

Our Inception

By Neil Whitmoyer

S.H.A.R.E. Fest, formerly Sandy Hollow Festival, began in the fall of 1990 in Perry County, PA, on fifteen acres of meadow and woodland owned by Mark Whitmoyer. Mark's homestead is tucked away in the relative seclusion of Sandy Hollow, and includes his house and garage, an old stone springhouse and a rustic barn overlooking a spring-fed pond. The pond is surrounded by meadows, which are surrounded by forested ridges, all resting near the eastern end of the county. Rural Perry County is peopled by a mix of "good old boys and girls" with deep roots in this rocky soil, and "newcomers" who mostly commute to the Harrisburg/Carlisle area. One can live in Perry County for many years and still be a "newcomer".

In 1989 Mark's brother Neil Whitmoyer began playing music with some new friends from around the Susquehanna Valley, including guitarists Mike Banks and Bill Rogers, percussionist Lance Clewett, singer Conni Weller, and bassist Jason Hollar. Earth Day 1990 marked the beginning of a modest series of musical/environmental gatherings, hosted by Neil at his cabin on Rattlesnake Ridge, near Sandy Hollow. Meanwhile, Mark had established a tradition of autumn gatherings in Sandy Hollow, featuring volleyball, bonfires, food and drink, acoustic music, that sort of thing. When Neil's events outgrew the cabin, he and Mark blended the two circles of friends into one larger gathering, on September 29, 1990. This is the event that is often referred to as the first Sandy Hollow

Festival, because the festivals grew directly out of this get-together.

The debate goes on as to how many festivals have actually taken place, and one reason for this uncertainty is whether to include fall 1990. While certainly festive, it was hardly what most people would call a festival. Roughly fifty people, many of whom pitched tents for the night, danced to thrown-together live music, burned a lot of firewood, ate potluck food, and discussed the issues of the day into the wee hours. The hat was passed to raise a donation for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. But more importantly, a magical seed was planted that weekend.

That seed germinated into the "Free Spirit Potluck Club", propelled by a "live wire", recent Canadian immigrant Shawn Drain, along with her American husband Dave. The Drains shared their abundant energy and helped us through the winter with events like the "Cabin Fever Survival Dance". Neil, Mike, Conni and friends provided live music. These and other events that sprang up from the Sandy Hollow event helped to foster the roots music scene in central PA. The aforementioned musicians formed the band that's known today as Flying Colors. The band still plays at S.H.A.R.E. festivals and other events around central PA.

Mark and Neil Whitmoyer, together with Mike Banks and a broader group of friends, decided to stage a more organized event the following spring. On May 18, 1991 the first Sandy Hollow Festival took place, and while still small by festival

standards, it was a success by any measure. Ideas for a permanent stage and dance floor floated about. So far the makeshift stage had been next to the paved road, and a permanent location was tested out for the fall '91 event. A more substantial, but still temporary, stage was built for the October 12-13 festival, beneath one of the two gigantic Sycamores in Mark's yard. To avoid cutting any more lumber than necessary, since this stage was still temporary, it was built rather tall, and came to be known amongst the musicians as the "Nosebleed Stage".

Up to this point the live music ran only on Saturday. But on Sunday of the rain-soaked fall '91 festival a new band formed on the spot, when Canadian country star Cameron Molloy appeared on the scene like an apparition in his clean clothing and spotless, white Stetson, and began singing and playing his guitar for the mud-covered masses. One by one, the musicians on hand woke to the music and made their way to the stage, which was the only dry place anyway. Add bass, add drums, two more guitars, mandolin, congas, even a little flute. Cameron's solo set morphed into an eight-piece band, and lasted seven solid hours. The Sandy Hollow Boog Band was born, and to this day the boys still thrill S.H.A.R.E. Fest crowds with their lively country rock, and they still have a way of drawing in the rain.

By the spring of '92 a permanent stage had been built for the Memorial Day weekend event, and the addition of Friday night music was kicked off by local musical legends, Trick Bag. A unique feature of the spring '92 gathering is that on

Sunday the entire festival, tents and sound system and all, moved five miles to Warm Springs Lodge, and merged with another sizeable gathering.

Meanwhile the music never stopped. Flying Colors was playing to capacity crowds around central PA and amassing a sizeable mailing list, which was included in the festival mailings. The fall '92 festival, over Labor Day weekend, was so well attended that the grounds and the volunteer staff were nearly overwhelmed. As a result of this sobering experience, several measures were enacted over the winter, including the formation of the non-profit Sandy Hollow Arts and Recreation for the Environment (S.H.A.R.E.). The tough decision was made to hold the festivals by invitation-only, thus limiting attendance to a manageable size crowd of like-minded people. S.H.A.R.E. has always strived to create a family-friendly atmosphere.

A strong if loosely knit family was forming around the festivals and related activities. Unlike the early days when a very few people wore many hats and worked themselves to exhaustion, dozens of volunteers showed up at organized work weekends to prepare for the events. S.H.A.R.E. had taken on a life of its own, and the feeling of community was so strong that sometimes even two gatherings a year seemed like not enough. This desire for a community of kindred people contributed mightily to the popularity of Flying Colors, who were performing more and more frequently around the area. The band became a miniature Sandy

Hollow Festival on the road, and people crowded the venues as much for the good company as for the music.

By May 21-23, 1993 the spring festival had settled on the second weekend after Mothers' Day, while the fall dates moved to accommodate Perry County's Little Buffalo Festival of the Arts, due to overlapping interests. Despite the "invitation only" status, attendance was growing again, and jumped considerably on October 1-3. Flying Colors' sphere was expanding as well, and shows outside central PA generated new connections with regional bands. Many had been hearing about the Sandy Hollow Festivals, and wanted to play there. The Giant Pandas, Solar Circus (now Juggling Suns) and Grinch were amongst the first regional bands to grace the S.H.A.R.E. stage. Despite the fact that festival bands receive a fraction of their normal price, the quality of bands queuing to play the festivals increased to the point where Flying Colors relinquished their automatic Saturday night timeslot to accommodate all the talent. The S.H.A.R.E. crowd can't be beat when it comes to bringing out the best in their performers, and there's never been a band that didn't want to come back for more.

As the festival grew, unfortunately so did the friction with some of the locals. Even though no ordinances were being violated, and the festivals were peaceful, clean and respectful, some people evidently feel threatened by anything different, and the good-old-boy network closed in on S.H.A.R.E. In 1998, in a backhanded move the Carroll Township Supervisors accused S.H.A.R.E. of running an illegal

campground, and presented the group with the choice of following the township's unreasonable guidelines for running a campground, or facing a costly legal battle. Unrelated conflicts within the S.H.A.R.E. circle had left the membership in a hard place even prior to the township's attack on the group, and the will to take on an even bigger fight simply wasn't there. Sadly, the final Sandy Hollow Festival in Sandy Hollow had already passed, and no one knew it.

As much as everyone loved Sandy Hollow, it was not the physical location, but this grouping of free-spirited people that was unique, and strong of spirit. This was demonstrated by the fact that from the time the decision was made to find a new location for the festival, only eighteen days passed until the spring '97 event materialized. The show went on at a previously undeveloped location, also in Perry County. One could write a short story about this gargantuan effort alone, from clearing underbrush to moving tons of gear (including an entire stage). It was a defining moment in the history of S.H.A.R.E. People began to realize how important it was to one another to keep coming together.

The immediate availability of this alternative site helped the festival stay alive, but it didn't turn out to be well suited for the long run. By fall 2000 the festival had moved to a for-rent facility far west of Harrisburg near the Maryland border. After two tries at this venue the energy still wasn't right, so S.H.A.R.E. decided not to go back, even though no alternative had been secured. Burnout was setting in, along with fears that the group might not hold together. Even this

exceptionally peace-loving group of kind souls, it turns out, was not immune from internal conflict and small-scale politics. Volunteerism dropped off and some of the original key players fell away. The remaining core players were feeling a lack of support. The music seemed to be fading.

In a pivotal move, S.H.A.R.E. decided to try a no-bands weekend campout at a site closer to home, for fall 2001. This proved to be a defining moment in S.H.A.R.E.'s history because ... the people came! Many of the extended family showed up. This gathering fostered long healing circles where people really poured their hearts out about what S.H.A.R.E. means to them. It was beautiful and rejuvenating.

This gathering also generated the first extended email list, which immediately connected the community in a much tighter way. Even as the group searched for yet another new home, most people still referred to the festivals as Sandy Hollow Festival, reflecting the feeling that came out of the fall '01 gathering. Sandy Hollow represents more than merely the geographical roots of S.H.A.R.E. It is spirit, and it is this collective spirit that doesn't die.

It is tempting to list the fall 2001 gathering as one of the festivals, which helps to further explain the confusion about how many festivals have been held. Another major development of this gathering was the offer to use yet another venue for the next festival. In spring 2002 the festival moved to a farm located between Harrisburg and

York. This location worked out through spring festival 2003, but once again the group was compelled to move.

It seemed that time might run out and another festival be skipped, when a S.H.A.R.E. member from up the Susquehanna steered the group towards a user-friendly, "plug-in-and-go" facility in the hills of Union County. Beginning with the fall 2003 festival, this excellent venue has become S.H.A.R.E.'s home. The SHARE crowd enjoys the hot showers and modern kitchen, among other features. Even hurricane Ivan in September 2004 couldn't ruin the event at this superior facility.

Neil Whitmoyer is contemplating an expanded, more detailed history of S.H.A.R.E., and is looking for contributions from S.H.A.R.E. members, particularly the "long-timers". Amazingly there is no complete record, for example, of which bands performed at which festivals. And the possibilities for "side stories" are huge. Neil is asking you to take some time and write about your own personal SHARE experience(s). How did you come into the circle? What's the funniest thing you ever saw at a festival? How has your involvement in S.H.A.R.E. changed your life? Or your children's lives? What was your reaction the first time you saw Star Camp? What bands most impressed you? You get the idea. You don't need to be a good writer. Neil will take care of the editing, etc. Feel free to contact Neil with contributions, ideas or questions at schlappy@earthlink.net.