

Short Story

By the Time We Got to Woodstock
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In June and July of 1969, my friends and I were exposed to a variety of ads in local newspapers and over the radio which announced a unique festival of peace and music in a tranquil setting in upstate New York. Sullivan County, New York was only a three hour drive from where we lived in Bloomfield, Connecticut.

The concert was to take place over a weekend with major acts appearing on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, August 15th to 17th, 1969. The tickets were a staggering \$7 per day, or \$21 in total, which was a big sum to high school kids. Many of us sent away for tickets in advance, and as that second week in August approached, we were as high as kites as we prepared to make our way to the Woodstock Music Festival.

I went with Mike Delitesso and Bonnie Gautreau, along with two of their friends, in Mike's station wagon. My best friend, Peter, went in another car departing about an hour and a half after us. BHS classmates, Don DeGruttola, Dave Simpson, Greg DerBogoshian, and I think Tom Griffith, departed that same day. Rick Eden, Steve Brady and others were there as well

Mike's goal was to get to the Natural Amphitheater, at Yasgur's Farm, where all the action would take place, by about three in the afternoon. The first act, Richie Havens, was scheduled to go on at four.

We arrived in Sullivan County itself with plenty of time to spare, but didn't realize that the last ten miles or so would take us more than an hour. We crawled along, and noticed that people were streaming in from every direction – on bikes, walking, in minivans, and even buses.

As we listened to the radio, it became clear that every high school and college-aged kid in the Northeast had heard of some message about Woodstock. If they were asked, the promoters claimed that 100,000 tickets would be sold, but no more. I had only been in large football stadiums housing forty to fifty thousand people, so I had an idea of how many people 100,000 would be.

We parked our car several hundred yards away from the opening gate. It wasn't possible to get any closer. We went into a market in town to find that almost everything on every shelf was gone. We bought up what we could and continued on.

No Gate, No Fence

We were walking for quite some time and did not see any gate or any place to show our tickets. Within a few more minutes we were actually in sight of the stage way down the hill at the bottom of the Natural Amphitheater, perhaps a hundred or a hundred fifty yards away.

We asked some long-haired, hippy type where the gate was and he said, "You're standing on it, man!" Sure enough, when we looked down, the chain-link fence meant to define the perimeter of the festival, deciding who gets in and does not, had been trampled down to the ground and covered over in about an inch of solid mud.

We had paid for nothing, because this was now a free concert. There was no gate, nobody collecting tickets, and nobody keeping score. I immediately tossed my tickets to the ground. Why carry anything extra during this three-day event in which everything you owned was on your back? (Today of course the tickets sell on eBay for thousands of dollars each.)

My friends and I claimed some space about 150 yards from the stage, directly up the middle of the amphitheater, in other words you might have called it centerfield. I was curious however, to see what it would be like to move up closer. I owned two of Richie Havens' albums and thought he was a great performer.

So temporarily ditching my friends, I made my way around the untold numbers of blankets, sleeping bags, towels, and little settlements that had sprung up everywhere. There was no quick access to anything inside the Amphitheater. Several minutes later, having walked the seventy yards or so, I stopped about forty yards from the stage just before Richie Havens was about to perform.

Risking Hearing Loss

There were scads of people on stage, fiddling with wires and mics, turning dials, and all the while pretending to look official. When Richie Havens began singing, however, I was totally unprepared for the volume of sound coming from the speakers. I thought I was going to lose my hearing. I had never encountered anything at that decibel level before. I quickly covered my ears with my hands. I looked around, but no one else was doing the same. As Richie Havens sang on, I quickly made my way back, even as more people had filled in the remaining spaces. The music was still loud, but passable.

I thought to myself, don't people know that hearing loss can be permanent? Maybe it was something in the air that was temporarily impairing them. So many people were smoking marijuana, and who knows what else, that to take a breath was to become stoned. The noticeable aroma saturated the air and there was no getting around it. I had never touched pot in my life, and though the smell was odd, I was still happy to be there. It was a great day in August to be listening to some of the top rock groups around.

As one act after another came on, at one point, I noticed that on the far left of the amphitheater stood a row of portable johns. As with so many other elements of this festival, there were few alternatives to the vital necessities. I made my way over to the lines that had formed in front of each one of the porter johns.

Port a Poo

After many minutes it was my turn. The stench, particularly when someone opened up one of the doors, was already overwhelming. As I made my way into one of the booths, I couldn't help but notice that the pile of human waste was already approaching the top of the toilet. In order to let nature take its course, one could no longer sit down on the toilet seat for risk of encountering you-know-what.

You had to stand and carefully deliver your shot. Whatever meager rolls of toilet paper had initially been installed were apparently long gone. I was so glad my mother always told me to carry an extra tissue or two. I couldn't think of a time in my life when I would need them more.

What the movies and books and everything that has been written about Woodstock never tell you, is that the set changes between one act and the next often took between thirty and forty-five minutes. Therefore, instead of holding to the schedule which looked so good on paper, and listed musical acts to end no later than midnight, the performances continued on until about three or four in the morning.

Making an End Run

By Saturday morning, all of the stores in town had everything cleaned out. Department stores, grocery stores, and anybody selling anything had sold it all. The backpacks were gone, umbrellas were gone, boxes were gone, sneakers were gone, bread was gone, and milk was gone. Even Twinkies and Hostess Cupcakes were gone.

Amazingly, Mike made it back to his car, and we high-tailed it out of town before the rest of the masses awoke, and crossed the line into Pennsylvania. We found a market and loaded up the car with as much food as we could. As equally miraculously as our easy exit, we made our way back into town and found a parking space about a hundred yards farther from where we had been. We then made the long trek back to the amphitheater, but at least we would not starve. We might not be able to go to the bathroom, but we could keep eating.

Saturday's opening afternoon acts were lightweights, compared to what was to follow in the evening. In a sequence that I'll never forget, and which has never been rivaled anytime else in my life, I saw Canned Heat, Sly and the Family Stone, Jefferson Airplane, Janis Joplin, and The Who. Saturday's concerts ended at about four in the morning.

To Breath was to Get Stoned

The air was saturated with the smell of marijuana, and people clung to their knapsacks and sleeping bags for dear life, as an August night in upstate New York can get chilly. Hippies were all around us. There were so many long-haired hippies, it seemed like the whole country was like this.

On Sunday, the day started even more slowly than Saturday. People were really groggy. I guess non-stop marijuana use will do that to you. Some didn't get up until past

noon. When the early afternoon acts did finally begin, it started raining. Not a summer rain like you might imagine, but a freezing, pelting rain.

I had been up near the top of the amphitheater, away from my group, on a mission of exploration. I was only wearing shorts and flip-flops. I had no towel and no hat. When the rain came down, it was freezing, and I was completely unprepared.

There was no place to turn. There was a sea of humanity in every direction. Now, knapsacks, sleeping bags, towels, and blankets were getting soaked. In another hour, the entire amphitheater would be converted to a mud bath.

Cold Autumn Rain, to Mud Plain

As the film documentaries show, tens of thousands of sleeping bags were abandoned after the festival. They were too muddy to take back and certainly too dirty to put in anyone's car. I looked around for any possible shelter as the rain grew heavier. There was nothing except for the trailer sections of some trucks that had been parked on stilts towards the back of the amphitheater.

I was a few dozen yards away from the trailers, which meant it would take me many minutes navigating past the crowds that now occupied every square inch of the amphitheater. As I finally made it to the first trailer, I took a look at the bunker of cinder blocks on which one side of the trailer rested, while the wheels of the trailer supported it on the other.

Was it solid? Could I get under it safely? We're talking tons of weight here. One slip, and I would be a goner. I quickly assessed the sturdiness of the cinder block bunker. I gave the trailer a light shove, but it was like pushing against the wall of a building. There was about three feet of space underneath, I could hunch down, and ride out the storm. To my surprise, nobody else followed suit.

It was still cold, and I was shivering with no let up, but at least I was out of the rain. I had plenty of room under the trailer and I wondered how long would this storm last. Who knew? I didn't have a watch, and there was no music emanating from the stage – it was far too dangerous with the amps and electrical equipment. There was no lightning, but the sky was gray and foreboding.

Perhaps an hour later, the rain subsided. Then, a little bit of sun shone through, and it looked like we might actually have a day. I made my way back to my friends' settlement. Mike had an announcement to make. He said that if we didn't take off before dark, we might be stuck in town for hours. We all had to agree.

Head for the Hills

At three or four in the afternoon in late August, there is still plenty of daylight, but we feared that the mass exodus from this festival might become a mass traffic snarl that could last for untold hours. So, we decided to depart by five. This means we would not see Crosby, Stills, and Nash; we would not see Country Joe and the Fish; we would

not see Jimi Hendrix. Even as high-schoolers, we knew sometimes you had to make tough choices, and this was one we all agreed upon.

However, as luck would have it, we were about an hour out of town when Mike's car broke down. It was late on a Sunday night; we were in a small town, and no service stations were open. So we camped out once again, some sleeping in the car, some sleeping near it.

At the crack of dawn, we rolled it into a service station where we waited a couple hours before getting back on the road again, eighteen hours after we had departed from Woodstock. Unbeknownst to us, the Sunday sessions went to about five in the morning, the longest and latest of all. Still, an hour from the epicenter, heading towards Connecticut when most others would be heading towards New York, Philadelphia, Syracuse, etc., the roads weren't too bad.

We made our way back to Bloomfield, Mike dropped each of us off, and I remember thinking, the only thing I want to do now is sleep. I said "Hi" to my mother, made my way up to my bed, and didn't get up until about eight or nine that night. Even then, I awoke only for an hour or two, then crashed again 'til the next morning.

The Happening

When my parents showed me the newspapers, I was amazed. Instead of the 100,000 ticket buyers who were scheduled to show up, 500,000 had shown up. Woodstock had been a national and perhaps international phenomenon. There was coverage on the nightly news. It made the headlines of the Connecticut papers. The mass exodus that we wished to avoid, in particular, was highlighted on the news.

After two days, reporters and their TV cameras had a chance to do the work.

I had been a part of "the defining moment" of my generation. I can assure you that it didn't feel like a defining moment, although it was certainly something I would not have wanted to miss. My friends and I had always been responsible. If some of them smoked marijuana that weekend, I didn't know about it. I was unprepared for the behavior of the masses at Woodstock.

I also remember thinking, "So this is the generation who's going to move into positions of power?" Sell-outs, if you ask me. All kinds of principles in their youth, few of which they managed to hang onto very long as soon as the reality of competing for jobs, of paying mortgages, and of raising children set in.

As time passed, it occurred to me that more and more people were claiming to have attended Woodstock. I had a pretty good idea of who had attended from my hometown. When I went to college, I was kind of surprised at the frequency of times I would encounter someone who told me they had been to Woodstock. Quickly, I surmised, a lot of people were lying. They said they had been there because apparently, to the non-attendees, it seemed to be de rigueur.

So, You Attended, Too?

I developed my own little test to determine who had been there for real, and who had not. For example, everybody knew about the musical acts because it was published in the papers and recited on radio stations. But non-attendees would have little chance at knowing about the particulars of everyday life, such as where you could shop for food, where you could go to the bathroom, where you could get medical aid, and so forth.

Likewise, the non-attendees had no idea that the fence had actually been trampled down to the ground and then disappeared. From the logistics, to the mechanics, to the smell of the air, I could quickly surmise who had actually been there and who had not. I never put anybody down when I caught them, and in fact I didn't even let them know. I just smiled within and thought to myself, "Good grief it was only three days! There will probably be other concerts."

Little did I know.