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Celtic Festival returns Sept. 14-15 in Lockport



Provided photos: The Niagara Regional Police Pipes and Drums will be performing at the upcoming Niagara Celtic Heritage Festival.

By Ginny Kropf, correspondent Posted 3 September 2024 at 7:06 am

LOCKPORT – The Niagara Celtic Heritage Festival will celebrate its 23rd year on Sept. 14 and 15 at Niagara County Fairgrounds.

Founded by Philip Banks of Burt, the event has proven increasingly popular every year and annually features more than 2,500 participants from throughout Western New York, including Orleans County. These include clans, musicians, pipers, dancers, vendors and artisans.

Banks said he and his wife Beth started the event in 2001 as a grassroots economic development project, after reading about something similar in Readers Digest, done in a small town in Texas.

“We had been long time attendees of the now defunct Amherst Scottish Festival and Ontario, near Lake Huron, several times and saw people celebrating their Celtic heritage,” Banks said. “We were from the Olcott area and knew that could be a good venue for an event. Beth is Scottish/German and I am Irish/German. We could have never known this festival would become so big we’d have to relocate to the Niagara County Fairgrounds in 2019.”

Banks said volunteers have been recruited from Orleans County since the festival’s founding, and at least several dozen volunteers annually come from Orleans County. In addition, several hundred Orleans County residents buy tickets for the event, he said.

The Niagara County Celtic Heritage Festival this year will welcome an impressive lineup of massed pipe bands, in addition to as many as 30 Scottish groups to the Clan Village, making it the largest gathering of family reps in New York State, according to Banks.

A total of eight pipe bands and one brass band from across the local region will perform in ceremonies, individual concerts and massed bands on both days.

Banks invites everyone to join the thousands of people who attend each year, when “everyone is Celtic for the weekend.”

On Saturday, the Gordon Highlanders Pipes & Drums, 96th Highlanders Pipes & Drums, MacKenzie Highlanders Pipes & Drums and the Celtic Spirit Pipe Band will entertain. The D Company Gordon Highlanders were formed in 1837 and is the oldest continuing organization in the city of Buffalo. The 96th Highlanders of Jamestown are proud to represent their region in and around Chautauqua County.

The MacKenzie Highlanders from Youngstown have roots dating back to 1913. Their tradition continues as they offer free lessons to all interested in becoming a member. Celtic Spirit is also from Niagara County and mixes traditional pipe music with various modern instruments in unique arrangements.



The Glengary Bhoys also will be featured during the festival.

On Sunday, visitors can enjoy the Niagara Regional Police Pipes & Drums, the Rochester Scottish Pipes & Drums, the Buffalo Niagara Scotia Pipes & Drums and the Feadan Or Pipe Band. The Niagara Regional Police are from Niagara Falls, Ontario, and perform across Canada and the United States, both as a concert and a competition band. The Rochester Scottish are the City’s Celtic Ambassadors to the world. The band has a broad repertoire playing both traditional martial and modern tunes.

One of Western New York’s newer pipe bands is Buffalo Niagara Scotia from Tonawanda, and is dedicated to strengthening Scottish pride in the region. They welcome newcomers of all ages. Feadan Or from the Finger Lakes promotes traditional Scottish bagpiping, drumming and dancing, in performances and through teaching.

Also on Sunday, to give the feel of a “military tattoo,” the festival will welcome the Mt. St. Mary’s Academy Marching Band from Kenmore. Wearing kilts, they are the only fully instrumented all-girls’ marching band in New York state.

The clan group practice dates back to the 1700s when so many people in Scotland were forced to leave their homeland for other countries. Each clan can trace its lineage to ancestors from Scotland, dating back many centuries. In fact, Banks said most clans still have a hereditary chief in Scotland.

The clans display all sorts of materials related to their families, including their tartans, and answer questions about their generations of ancestors. During the weekend, visitors can experience the sight of them marching in the opening ceremonies, see the “Calling of the Clans,” when torches light the ceremonial bonfire, and take part in the Memorial Service to honor their members who have passed since the last festival.

Each group was formed for charitable, religious, educational and/or scientific purposes to support the family name, with all the sub-group names and variations. Typically, their mission is to protect cultural, artistic and historic endeavors and acquire, preserve, restore and act as custodians for historical records, relics and heirlooms.

They encourage the preservation of historical buildings and landmarks related to the family in countries throughout the world. The individual societies are divided into regions, with hundreds or thousands of members active throughout North America, Australia and other countries. Any person who is of the clan lineage or the dozens of associated family names can join to learn about and celebrate their traditions and genealogy.

Clan representatives will come from New York, Pennsylvania and Ontario, Canada. The names include Baird, Blair, Barclay, Bruce, Buchanan, Claus, Cumming, Donnachaidh, Douglas, Ferguson, Forsyth, Grant, Gregor, Gordon, Hall, Hannay, Hay, Henderson, Hunter, Home, Keith, Kerr, Lindsay, Little, MacBean, MacFarlane, MacGillivray, MacNachtan, MacNeil, Masonic, Morrison, O’Keefe, Thompson and Wallace, as well as the Daughters of Scotia, the Rochester Scottish Society, the Clans and Scottish Societies of Canada and the Scottish Military Society.

In addition to the nine bands, the cultural celebration will include Highland athletics, dancers, national and regional musicians, merchandise vendors, artisans, food and beverage vendors, a kid’s area, clans, reenactors, seminars and local community groups.

The festival will also showcase a wide variety of food vendors at the event.

“Food and beverages rank very high among the reasons people attend cultural celebrations, because traditional dishes maintain ethnic heritage through the generations,” Banks said. “The event will have 30

vendors offering 150 menu items of all types, including entrees, finger foods, sweets, snacks and vegetarian options.”

“Many events don’t put a priority on food and beverages, but the fact is that most visitors consider it a high priority,” said Beth Banks, festival director. “This isn’t just boring fair food. We have something for every taste. We have a team dedicated to finding vendors that fit our festival priorities. You don’t wait in long lines and there is plenty of seating.”

The director explained vendors come from as far as North Carolina to serve Celtic specialties, such as a full Scottish breakfast, Guinness meat pies, Scottish dragon eggs, colcannon, cranchen, potato pancakes, potato soup, salt potatoes, shepherds’ pie, vegetarian shepherd’s pie, Guinness meatballs, Irish beef stew, Irish lamb stew, Jameson braised beef and chicken wings, Scottish barbecue and banger sausages. There are several kinds of haggis and even a haggis eating contest Saturday night.

Celtic sweets include Irish bread pudding, Irish oat cookies, Scottish shortbread, sticky toffee pudding, Welsh cookies and several Celtic-themed ice creams. An assortment of adult beverages includes Guinness, harp, Smithwicks, hard cider, mead, wine, wine slushies and gourmet coffees.

Many visitors, according to Beth Banks, attend just for the variety of food and beverages.

The Niagara Celtic Heritage Society is a 501c3 not-for-profit educational organization, founded in 2001 and focused on preserving the culture of the seven Celtic nations in this region. The annual festival is its primary fundraising activity.

Parking is free, as is the Festival Guidebook. A detailed schedule and ticket information can be found at www.niagaraceltic.com.