland, known as "clans," will celebrate their history on Clan Row, while visitors may stop in on the new Heritage Row to learn the living history of all Celts, with the help of numerous displays and demonstrations. Local historians will be present to aid in the search for familial ties.

Also look for falconry and birds of prey, dog agility demonstrations and pony rides, as well as a host of other children's activities.

Banks said the festival draws heavily from Rochester, Buffalo and Southern Ontario but will also attract many patrons and vendors from Ohio, the New England states and beyond.

"There are some Irish and Scottish festivalgoers who travel up and down the East Coast and will finish up the summer with us here," Banks said.

"It's wonderful that we've been able to do this for 10 years now," said Rebecca Schweigert, another member of the Niagara Celtic Heritage Society, which sponsors the event. "It's just overwhelming, the amount of support that we've gotten from the people of Western New York -- to grow as big as we've grown, and as fast as we've grown."

For more information, go to www.NiagaraCeltic.com or call 778-5730.

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