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WITH THE KIDS

Ojai Storytelling Festival

By Brenda Rees
Special to the Times

THE proposed logo for this year's Ojai Storytelling Festival -- an old grandmother in a rocking chair relating a story to wide-eyed children at her feet -- didn't work for Brian Bemel, the festival's artistic director.

"It's a stereotype that's so outdated," says Bemel. "Storytelling has somewhat of a renaissance going on right now with lots of new young faces in the community. People are hungry for this kind of entertainment."

Expect to hear word weavers of all ages at the annual festival, which takes place at various times and locations today through Sunday. While most of the day events are perfect for general audiences -- Bemel suggests children should be 6 and older -- some evening shows are strictly adults only.

A good bet for families is "Animal Tales and Paper Trails" (11:15 a.m. Saturday) by storytellers Dovie Thomason Sickles and Kuniko Yamamoto. In addition to working with words, Yamamoto -- who studied traditional dance and music at the Konishi School in Osaka -- uses masks and music in her tales about ancient and modern Japan.

"Some are stories I heard growing up in Japan; some are things I picked up in books," says Yamamoto from her Florida home. "Some are personal tales, and sometimes I just outright lie!"

Yamamoto says she enjoys telling "Funny Little Woman" because of the unexpected twists. "This woman is captured by a Japanese monster, an *oni*, and she escapes not with a sword or with pushing. She just laughs," explains Yamamoto.

Bringing old-time mountain music and folk tales to his presentation "Riding Into the New Age in an Old Car" at 4:30 p.m. Saturday is David Holt, who has traveled for more than 22 years on the back roads around his North Carolina home searching out traditional musicians and storytellers.

Accompanied by banjo, steel guitar, washboard, paper bag and "thunderwear" (an electric body suit), Holt -- a four-time Grammy winner -- says his personal stories work on all levels.

Holt may tell the story of how, as a child growing up in Texas, he and his brother were complaining to their mother about not getting a frivolous item at the store.

"Mom drove us out to the middle of a cotton field and told the foreman to give us jobs to make some money," he says. "Kids love [the story] because it's about parental conflict, and parents think the story is about teaching kids a lesson."

Holt admits, "I don't know if I learned a lesson that day, but I did hear the cotton workers singing

those wonderful songs, and that got me hooked on this kind of music -- so maybe I learned something after all."

OJAI STORYTELLING FESTIVAL

WHERE: Various locations in Ojai; see website for complete schedule.

WHEN: Opening "Meet the Tellers" event at 7 tonight. See website for complete schedule. Ends Sun.

PRICE: \$12-\$30 for adults, and \$10-\$16 for children at individual events.

INFO: (805) 646-8907; www.ojaistoryfest.org