

Lessons I Learned at Woodstock

By Kenton Pass

Was it really almost 38 years ago that Woodstock happened? For those of you who sadly weren't there, it was just another crazy music festival of that era, something you have had to hear about over and over for decades.

But for the lucky 300,000 to 500,000 (estimates still vary) souls who somehow simultaneously converged on Max Yasgur's farmland in August of 1969, it was much more than rain and rock and roll.

Every once in awhile, but not often enough, I run into another survivor of the 60's who experienced the event simply known as "Woodstock". I am always eager to hear their memories like, what bands they saw, where they slept or how they dealt with the incredible mud? I save my favorite question for last - how did Woodstock affect them on a personal level, then and since?

Their answers are scattered between the laid back ("I like to remember how peaceful it was, man.") to the agonizingly intense ("My life has never been the same. I've always wanted to go back and live there.").

Personally, I've thought about Woodstock quite a bit over the years and I'm sure, at my age, the old memories are probably a little askew from the actual events. But, nevertheless, they are my memories of an amazing time in our country's cultural history and I like to think I learned a few positive lessons:

Plan for the unexpected

I have read that the promoters expected maybe 40,000 to 50,000 people to show up. In reality, they didn't have enough port-a-potties, toilet paper, concession stands, drinks or anything else to support 10,000 folks, much less than half a million. Since then, I don't go anywhere without taking everything I need to get by, whether it's camping, biking or to Red Rocks for a concert. As it was, we survived for over three days, everyone happily sharing what they had (easy to laugh about now).

Be careful of strangers bearing gifts

I remember sitting down on the ground that first day with thousands of other excited, crazy kids, listening to the bands and watching the storm clouds together. I

also vividly remember seeing gallon jugs of brightly colored kool-aid being passed around from mouth to mouth. I don't remember much else about that first day.

Be flexible - go with the flow

The day before the music started, 10 of us arrived at the festival grounds in my old Ford window van - my friend Steve and I and eight motley hitchhikers we had picked up between Georgia and New York. No one had a concert ticket except one guy from New Jersey. On the very first morning, I found myself in front of the locked main gates, ready to get things started. Evidently, some of the more impatient attendees didn't see any potential in waiting for the official grand opening and they started testing the structural integrity of the surrounding fence. I remember hearing an older guy's voice yell out, "This should be a free concert!" And suddenly with a rush and a heave forward, a miracle happened and I didn't need a ticket after all!

You never know who your real friends are

Woodstock was held near the town of Bethel, N.Y., on the edge of the Catskill Mountains and is a haven for summer vacationers and folks escaping the city heat. By the end of the first day, the food concessions were empty and abandoned and many of us were hiking into nearby villages searching for nourishment.

I remember walking down one pretty forest lane lined with small, rustic cabins. Quite a few of the occupants were elderly Jewish folks and they had heard that kids from the festival might be hungry. They responded by setting up card tables along the road with little homemade sandwiches and Dixie cups of juice and water, all free for the taking and gratefully accepted. One poor man had the mistaken idea of trying to make a profit by selling his tiny cups of water and I remember seeing his table actually knocked over and scattered - not by any hungry, desperate kids, but by two indignant, little blue-haired ladies.

Always have an exit strategy

Early the first morning, my friend Bram from Texas begged to borrow my van to "run" into New York to pick up some kids he knew who needed a ride. Why the hell I would even consider letting go of my transportation as well as my shelter was entirely moronic, but off Bram drove.

Of, course, at the time, neither of us had any idea of the masses of cars streaming towards the festival. As the traffic jams started piling up, we found out later that tens of thousands of kids simply abandoned their vehicles and began hiking towards the music.

Bram made it to NYC, found his friends, but only got back as close as downtown Bethel, several miles away from the festival. Somehow, on the third day, I came face to

face with Bram on a narrow trail in the woods, retrieved the keys and eventually located my van parked next to the Bethel Fire Station. In those days before cell phones, I could have easily been hopelessly left behind with no way to get home to Atlanta. Always have a fallback plan.

These lessons and many more have stayed with me all of these years, proving my parents wrong when they worriedly asked a long-haired kid of 17, “Why can’ t you just go to summer camp like a normal kid?”