Chattooga River Festival celebrates 'Deliverance'

By Blake Guthrie
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

This summer marks the 40th anniversary of the landmark film "Deliverance," and Oconee County in South Carolina and Rabun County in Georgia — which border the Chattooga River where key scenes were filmed — are throwing a festival to celebrate.

The inaugural Chattooga River Festival, June 22-24, will feature an appearance by Ronny Cox, who played the character of Drew in the film and performed in the famous "Dueling Banjos" scene. Cox will perform with his band at the Rabun County Civic Center in Clayton Friday, June 22, and sign copies of his book "Dueling Banjos: The Deliverance of Drew" (Decent Hill) at Timpson Creek Gallery June 23.

It might seem surprising that the movie is being commemorated, given the disdain residents have expressed toward the film's portrayal of the locals. In actuality, "Deliverance" isn't set in either county but in the fictional locales of the Cahulawassee River and the town of Aintry. The fact that the festival is being staged at all proves that time heals most, if not all, wounds.

Festival organizers are quick to point out that the focus on "Deliverance" at this year's event is due to the significant anniversary. The theme going forward will spotlight the cultural and natural attractions this region of mountains and rolling foothills has to offer.

South Carolina's Oconee County is filled with scenic lakes, hiking trails, wild rivers, cascading waterfalls and plenty of rural charm. You can raft for a day or two on the Chattooga and never see any development along its banks except for a couple of highway bridges crossing overhead.

There's a reason "Deliverance" was filmed on the river and Payson Kennedy has a lot to do with that. Kennedy is co-founder of the Nantahala Outdoor Center, and he played Ned Beatty's stunt double in the film, or "canoe double" as he refers to his role. The 80-year-old, soft-spoken Kennedy is a legend in the white-water world, still shooting Class V rapids with the occasional tour group. On a recent trip down Section IV of the Chattooga — the toughest section of the river where much of "Deliverance" was shot — he reminisced about working with the stars of the film, who didn't have any previous white-water paddling experience.

"All those guys picked it up pretty good. You can see them in the film running some of these rapids in an open canoe," he says. "I was impressed by that. I can spot myself in a scene or two." He also remembers running the crew and expensive film equipment down the river, because it was logistically impossible to do it any other way in such a wilderness location. At a certain bend, Kennedy points out the spot where the movie's most infamous scene was shot — "the, um, love scene," one of the river guides says, for lack of a better description. "I wasn't there the day they shot that scene," says Kennedy.

The main setting for the festival is at nearby Chattooga Belle Farm in Long Creek, a small rural community populated by farmers and young, outdoorsy types who moved there to be near the river, giving this country locale a free-spirited vibe. The 138-acre farm has a disc golf course running through its working orchards and vineyards and offers one of the more scenic vistas in Oconee County, making it a perfect location for the festival.

Festival activities at the farm will feature musical performances on two stages including Atlanta favorites Michelle Malone and Heather Luttrell, a "Dueling Banjos" competition and the Banjo Boogie Hills n' Chills Fun Run, a 5 kilometer cross-country race. The festival concludes Sunday night with a special screening of "Deliverance" at the Tiger Drive-in, a 1950s-era drive-in theater in Clayton.

BREAKING OUT

Long Creek Falls flows directly into the Chattooga River and is a popular stop for paddlers on Section IV of the river. BLAKE GUTHERIE / ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION



YOU CAN GO

CHATTOOGA RIVER FESTIVAL:
June 22-24. $35 single day Fri.-Sat., $15 Sun.; $95 weekend pass. Chattooga Belle Farm, 454 Damascus Church Road, Long Creek, S.C. 864-647-9768, www.chattoogariverfestival.com.

RAFTING OUTFITTERS:
Nantahala Outdoor Center — Chattooga Outpost. 851-A Chattooga Ridge Road, Mountain Rest, S.C. 1-800-232-7238, www.noc.com.

Wildwater Ltd. — Chattooga Adventure Center. 1251 Academy Road, Long Creek, S.C. 1-800-451-9972 www.wildwater-rafting.com.

Southeastern Expeditions. 7350 U.S. 76 East, Clayton, Ga. 706-782-4331, www.southeasternexpeditions.com.

Chattooga Whitewater Outfitters. 14239 U.S. 76. Long Creek, S.C. 864-647-9083, www.chattoogaadventures.com.

STAY:
Oconee State Park. One- and two-bedroom cabins with full kitchens and bathrooms are available, some by a small lake, others in the woods. Rates $60-$104. 624 State Park Road, Mountain Rest, S.C. 864-638-5353, www.southcarolina-parks.com/oconee.

Wildwater's Chattooga Cottages and Jawbone Cabin. Wildwater's Chattooga Adventure Center has loft cottages that can sleep four and a more luxurious three-bedroom cabin that can sleep up to eight. Rates are $149 for the cottages, $360 for the first night at the cabin, $285 for additional nights. 1251 Academy Road, Long Creek, S.C. 1-800-451-9972, www.wildwaterrafting.com.

VISITOR INFO:
Mountain Lakes CVB Visitors Center. 105 W. S. Broad St., Walhalla. 877-685-2537, www.scmountainlakes.com.