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Cedar Key Annual Seafood Festival attracts thousands; *Event continues today (Oct. 22)*



Cheerleaders from Cedar Key School demonstrate spirit during the parade on Saturday morning.

Story and Photos

By Terry Witt Senior Staff Writer © Sept. 22, 2017 at 9:17 a.m.

CEDAR KEY -- Picture perfect weather helped attract thousands of people to the 48th Annual Cedar Key Seafood Festival on Saturday (Oct. 21), and they came with an appetite.

The festival continues today (Sunday, Oct. 22).

Those who braved the bright sunshine and cool breezes patiently waited in long lines to partake of the seafood, corn on the cob, hamburgers, seafood chowder, clam chowder and more.

The festival began early in the morning, when people arrived to begin browsing through the 130 tents over the arts and crafts vendors' locations along Second Street.

A parade in the late morning wound along Dock Street and passed through the heart of the festival.

Cedar Key Lions Club President Dale Register was all smiles as he tried to stand on a sidewalk for an interview as hundreds of hungry festival visitors swarmed around him to reach food stands. He finally decided it was best to move to a grass spot nearby to avoid getting in the way.

"The crowd is the best we've seen in a few years," he said.

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Betty Cooke waves to visitors as she rides on the front of her son's airboat in the festival parade. She yelled out to the crowd, "Eat Oysters, they're good for you." Her son Ricky Cooke was pulling his airboat with a pickup truck and using a cell phone to snap pictures along the parade route.



The midway of the arts and crafts area of the festival is crowded with thousands of visitors around 11 a.m. Saturday. The crowd swelled as the day progressed.

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Levy County Commissioners Mike Joyner and Lilly Rooks wave to the crowd from a boat they rode in the parade. Both are running for re-election next year. Commission Chairman John Meeks was on the opposite side of the truck.



An Honor Guard of veterans from Chiefland VFW Post 5625 rides in the back of a pickup truck proudly displaying the American flag. Seen here are Jake Wynn (left) and Kary Colson

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Tiffany Black and Scott McNulty prepare farm-raised clam meals for the Cedar Key Aquaculture Association, which is comprised mainly of clam producers.



Randall Lashley and Tony Berryhill prepare breaded shrimp for cooking at the Cedar Key Oysterman's Association tent.

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Ralph Selby and Roy Kelly pull a steaming hot batch of freshly cooked corn cobs from the cooker at the Cedar Key Lions Club tent.

Register said the weekend crowd could rise to about 25,000 visitors. The streets near the festival were crowded with cars.

He said people came early to look at arts and crafts.

“People seem to be anxious for a seafood festival,” he said. “The weather is about perfect.”

The seafood festival provides non-profit organizations with an opportunity to make money for charitable causes. Eighteen non-profits operated food tents. All were busy. Everyone working at the tents was a volunteer.

School Superintendent Jeff Edison was busy flipping burgers at the education tent. Many people wanted burgers and cheeseburgers.

The Cedar Key Oysterman’s Association appeared to have the longest line. The association was selling oysters and shrimp. The line stretched for about 100 feet. People waited patiently for their turn. Next door the Cedar Key Aquaculture Association was selling clam dinners at a furious pace.

The oystermen said the oyster beds aren’t what they used to be. The state no longer funds replanting of oyster beds. It has hurt the industry.

The Cedar Key Lions Club sponsors the festival. The club makes more than \$50,000 in annual charitable donations. The club’s charitable giving supports the Levy County Eyesight Initiative, KidSight programs in Levy County including the lazy eye program that saves the vision of many young people, Cedar Key High School scholarships, Guardian Ad Litem Angels, Florida School for the Deaf and Blind, Southeastern Guide Dogs, Cedar Key Safety Patrol, North Florida Hearing Aid Assistance, Cedar Key Food Pantry, Conklin Center for the Blind, Lions Clubs International and Paws for Patriots.

Register said Cedar Key, while a popular destination for festival and fishing enthusiasts for much of the year, remains one of the best kept secrets in Florida.

“We think we are a well-kept secret that shouldn’t be kept a secret,” he said with a grin.