

Georgia Living

GROUND'S SWEEP

As fair moves out, folks with metal detectors move in

By James Palmer
Macon Telegraph and News

The last two cotton candy stands are holding out at the corner of Walnut Street and Martin Luther King Boulevard. But the 1990 Georgia State Fair is history.

It shut down late Saturday night and, now, on Sunday morning the fair workers are packing up and heading out. But the last fair-goers aren't through.

Now's the time for the payoff, such as it is. A few people weave through the maze of trucks and trailers looking for ... whatever they can find.

"I try to do it after the fair every year. This is my third year," said a man swinging a metal detector back and forth. "I think there are four or five of us out here."

And what are you looking for?

"Nickels, dimes, quarters and pennies," he said. Neither he nor his wife wanted their names used. There's something a little embarrassing about admitting your sifting through 100,000 people's leavings on a Sunday morning. But both were operating metal detectors and carrying shovels, looking for whatever fair patrons had left behind.

"Last year I found \$3 on Sunday," the man said. "The day after that me and my buddy came back out and found a penny apiece. You've got to get out today if you want to find anything."

His wife said she goes treasure hunting because, "if I don't go he'll leave me at home. We go out every day looking somewhere," she added, pulling out a pocket full of coins.

"I beat you," she said, smiling at her husband.

It's pretty gross work. A leftover fairground doesn't carry the romantic sadness of the

day after Christmas. It stinks, with an odor of soured candy apples and corndogs. Trash is scattered from one end to the other of the former midway, waiting for the cleanup to begin. Scattered in it are things like torn T-shirts, broken balloons and smashed balls of cotton candy.

But that doesn't stop folks from coming back every year and sifting through the mess even if the payoff isn't great.

"It's going mighty slow this year," said James Herndon. "I've been coming down here every year for the past 10 or 12 years."

Herndon is swinging his Deepseeker metal detector around piles of sawdust which marks where games, rides and ticket booths had been. When his detector beeps he scoops up the spot with a garden trowel.

"They didn't put out enough sawdust this year," he said. "If you drop a coin in sawdust that's the last you see of it. I haven't even found any junk jewelry this year."

Herndon said he's owned a metal detector for about 15 years and spends part of his retirement time looking for treasures.

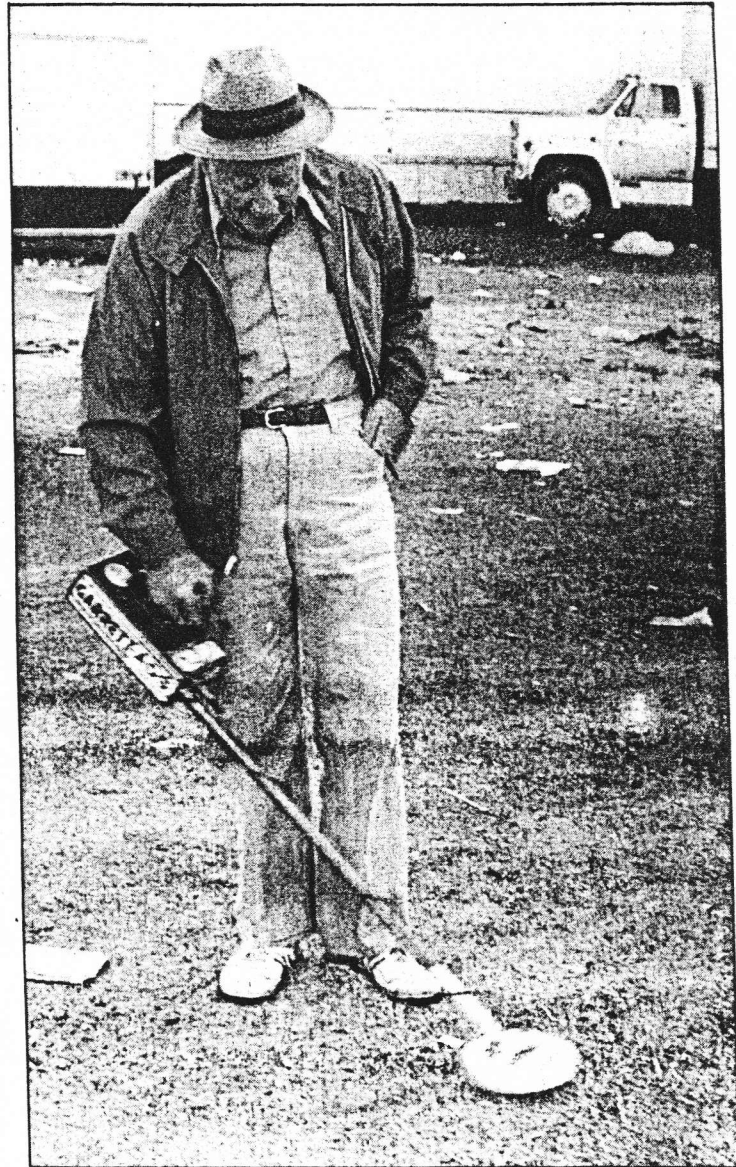
"I guess I was one of the first ones in these parts with a metal detector. I've worn out several of them. It's exercise and I get out of the house a little bit," he said.

Herndon said his best after-fair take was "\$14 or \$15."

"It doesn't take long to find when it's here," he said. "This year I haven't found \$1. I hadn't found enough to buy a cup of coffee. I haven't worked in 10 or 11 years. I'm on social security. That don't get it. This helps a little dab."

"I haven't seen the regular crowd this year (out looking for coins). I saw one fella that had found 15 cents. I got out here about five after 8. I can't get cranked up early like some of them."

"I'm about ready to call it a day. But you never know what you'll find. That's what keeps you interested."



JAMES PALMER/Macon Telegraph and News

James Herndon was a bit disappointed by finds from this year's fair