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Festival gets rave reviews

By Brad Bauer, bbauer@mariettatimes.com

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Even before all the sternwheelers had begun to churn their way home Sunday, Ohio River Sternwheel Festival Director General Butch Wiseman was already thinking ahead to next year's festival.

"It's going to be hard to top this one," Wiseman said. "I've not had one person approach me and say they've had anything but a great time this weekend. The weather, and the weekend in general, was just perfect."

The annual Capt. James E. Sands memorial boat races and Rollin' Oldies car show capped-off the 34th annual festival at Marietta. Nearly 400 show cars lined downtown streets as thousands of spectators looked on. The free weekend-long concert series also ended Sunday.

"We loved every minute of it," said Bonnie Hutchison, of Miller, who stayed at the Lafayette Hotel over the weekend with husband, Steve. "All of the entertainment was good. The fireworks were spectacular and everyone is always so helpful and friendly."

In a change from previous years, this year's festival featured its biggest entertainer of the weekend on Friday night instead of Sunday afternoon.

Jake Owen, a Grammy Award-nominated country music artist, performed at 9:30 p.m. Friday on the stage barge.

Marietta resident Teri Allen, 40, said she appreciated the entertainment switch.

"The concert was great and having it on Friday made more sense to me," she said. "I've never seen so many people downtown for the start of the festival. It really seemed to add to the 'buzz' of the whole weekend."

Early on Sunday, Hutchison stood along the riverbank watching as the boat captains prepared to pull out for their races.

"I've got to learn this stuff... Next year I plan to be a deckhand," she said.

Hutchison said her husband has been building a sternwheeler, The Port Explorer, which they hope to have finished and bring to next year's festival.

This year, 35 sternwheelers were in town for the weekend. Event organizers and city officials estimate as many as 100,000 people crowd downtown over the weekend each year during the sternwheel.

Wiseman said the festival costs about \$140,000 to put on each year. As part of next year's 35th anniversary, the group hopes to raise more money to make the event even more special. The festival is paid for by corporate and private donations.

Sternwheel corporate finance chair, Cheri Seevers, said the group will be working hard to achieve those goals.

"We want to light up Marietta like it's never been before," Seevers said.

Marietta Noon Lions club member Brent Warren said the group's food cart did - and other vendors - seemed to do well over the weekend.

"We had great weather. It was cool and dry and we had a lot of people out," Warren said.

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