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TIME FOR KIDS

Tales in Tennessee

A festival brings storytellers together

Brenda Wong Aoki wove a tale about her California childhood.

HOW DID THE KANGAROO GET its tail? Why does the turtle have a shell? What's it like to attend a tough city school?

For answers, all you have to do is find your way to Jonesboro, Tennessee, where the National Storytelling Festival holds its annual gathering. Last weekend, more than 10,000 people poured into Jonesboro, a tiny southern town that is usually home to only about 4,000, for the biggest storytelling festival in the country.

When the festival began 29 years ago, the art of storytelling seemed to be dying out in America. "At our first festival we had only 60 people sitting around an old farm wagon," recalls Jimmy Neil Smith, a festival founder and former mayor of Jonesboro. The festival has grown from that one wagon to six huge tents packed with people who laugh and cry as they listen to the best storytellers in the world.

Why has storytelling become so popular? Perhaps it's because stories help us understand our past—and maybe even our future. "Long ago,

when there were no books, no movies, no TV, it was the storyteller's job to unravel the universe, explain why there are stars in the sky, why we laugh and cry," says storyteller Brenda Wong Aoki.

"Everyone can be a good storyteller. That's what we do every day,"



Children of all ages listened and enjoyed the stories.

says Syd Lieberman, a former English teacher and wonderful Chicago storyteller. "When you say, 'Mom, listen to what happened today,' that's the beginning of a story." The trick to telling a good story, Lieberman advises, is to not be afraid of the truth. "Stories aren't always about the smiling moments," he says.

Do you know a good story? Maybe next year you'll come to the 30th annual festival and swap a tale with the pros! —By Susan Seliger