Walhalla Oktoberfest kicks off today

BY STEPHANIE JADRNICEK
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WALHALLA — Dressed in traditional Bavarian-style garb, Mountain Top Polka Band will set the scene at the 38th annual Oktoberfest in downtown Walhalla.

Festivities begin today and run through Sunday. The annual fall event celebrates Walhalla's German heritage, passed down by Old World immigrants who moved from Charleston to the Upstate more than 160 years ago.

And what's an Oktoberfest without a little polka?

"Polka isn't as popular here in the Carolinas as it is in Germany or even as it is in the northern parts of the country such as Michigan, Wisconsin and Cincinnati," band member Adam Bennett said. "But polka is just part of having an Oktoberfest."

Polka is the traditional Bavarian style of music that's been baked into Oktoberfest since the event originally started in Germany more than 200 years ago. Bennett said Oktoberfests in the U.S. also feature other types of music.

Sporting lederhosen and dirndls, Mountain Top Polka Band will play accordions, clarinets, drums, a tuba, guitar, cowbells and even an alphorn to form an authentic feel at the festival.

"We'll have lots of dancing — lots of polka dancing, lots of waltzes and, of course, the chicken dance," he said. "The chicken dance is a popular Oktoberfest party dance. It involves flapping your arms and shaking your rear."

Mountain Top Polka Band will also entertain the audience with a bench dance called the Schuhplattler.

"It's a dance that involves a lot of slapping — slapping of your legs and your feet and each other," Bennett said. "It's just a lot of fun for the audience to watch."

The band's been playing polka together since 2009. They started at their home church in Asheville, N.C.

"We were having an Oktoberfest and decided we could put on a small little group of musicians to play some of those songs," he said. "After that we started getting calls from people. They'd heard

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us play some polka, and it just went from there. We play over 100 compositions now, and we play all over the Southeast."

In addition to polka, Oktoberfest will have festivities for people of all ages. The adults love the beer and the brats, but there's also plenty of family fun, food and non-alcoholic beverages packed into the three-day party.

Little German Band and Dancers will steal the stage Friday and Saturday evening from 7-11 p.m., and a fireworks display will dazzle festivalgoers at 10 p.m. Saturday. Food and craft vendors will travel from near and far to sell their wares. And the little ones, and the young at heart, will enjoy the carnival rides all weekend.

Rarely can anyone resist the boisterous appeal of polka. Bennett said the audience should expect to have a lot of fun. For some, that may come in the form of simply swaying in their seats, but others may feel the need to do a little dancing.

The polka band will be performing on the green beside Arby's, with other festivities taking place along Main Street and at Sertoma Field.