

# The Georgia Mountain Fair celebrates 68 years in Hiawasse, Georgia



The Marren Family of Human Cannonballs, performing daily at the Georgia Mountain Fair in Hiawasse. Photo by Mark Smith



Second-grader Shawn Marren Jr. is the youngest human cannonball in history at only 8 years old.



"Welcome to the Georgia Mountain Fair, the showplace of the mountains." Photo by Mark Smith

**By Mark Smith  
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The Georgia Mountain Fair opened for the 68th time on Friday, July 20, and it was a beautiful, sunny, pleasantly warm day inside the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

As the morning transitioned into afternoon, the smells of hot dogs, hamburgers, bratwurst and funnel cakes intermingled with the fresh mountain air.

Young folks, old folks, moms, dads and little children meandered throughout the fairgrounds that Friday, looking at all the handmade crafts on display and watching the various craftsmen perform their magic with wood, leather, glass, textiles and metal.

For those who enjoy the spectacle of musicians coming together to play downhome mountain music, there were a number of front porch pickers playing in front of both the GMF Museum and the Old Mercantile.

To the delight of many, the Bellamy Brothers performed two shows on opening day at Anderson Music Hall, and the Fair hosts multiple music shows daily throughout its nine days in Hiawasse.

The Georgia Mountain Fair continues through Saturday, July 28, and folks won't want to miss this celebrated local tradition.

Of course, there are the vendors who have a large variety of goods, mostly handmade and authentic.

Devan Cole, founder and primary instructor of Hot Glass Academy, is at the Fair for the second time. Cole and his helper are giving glass blowing demonstrations and have glass art for sale.

"It's an amazing event," said Cole, who lives in Americus.

Justin and Sandy Howard from Ellijay are makers of some remarkable polished horseshoe art. There was a horse head cleverly fashioned out of horseshoes, and racks for hats and coats, among other works.

Jon Williams, a self-

described luthier, or maker of stringed musical instruments, has a grand display of his handmade dulcimers and autoharps.

"A lot of good artists here," said Williams. "The weather's fine. It's a beautiful place to be on a July day, and there's a lot of fun to be had."

Bill Wilkinson, a retiree from western North Carolina, makes hand-hewn wooden bowls, and his wife, Kaye, sells them. Kaye said they started coming to the Fair four years ago.

Jimmy Brock makes and sells leather goods like belts, hats and holsters. Brock said he's been doing leather work since he was 16 years old, and he has been coming to the Fair for over a decade, possibly as long as 15 years.

Mike Wilson, who said he's attended the Fair for 25 years, makes and sells handmade knives. He said he's built up a large clientele over the years and enjoys coming up every year.

Maria Eckols, behind the counter at the Old Mercantile, said, "There's so much history ... it's interesting, and I wish the younger generation appreciated it more."

The Georgia Mountain Fair attracts a large number of food vendors every year, and this year was no exception.

The Towns County Lions Club, which is largely instrumental in the operations of the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, has a funnel cake concession. Their funnel cakes are handmade and sprinkled with powdered sugar, as they should be.

All the money made at the Lions Club concession goes to charities, said Lions Club Treasurer Julie Payne, who was volunteering on opening day.

There are several hot dog and hamburger concessions with bratwurst sausages mixed in, beverage concessions, shaved ice vendors and a variety of other interesting food vendors.

One such concession is run by Stepan Vlach. Vlach hails from the Czech Republic

and is new to America. He said this is his first experience at the Fair, and he is hoping to have a successful run.

Vlach and his helper, also from the Czech Republic, are offering "Chimney Cakes." A chimney cake is made from dough that is wound around a wooden roller and braised over a gas fire. When fully cooked, they are covered with an assortment of flavors, like caramel.

The Georgia Mountain Fair wouldn't be the Fair at all without the carnival, and this year's carnival features the Human Cannonball Act, a first in Fair history.

Shawn Marren (The Human Cannonball), his wife Valeria, two of their children and his protégé, Kristen Finley, are performing at the Fair throughout the week.

By the looks and feel of everything the Fair has to offer, it's going to be another great run this year.