

It was a busy time at Pekin Park during the afternoon of July 4. After the parade wined down, guests poured into the park's outdoor shelter to watch several performances and competitions take place at the park's stage area. And though the brutal heat forced the bouncy houses across the way to shut down hours early, the rising temperatures couldn't slow down the energy that Pekin's local youth and entertainers were demonstrating on stage.

First up was the annual 4th of July Queen competition. This year 15 young ladies vied for the title that was eventually claimed by Gabrielle Gibson. Samantha Calloway was chosen as 1st Runner-up and Savannah Robinson was 2nd Runner-up. Jazzmin Tabor was named Miss Congeniality and Haley Mullins was this year's Queen's Float winner.

A new program for this year's festivities was "Buster Crockett's Barber Shop". Long time barber Crockett and several of his family members and close friends gathered together on stage to tell a few of the many stories that circulated through his shop back in the day. The Pekin Betterment Organization hopes that the Barber Shop segment will become a yearly staple at future celebrations.

Steve "Spoonman" Tankersley later gave Buster the "Key to Pekin" as a token of the town's appreciation for Crockett's many years of services. However, Tankersley cautioned him that "it hasn't opened any door I've tried it on so far." The Spoonman returned shortly afterwards with Grease Gravy members Stephen and Nancy Dickey to play an energetic set of classic bluegrass tunes like "Old Joe Clark" and "Burglar Boy" that got the crowd clapping and tapping along.

The annual Prince and Princess competitions also took place later that day. Every child who entered was a winner, but some stood out from the crowd like Connor Elliot, who was decked out in a full-blown Uncle Sam outfit for the occasion. In the end, Chaylee Byrd was crowned 2012's 4th of July Princess and Reese Wineinger was chosen as this year's Prince. Runners-up were Emma Grace Hart and Lila Jean Blevins, and Anakin McCormick and Alexzander McNally, respectively.

With the announcing of the new Prince and Princess, Pekin's 182nd Fourth of July celebration officially came to a close. Despite the hot, summer weather the festival was well attended and turned into another successful Independence Day for Pekin, the small town with big American pride.