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“It’s so exciting to have people back on the beach,” Nelson said. She explained that after a two year gap of being unable to have on-site competition during the pandemic, the popular contest once again is back in town.

Set to take place over the course of this weekend, the contest invites competitors to vie for prizes in categories ranging from the littlest Sand Fleas to Masters. Contestants and visitors can gear up before the big Saturday afternoon competition starting Friday evening with a bonfire, music and s’mores. Sandcastle building commences Saturday at 2 p.m. with final judging at 7 p.m. To wind down the weekend on Sunday there’s a Singing Sands 5K Fun Run and Walk.

“This will be the 58th year of the event and I was at the first one,” Nelson said, recalling her childhood in Cannon Beach. She may have been only 4 years old at the competition’s 1964 debut, but remembers the excitement.

That first sandcastle contest began as an activity to entertain families isolated by a tsunami that washed out the Elk Creek Bridge, just north of town. Once the bridge was restored and the town recovered, the idea took hold that building sandcastles might not only entertain locals but attract visitors. Soon, that vision took hold and the annual Cannon Beach Sandcastle Contest emerged as one of the largest sandcastle contests on the West Coast. Its longevity, of over 50 years, has been recognized by Oregon Parks & Recreation as an Oregon Heritage Tradition.

“We had to pivot big time in 2020 and 2021 to keep our sandcastle competition continuous,” Nelson said. “We managed to engage people online in summerlong virtual events for people to build a sandcastle, take a picture, and post it.” Participants joined in from all over the world, keeping the level of enthusiasm and camaraderie high, but it just wasn’t the same. Now, Nelson is excited to bring locals and visitors back together in person.

“I just love having so many people here digging and playing in the sand for our contest,” Nelson said. “You don’t have to be artistic or have special skills. You can be young or old. Anyone can build a sandcastle. And seeing what creations people come up with is amazing.”

Contest divisions stretch across age and skill levels, including both individuals and groups include: Sand Fleas, Juniors, Teens, Small Group, Large Group, and Masters. Each team is given a plot of sand within a designated area. No specific theme is required, but only natural materials found on the beach such as sticks, shells, rocks and seaweed may be used for ornamentation.

The weekend attracts tens of thousands



Cannon Beach History Center & Museum

Beachgoers gather for a photo during one of the first sandcastle contests in Cannon Beach.



Cannon Beach History Center & Museum

A turtle, sculpted on Cannon Beach in 1986.



Sand creations at a previous Cannon Beach Sandcastle Contest.

of visitors. “It’s a party on the beach for 30,000,” Nelson added, laughing. “I lovingly say that. It is a big party, though, all happening in one day between high and low tides. And it’s the only day of the year that people are allowed to park on the beach. It’s basically the kickoff to the summer here in Cannon Beach. I can’t wait to welcome everyone back on the beach.”



Cannon Beach History Center & Museum

ABOVE: Visitors line the shores of Cannon Beach during a late 1970s sandcastle contest.



LEFT: A sandcastle stands tall on Cannon Beach, with Haystack Rock in the background.