

Lizard Lick Festival licked by criticism

By RICK WARNER
Staff Writer

Lizard Lick, the sleepy Wake County town that leaped into the spotlight in the late 1970s, may be crawling back to obscurity in the early 1980s.

Charles P. Wood, the founder, director and chief booster of the renowned Lizard Lick Festival, says he's pulling the annual bluegrass celebration out of Lizard Lick because of criticism from some of his neighbors.

"It's just not worth it anymore," said Wood, the unofficial mayor of the small crossroads community on N.C. 97 between Zebulon and Wendell. "I'm tired of all the jokes and complaints. I'm tired of being threatened. If the (critics) don't want us here, we'll leave."

Part of the problem has been the growing popularity of the festival, which started as a small "family affair" in 1975 but blossomed into a full-fledged cultural event that has attracted as many as 3,000 fun lovers, reporters and curiosity seekers to the town each September.

As the festival grew, so did the number of complaints from neighboring residents. They claimed the music was too loud. They griped about the traffic jams. They called Wood a few choice names.

"They said the whole idea was stupid and

that I was crazy," he said in an interview last week at his makeshift Town Hall office. "But these are people who didn't want the festival in the first place. They only started complaining after we became a success."

There were even those who suggested that Wood was in it for the money.

"A lot of people thought I was making a bundle, but I wasn't," said Wood, a mechanic who owns several businesses in Lizard Lick. "We lost an average of \$600 a year on these festivals. We had some pretty big expenses, but we never charged a cent to get in."

It all began as a publicity gimmick, an attempt by local merchants to drum up business after their town was bypassed by the new U.S. 64. But it soon became a tradition. The bluegrass bands. The arm wrestling and the tug-of-wars. The clogging and the buck dancing. And, of course, the one and only annual lizard race featuring real live North Carolina fence lizards.

To Wood, the festival has been the perfect example of "good, clean" family entertainment.

"It hasn't just been good for business, it's been good for Lizard Lick," Wood said. "People all over the world know about our town. There's a woman in England who named her flat after us. In Germany, there's a guy who

has a Lizard Lick flag flying from his boat. They even have some Lizard Lick rocks in Australia.

"We've made Lizard Lick a household word. There are people from Wendell and Zebulon who go around telling people they're from Lizard Lick."

Though Wood is canceling the festival in Lizard Lick, he plans to hold the lizard race and a few of his other favorites in October at an annual fall festival in Wendell.

Future lizard races, Wood said, will be "a year-to-year proposition."

Whatever happens, Wood is confident that people won't forget Lizard Lick.

"We've built a solid foundation the last five years," he said. "I think we're on the map to stay."