

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GEORGIA STRING BAND FESTIVAL

It all began with lunch at Thurston's. There Patti Champion Garner heard Paul Shoffner recount the story of Gordon County's two great old string bands, the Georgia Yellow Hammers and the Baxters. Garner was convinced that the groups should be honored in their home town. Her infectious enthusiasm persuaded the Calhoun Gordon Arts Council to initiate a festival featuring the rich array of talented old-time musicians in Georgia and other southern states.

Garner, chair of the music guild for the Arts Council, had recently returned with her husband, Phil, to her native Gordon County after a career in public relations and journalism with a focus on popular music. With a committee made up of Teresa Bailey, Donna Gregory, Dar and Don Nix, Jane Powers Weldon, Arts Council president Molly Jenkins, and council director Ricardo Morris, Patti and Phil Garner began soliciting sponsors, grant funding, musicians, and volunteers.

The first festival, in 2007, brought to the stage of the Harris Arts Center the Carolina Chocolate Drops, who were just winning national acclaim. With them, or following in later years, were the New North Georgia Buggy Riders, Red Mountain Band, Skillet Lickers II, Jake Leg Stompers, Little Country Giants, Georgia Crackers, New Binkley Brothers, Norman and Nancy Blake, James Bryan, the Appalachian Ensemble, Dom Flemons, and other popular performers of old-time music. After entertaining on Friday night, many of these artists returned Saturday to compete in the Gordon County Fiddlers' Convention.

During the early years of the String Band Festival, downtown Calhoun was the site of a street fair called More Than a Taste of Calhoun. Drawing crowds from miles around, the Saturday fair was an ideal venue for musicians, who delighted spectators by busking on street corners and under store canopies up and down Wall Street.

After Patti Garner retired and Paul Shoffner began to plan the Fiddlers' Convention, it moved briefly to the Northwest Georgia Regional Fairgrounds. Both events are now performed at the Harris Arts Center in downtown Calhoun.

The Georgia House of Representatives, in 2018, named the event Georgia's Official String Band Festival.

—Jane Powers Weldon