

# 50th kite flying contest coming

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Fifty years ago, Ed St. John presented his idea of a kite flying contest to the Downtown Exchange Club.

He became a "committee of one" and organized the first contest back in 1929, and this year he'll be there for the 50th competition.

Austin's contest is the second-oldest kite flying contest in the United States (Long Beach, Calif., is in its 52nd year).

This year's kite-in will be March 19 in Zilker Park. Registration is at 2 p.m., and the contest begins at 2:30. Rules are fairly simple: Kites must be homemade. Kit kites don't count. And contestants must be able to stand alone—that's so infants don't enter, as happened one year.

St. John recalled that there were between "25 and 30 contestants" at the first contest, which took place in Lamar Park on the banks of the Little Colorado River. "That's where Lake Austin is now," he said. Around 1,500 people showed up to watch the kite enthusiasts participate.

One of the participants was 15-year-old Winfred Gustafson.

Gustafson still remembers that contest and taking a prize in it. He'd been flying kites for a number of years before taking part in that contest. "We'd fly our kites in this one park, and somehow the strings always broke and they'd land in this lady's pasture. She'd get the cops after us," Gustafson said.

"Back then, kites were all homemade. You couldn't get to the dime store and buy them. What you had to do was buy the last apple or orange and get the crate. Then you'd cut up the sides

of the crate for your braces," he added.

This year, Howard Norris, an employee of the Austin Parks and Recreation Department and supervisor of the event, expects about 200 entries and 3,000 spectators.

"Every type of kite you can think of was in that first contest," said St. John. "They were crude, but they flew, sort of."

St. John made a multi-colored paper kite for his nephew to fly back then. "It was really unique and drew a lot of interest," he said.

The original kite contest categories included the highest flyer, the largest, the smallest and the most colorful kite.

"These were just things I thought up in my head," he said.

This year's contest will sport 11 different activities. A different kite must be used to enter each division (except one). Categories are the highest kite, steadiest kite with tail, steadiest kite without tail, most active kite, strongest pulling kite, smallest kite, most unusual kite, largest kite and the 50-yard dash for children under 12 (this contest allows a kite to be used from another event.)

There will be two special events, in honor of the 50-year celebration. They are the best 50th anniversary kite and the best flying performance by a veteran flyer of a tournament over 25 years ago.

Gustafson was an event winner back then. He'll be at the contest. So will St. John.

Why was the contest started 50 years ago?

"I was a new member of the Exchange Club," St. John explained. "We were looking for an activity for youth. I'd always been a kite enthusiast..."

And the contest was born.



Winfred Gustafson, left, and Ed St. John reminisce over a scrapbook about the Downtown Exchange Club's annual kite flying contest. Gustafson and St. John will be at the 50th contest next month. Citizen photo by Jay Godwin