

Wiregrass Festival features fire ants, fun

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 STAFF WRITER

ASHBURN, Ga. — Turner County residents looking for a theme for their new festival found inspiration in a cow pasture.

Those thick tufts of tall, fibrous grass that commonly sprout in south Georgia pastures joined the list Saturday of gnats, rattlesnakes, swine and other regional quirks immortalized in annual celebrations as the town kicked off its first Wiregrass Festival.

"We thought of several other things, but there were always problems with the name," festival director Jay Leatherwood said Saturday as he buzzed from one end of College Street to the other on a motorized cart. "Wiregrass is native to this area, our newspaper is named after it — why not?"

"We originally thought about having a Fire Ant Festival, but we got a

lot of negative reaction to that."

Instead, organizers chose a theme of "Flame the Fire Ant!" which still left Saturday's festival filled with ant-themed T-shirts, children's games and bobbing antenna headgear.

Children sported ant faces painted on their cheeks, and downtown stores featured ant caricatures painted on their windows. A grocery store displayed a scene of the small red ants carrying off bags of goodies, while a hardware store showed one of the smiling insects hard at work with a paint roller.

Flaming fire ant T-shirts were selling like hot cakes at a booth in Heritage Park Saturday, vendor Charnelle Reinhardt said.

"We've done pretty good," Mrs. Reinhardt said, assessing her stock. "Especially with the ant antennas — it's really picked up this afternoon."

Ochlocknee resident Judy Allgood said she made time Saturday

to attend the festival before going back to her second home in Illinois.

"We're going back to Chicago next week, and we're trying to cram everything in," she said as she bought a T-shirt. "Everybody hates fire ants, I guess."

Organizers estimated attendance about noon Saturday at 1,000-2,000 people. They hoped day-long entertainment like bands, clogging groups and a street dance Saturday night would continue to draw the crowd.

Crafts booths also dotted College Avenue, the main street of the festival, and events like a softball tournament, a golf tournament, a collector's show and an antique display helped attract regional residents.

"I'm enjoying it — I really am," said Ty Ty resident Ruby Reynolds as she left an open-air stage after joining the Country Kickers for a dance.

Today's events include gospel singing in Heritage Park at 2 p.m.



ALISA DEMAO/staff

Sycamore Elementary School librarian Debbie Free strokes a rainbow of colors onto Victoria Merry's cheek at a face-painting booth at the Wiregrass Festival in Ashburn Saturday.

and a strawberry cooking contest at 3 p.m.

"I'm pleased with the turnout — a little surprised that we got this

many people during the first year," Leatherwood said. "We're going to wake this town up a little, get it moving."