

The Central Ohio Folk Festival

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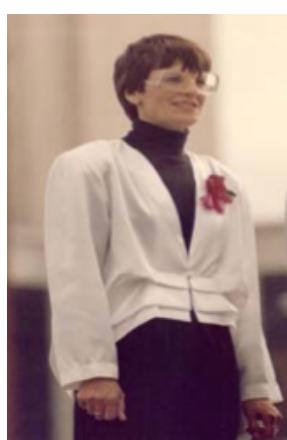
The Metro Parks

— a Sound Composition



Located at Battelle Darby Creek

Metro Park, this bench was donated and this tree planted in honor of Jan Staats upon her death in 2011. Jan was a longtime volunteer at this park and the primary force behind bringing the Central Ohio Folk Festival to the Metro Parks, one of the largest events held there at the time.



Jan Staats

CENTRAL OHIO FOLK FESTIVAL AT THE METRO PARKS

The Central Ohio Folk Festival is an annual event held for twenty-one years, the first full weekend in May and for fourteen of those years at the Battelle Darby Creek space. In 2026, the festival changed the date to the first full weekend in June. The festival itself has been held continuously since 1997, at various locations in the

Columbus area: Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in its first year (with 160 participants), then First Unitarian Universalist Church (1998-2002), and the Ohio Historical Society's grounds, as a Bicentennial event, in 2003.



Tim Taylor (far left) with Nancy Bailey, first co-director of the Central Ohio Folk Festival.

That year, Jan Staats had the idea of moving the event to the beautiful outdoor space of Battelle Darby Creek Metro Park, where she spent much of her time. She enlisted the help of Tim Taylor, park naturalist, who agreed, and he convinced John O'Meara, then Metro Parks Executive Director, that the festival would be an asset to the park's summer offerings.

In a 2013 interview, Tim recalled the conversation: "Besides natural history education, another one of the missions of the Metro Parks is cultural history education. I also grew up listening to my parents playing folk music — mostly Irish — on the stereo and I have been a fan for years. Jan gave me some background on the festival and how the festival committee thought it would be wonderful to take it outside. I approached our administration with the idea, and years later I'm telling the story of how it got started in the park."¹

In 2004 the Central Ohio Folk Festival came to Battelle Darby Creek Metro Park, co-sponsored by the park and the Columbus Folk Music Society. It found its home there from 2004 to 2017. In 2016, over two days, the event attracted approximately 4,900 people, including many young families, to its activities, most of which were free of charge. It became one of the largest events held in Battelle Darby Creek Metro Park.

The park is good for the festival, and the festival is good for the park. As then park manager, Kevin Kasnyik, put it: "Performing and enjoying folk music in a natural setting adds another dimension to the experience. This cultural and historical relationship makes the experience more special.

Watching our visitors, young and old, being exposed to not only the music, but the art of performing it, is extremely gratifying for the park staff. The festival has become an annual spring celebration of sorts. Visitor attendance is increasing after a long winter, wildflowers are blooming, and the birds are singing. The festival caps this all off and is kind of a kick-off to a very busy time of year for the parks.”



Participants enjoy the 2024 Central Ohio Folk Festival at Highbanks Metro Park.

In 2018, the festival outgrew the Battelle Darby Creek location and relocated to Highbanks Metro Park in the Big Meadows area. There it initially drew approximately 8,900 participants over the two day weekend. Attendance gradually increased to 12,800 over the two days, so that by 2025, it outgrew that space.

Coincidentally timing-wise, in 2020 the Metro Parks purchased the 56-acre former Hoover Y Park (along with a large adjacent disused quarry site) in Lockbourne, Ohio. They have been renovating the aptly dubbed Bank Run Metro Park, named after the type of rock taken from the quarry. Bank Run features include: plenty of green space, two lodge buildings, a 299 person outdoor vaulted ceiling pavilion with lots of picnicking space, and a large outdoor stage, a perfect setting for the Central Ohio Folk Festival!

The Metro Park's vision for Bank Run moves beyond the typical Metro Park and places greater emphasis on it being an event space. In particular, large events that Metro Parks struggles to host at its existing parks will be



View of Bank Run at the entrance.



Outdoor stage at Bank Run Metro Park.

welcome and easily accommodated at Bank Run. Festival goers can look forward to the new space at Bank Run Metro Park and new date of first full weekend in June beginning in the year 2026 and we hope for many years to come.

FROM THE BLACK SWAMP TO A METRO PARK — A FESTIVAL'S HISTORY

For 14 straight springs, from 1979 through 1992, the Lima, Ohio campus of Ohio State University was home to a yearly festival that drew thousands of dulcimer players—along with saw players, auto harpists, bones players, and fans of American folk music.² It also was renowned as a robust teaching festival. It was called the Great Black Swamp Dulcimer Festival, and when it was no longer held, folk music aficionados looked for a replacement.

They found it, with the help of the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department and the Marion Square Pioneer Dulcimer and Singers group. In 1993, the Central Ohio Dulcimer Festival was launched as a one-day event at the Martin Janis Community Senior Center in Columbus. It attracted 250 people. Like the Great Black Swamp event, this was a teaching festival, with daytime workshops and numerous mini-concerts, plus a full concert in the evening. Co-sponsoring the new festival, alongside the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department and the Marion Square Pioneer Dulcimer and Singers group, was the Columbus Folk Music Society (CFMS).

Popular from the outset, the Central Ohio Dulcimer Festival continued as a well-regarded event through the spring of 1996. In that year, the Columbus Dulcimer Club, which had been managing the event since 1995, approached Nancy Cline Bailey, an avid festival volunteer and a member of CFMS. She and other members of CFMS had been discussing the creation of a new festival that would encompass all types of folk music, and the

Dulcimer Club suggested to Nancy that the two groups combine their efforts, using the Central Ohio Dulcimer Festival as the foundation.

In return, the Dulcimer Club asked for a bookkeeper and a solemn promise that CFMS—and the newly born festival—would continue to support dulcimer music.

They had come to the right person: Nancy's husband, Fred, was an accountant. He agreed to take over the Dulcimer Club's books, and Nancy agreed to take over everything else. In this way, Nancy and Fred became the directors of the first Central Ohio Folk Festival—which opened in 1997—and remained its directors until 2009 when they passed the reigns on.



Fred Bailey, co-director and founding member of the Central Ohio Folk Festival

THE SOUND OF SUCCESS

Over the years, the Central Ohio Folk Festival has attracted such well-known performers as Jean Ritchie, Mike Seeger, Lee Rowe, Tom Rush, John Gorka, and Guy Davis, and more recently The Small Glories, Nefesh Mountain, and The Arcadian Wild, amongst many others. Like its antecedents, it has a tradition of providing myriad instructional workshops, as well as great music.

From the Great Black Swamp Dulcimer Festival to becoming a very sizable annual roots music event, the Central Ohio Folk Festival has earned the title given it by one of its first directors, the “jewel in the crown” of the Columbus Folk Music Society — and it’s a gem for the Metro Park, too.

References:

¹ *A Different Strummer*, newsletter publication of Columbus Folk Music Society, May, 2013, p.3.

² *Remembering the Great Black Swamp Dulcimer Festival*, by Greg Hoersten, 4/28/14, LimaOhio.com