

Beyond the Myth:

A deeper look at the 1969 Woodstock Festival

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The host of the Woodstock Festival, and town of Bethel, New York resident Max Yasgur said, “half a million kids can get together for fun and music and have nothing but fun and music.”¹. Attendees of the festival did not let Max Yasgur down, as they stayed three days without a single violent act. Max Yasgur should have thanked his neighbors and the National Guard. It is more surprising that residents of Bethel New York managed to stay peaceful. That part of the story is often left out. The story of the 1969 Woodstock Festival is based mostly on oral history, therefore it has largely become a mythical event. It is world renowned as a successful concert, where the “hippies” proved that free love works. This interpretation is very common, but clouds the complete history of the concert. It tells nothing about the profit driven corporation who promoted the concert, or how the idea for the festival was unmarketable, and found opposition in the majority of potential buyers. That in the end, the festival obtained necessary permits through backdoor dealings that defied zoning laws, and ignored local opinion. The Woodstock Festival was a complete business failure for the Woodstock Ventures Corporation, a political battle between the local government and residents of the town of Bethel New York, and was a social success only because the National Guard and local citizens organized to bring the crowd the necessary resources.

In late 1960 there was a growing “counterculture”, largely made up of people under the age of thirty who were questioning the purpose of American Society. William Doyle describes the development of this rebellious generation, “a deep social division known as the generation gap, separated parents from children, [and] half a million mostly

¹ “On This Day”, (August 18, 1969), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthistday/>: (accessed March 19, 2006)

young people removed themselves”.²These “hippies, longhairs, or freaks” as they became known, lived outside cultural norms. They grew their hair long, attempted to give up capitalistic, competitive American ideals, and advocated communal living and free love. Many people fear things they don’t understand, and the new “hippie” culture was no different.

The Woodstock Festival attracted “hippies” from all over the United States. The nearly half-million rock and roll fans, became the largest gathering of counterculture youths. The musicians brought the counterculture ideals into the public eye through radio, television, and extensive touring. Their music was displeasing to the over thirty crowd, therefore it greatly appealed to the new social group developing from the generation gap. Artists such as Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix, created more than just music, they had a significant influence on the youth. Many of the Sixties most popular artists were featured at the Woodstock Music and Arts Festival. That is one reason why it is recognized as the culmination of everything the counter culture had idolized, and proved the drawing power of the music and musicians. Still today the festival associated almost exclusively with the “hippie” counterculture.

The idea for the Woodstock Festival developed from the realization that there was a lot of money to be made from the constantly growing counterculture. Artie Kornfeld, Michael Lang, John Roberts and Joel Rosenman saw their opportunity to tap into this market. Roberts and Rosenman were both from wealthy families. They were two young men searching for something to do with their lives. As John Roberts explains, “the only

² Michael Doyle, Statement on the Historical and Cultural Significance of the 1969 Woodstock Festival Site, (Indiana: Ball State University, 2001), p. 9

problem was that we did not have enough business experience.... So we decided to solve that problem by taking out an ad in the Wall Street Journal: Young Men with Unlimited capital looking for interesting and legitimate business ideas”.³ Kornfeld and Lang represented the more counterculture of the four. Michael Lang was an aspiring musician and Artie Kornfeld was vice president of Capitol Records. Kornfeld and Lang answered Roberts and Rosenman’s advertisement and together they formed a company called Woodstock Ventures. This corporation’s first goal was to produce a concert to help raise funds for a music studio.

The Woodstock Music and Arts Festival was not supposed to be a protest concert similar to the “be ins” happening in California during this time. As historian Michael Doyle explains the “be in” concerts were, “a cultural form for evoking an alternative community in place, and garnered the counterculture's first coverage by the national news media. Dozens of be-ins and love-ins were organized across the country”⁴. The group had set out on this business venture to make money for a studio. With creation of Woodstock Ventures Corporation, and the vision of enormous profits uniting the four business partners, the company began production. As Joel Rosenman explains, “we wrote up a shareholders agreement among the four of us....that we would take the proceeds of the festival and build a recording studio”⁵. The whole idea began because two wealthy entrepreneurs signed legally binding contracts with two musicians with the goal of becoming even wealthier.

³ Joel Makower, Woodstock: The Oral History, (New York: Bantam DoubleDay Dell Publishing, 1989), p.24

⁴ Doyle, Statement on the Historical and Cultural Significance, p.3

⁵ Makower, Woodstock: The Oral History, p. 36

Woodstock Ventures wanted to gain profits through marketing their concert to the under thirty-counterculture group. Their hope was that ticket sales would be in the twenty five thousand range, with the price costing attendees about six dollars a day, and if the sales even came near 100,000 they would make incredible profits⁶. This miscalculation became a costly mistake. Costly not only to Woodstock Ventures, the larger than anticipated crowd caused environmental, travel, and legal problems for a sizeable portion of New York State. For Woodstock Ventures it cost millions of dollars as rock journalist Simon Warner explains, “advance ticket sales had generated \$1.3 million and first day sales of \$140,000 had raised the total to 1.5 million, expenses would run close to 2 million.”⁷ These finical problems were only an afterthought for the partners in Woodstock Ventures, because their first big problem was finding someone, and somewhere that would allow the festival.

The Woodstock Ventures Corporation’s drive to produce the Woodstock Festival grew stronger as time continued. Even without a guaranteed location, advance tickets sales fared well, promotions generated a good buzz, and mostly everything fell into place. With the exception of where the actual concert would be. Originally Lang had planned for a site near Woodstock, New York. The preliminary negotiations fell though because no landowners wanted to lease their property. Essentially Woodstock Ventures was not a corporation that people wanted to make a deal with. As the search expanded beyond the Woodstock area the frustration continued as Roseman explains, “we walked into the room and were essentially stonewalled and kicked out by this guy, who seemed to be

⁶ Makower, *Woodstock: The Oral History*, p. 36

⁷ Andy Bennet, *Remembering Woodstock*, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), p. 60

amused by our request to rent his property. He had a little fun and then kicked us out”⁸. Eventually they met a farmer named Howard Mills from Wallkill, New York. Mills was willing to let them use his land for ten thousand dollars. Only because after the concert cleared out, he had plans to have an industrial park built there.

Woodstock Ventures were accepted at first, only because the locals from Wallkill may not have realized what type of business there were dealing with. In Wallkill Woodstock Ventures quickly became scrutinized by locals for drug use. The company’s administrative troubleshooter Joel Rosenman, had the ingenious idea of circulating a memo, which announced it was a company policy to discipline strongly anybody caught with illegal drugs. Rosenman thought it would calm the locals. In actuality it had the opposite effect as he explains, “it just gave them further evidence that we were a bunch of criminals with long hair. Druggies”⁹. This was the beginning of the end of the Wallkill location.

The corporation did everything it could to make Wallkill a success, but it marked Woodstock Ventures first failure, as local residents soon turned against the concert. At first the zoning board in Wallkill, had led the corporation to believe, it would not have problems getting the necessary permits¹⁰. When public outcry increased and the town-building inspector refused to grant permits for the stage, the partners knew they would need legal assistance¹¹. Woodstock Ventures hired Sam Eager, a son of a state Supreme Court justice to lead their fight with the local government. During meetings with the town board, local citizens raised many questions about the impact of the concert. Not simply

⁸ Makower, Woodstock: The Oral History, p. 56

⁹ Makower, Woodstock: The Oral History, p. 89

¹⁰ Doyle, Statement on the Historical and Cultural Significance, p. 4

¹¹ Albert Winslow, “Show will go on, rock fete promoters boast”, *The Times Herald Record*, 15 July, 1969, p.3

questions about construction plans and the actual concert, but about how it affected the families of Wallkill¹². No matter how many plans, drawings, or contracts the corporation showed the zoning board, it could not answer questions of safety, and morality. As the campground coordinator Stanley Goldstein recalls, “there was a lot of name-calling. There had been threats made that the Millses were going to be bombed out of the house, that there were going to be shotguns and pitchforks, and run the hippies out of town. That we were coming up to infect the whole community with hepatitis and who knows what else”¹³. At this point Woodstock Ventures had spent over five hundred thousand dollars, and did not want to lose the Wallkill sight.¹⁴ The government truly did not want legally allow it and many of the residents did not want any hippy-type people in their town. The locals solidified their case when they presented a petition of over fifty -five “violent objectors” at a town board meeting, and the debates deteriorated into shouting matches.¹⁵ Realizing that the local government would not budge, the corporation pulled out of Wallkill. Rosenman and Roberts believed the concert would never happen, but Lang recalled that, “I don’t ever remember losing hope. There were moments of depression and moments of reflection and times of sitting outside of town halls wondering about the American dream and those kinds of things, and do we really have a system of justice and laws for everyone?”¹⁶ Even though time was running short, in the end the decision was made to forget about the Mill’s location. Many inside the business thought all was lost, but Lang’s dedication to the Woodstock Festival project drove him to find another location.

¹² Makower, Woodstock: The Oral History, p. 95

¹³ Makower, Woodstock: The Oral History, p. 97

¹⁴ Winslow, “Show will go on”, p. 3

¹⁵ “Ruckus erupts as rock fete rocks Wallkill”, *The Times Herald Record*, 13 June, 1969 p.3

¹⁶ Makower, Woodstock: The Oral History, p. 100

With the legal battle over in Wallkill, Woodstock Ventures became desperate, and attempted to find a location no matter the cost. They put out advertisements, Lang took helicopter trips all over upstate New York, and eventually they found a farmer from Sullivan County who was willing to make a deal with the partners. That farmer was Max Yasgur, who historian William Doyle describes as, “a well respected citizen of Bethel Township with [an] extensive holding of rolling hills and woodlands. His health was not good which made him more receptive to deriving income from pursuits other than farming”¹⁷ With Yasgur’s assistance, the corporation obtained the appropriate permits from the Town officials. Although the validity of the permits were challenged heavily by the local citizens right after construction began.

Many residents were against the concert, some held fears similar to those in Wallkill, others felt slighted by the town government. The decision to issue a permit to Woodstock Ventures, did not include the town’s zoning board, and ignored public policy by forgoing the necessary public hearing¹⁸. Many of the town’s residents came to the realization that the government had it’s own agenda. Obviously if the town officials were concerned about the public’s opinions, they would have made Woodstock Ventures apply for permits through the proper channels. Many felt there would be no help from town officials, so on July 28th of 1969, three hundred and twenty two citizens of the town of Bethel signed a petition organized to oppose the concert. The residents saw no other option, because with construction underway, and time running short they were demanding the town board to issue a stop order for the Woodstock Festival.

¹⁷ Doyle, Statement on the Historical and Cultural Significance, p. 5

¹⁸ August 1, 1969, Town Board Meeting, file 241, Office of the Bethel Town Clerk.

Many residents questioned the motives of some of their government, and wanted answers about the legality of the permit given to Woodstock Ventures. At a heated town board meeting on August 1st, the head of the zoning board tried to explain the situation to the angry town citizens:

the people in Woodstock Ventures were under the impression that they had the Green Light. At the informal discussion July 21, 1969 after which the green light statement was made, there were no minutes taken nor was there a vote and no member of the Zoning Board of Appeals was acting in the official capacity of his membership on this board. As a result of this we in no way deem ourselves responsible for any action taken, or progress exercised¹⁹.

This statement did not answer any questions regarding how a permit was issued. The zoning board basically stated, that the decision was not made at an official meeting, and that no member of the board was at the private meeting, therefore it was not the zoning board's problem. Citizens now knew that the zoning board was not to blame and they focused on the town board members.

Fed up with the lack of action from the local government, the town's residents took their case to higher level. On August 9th the Bethel petitioners sent a letter to the Sullivan County Supreme Court. Opposers to the concert and the town board were hoping that the courts would rule in favor of the people, and put an end to the concert. The petitioners compiled a list of all the zoning violations, which the town board and the building inspector of Bethel had allowed. In the letter angry citizens claimed, that the town board had given authorization to the building inspector to issue a temporary permit, without the consent of the Town zoning board of appeals. The locals were desperately trying to enforce a law enacted in 1967 that attempted to "promote the health, safety,

¹⁹ August 1, file 241

morals, and general welfare of [Bethel].”²⁰. Three days before the start of the concert the Supreme Court set up a hearing to be held. On August 12th the case went before the county’s Supreme Court, and after several hours of debates the final decision was in favor of Woodstock Ventures.²¹ Woodstock was going to happen in Bethel, regardless of how many zoning laws were broken, and in spite of the over three hundred and twenty two citizens who opposed it.

Many of the townspeople fought the concert on legal grounds, rather than relying on stereotypes and verbal threats. Their local government had made a quick backdoor deal with an outside corporation. The locals felt that their small town could not handle the huge crowds, regardless if they were one hundred thousand hippies or one hundred thousands farmers like themselves. As one citizen clearly argued, “From the standpoint of health, transportation on the narrow dirt or stone-bedded town road, especially Happy Avenue which abuts my 88 acres will be taxed beyond its physical capacity.”²² The citizens of Bethel were put in a very tough spot by their local government. Despite their opposition to concert, Bethel residents did not threaten attendees or Max Yasgur. As historian William Doyle explains, “The same spirit of cooperation that was noted among festival goers was also exhibited by people on farms adjacent to the site and in neighboring communities, many of whom provided housing, food, and water upon hearing of shortages at the site.”²³

Woodstock Ventures didn’t have time to worry about the legal actions being taken by local residents. Two days before the concerts start date, people began to arrive,

²⁰ Camp Chipinaw Inc., to Supreme Court of the State of New York, Sullivan County, 9 August, 1969, petition by Camp Chipinaw, Office of the Bethel Town Clerk, New York

²¹ Lacey Fosburgh, “346 Policeman Quit Music Festival,” *New York Times*, 15 August, 1969, p. 22

²² petition by Camp Chipinaw, Office of the Bethel Town Clerk, New York

²³ Doyle, Statement on the Historical and Cultural Significance, p. 8

creating new problems for Woodstock Ventures, and for Bethel. The corporation scrambled to find a place for all the people and, more importantly their cars. No one was ready for the early arrivals. Woodstock Ventures planned to have a crew of three hundred and forty six, New State police officers to help with crowd control. Unfortunately police commissioner Howard Leary decided to remind all of the officers, that in 1967 moonlighting regulations had been enacted, which forbid policeman to have outside jobs involving security²⁴. Leary deliberately enforced this regulation, because he did not want to have any association, with the Woodstock Festival. By allowing officers to participate in the concert it may have been assumed that New York State Police supported the concert.

With no support from the State government promoters had no choice but to use some of their own already overworked employees. The corporation asked some of the one hundred workers from the Hog Farm Commune assist with security. The commune had originally planned to run a free food stand, as well as organize a treatment center for attendees on bad acid trips. To help with crowd control members of the Hog Farm labeled themselves the “please force” and threatened lawbreakers with seltzer and pies²⁵. In the end the lack of state police inside the festival was perhaps a good thing. The members of the Hog Farm were devout followers of the free love movement. Their peaceful and brotherly manner was contagious, and served as an example to other concertgoers.

The State police also tried to sabotage the concert by arriving later than necessary to direct traffic, a delay that was very costly. The week before the concert, director of operations Wes Pomeroy attempted to set up a plan with state troopers for traffic control.

²⁴ Fosburgh, “346 Policeman Quit Music Festival,” p. 22

²⁵ Doyle, Statement on the Historical and Cultural Significance, p. 5

He tried to explain that massive amounts of people would soon flood the highway, police officials ignored his warnings. According to Pomeroy, “I had a firm commitment from these guys that they would have their people up there at a certain time, and they didn’t show up until almost eight or ten hours later.”²⁶ Woodstock Ventures had over five hundred acres for parking and hired workers to direct people in. But the police were not there in time to keep the highway traffic flowing. The blockage began long before the concert was set to begin, and it truly was the most serious problem as Doyle explains, “It was the first and only time that the state actually closed a portion of the New York Thruway, after festival goers, trapped in a seemingly endless traffic jam that in places featured four, sometimes five columns of vehicles splayed across a two-lane turnpike, simply abandoned their cars and set off for the festival site on foot.”²⁷ Those who abandoned their cars and headed for the concert grounds found a similar scene when they arrived. Thousands of people were ready for the concert, but the concert was hardly ready for them.

The traffic jam that ensued due to the lack of State police involvement became one of the most notorious problems of the concert because no one inside the block could get out. This had a terrible effect on the local farmers, especially the dairy farmers whose milk trucks couldn’t pick up their daily shipments. As one farmer explains, “the boys just milked the cows then dumped the milk over the side.”²⁸ Many fields were ruined as

²⁶ Makower, *Woodstock: The Oral History*, p. 176

²⁷ Doyle, *Statement on the Historical and Cultural Significance*, p. 7

²⁸ Alfonso Navraez, “Bethel Farmers Call Fair a Plot to Avoid the Law,” *The New York Times*, 20 August, 1969, p. 37

attendees camped wherever they pleased, picked farmers crops, and turned fertile fields into latrines.²⁹

The overflow of people caused as much financial strain for Woodstock Ventures as it did for the Bethel Farmers. The corporation had managed to get most aspects of the concert grounds ready to go. The stage was up and running, they had rented every available Porto potty (which still was far from enough), and at the last minute the perimeter fences had gone up. The fences were a short-lived endeavor, because they simply didn't do their job. The enormous influx of people merely pushed through the barrier³⁰. It was at this point when the leaders of Woodstock Ventures took a hard look at the situation at hand. The overwhelming amount of people coming in and the loss of the fencing, meant there was no way of collecting or selling tickets. Most concerts have one front entrance from which the vendor collects and sells tickets. With no perimeter fences, people just walked in through a hole. The corporation realized it would be nearly impossible to organize the crowd, and force people to buy tickets. At one point there was a thought to simply cancel the event, and to tell everyone to go home. This was far too dangerous, with enormous size of the crowd, no one wanted to start a riot. Other suggestions were to send collection trays around similar to church, or they could make an announcement over the loud speaker³¹. These appeared reasonable, but no one wanted to risk upsetting the mood of the crowd. Finally they decided to accept their financial failure by ending ticket sales and making it a free concert. The announcement was made to the crowd by the production coordinator John Morris, who remembers,

²⁹ Navraez, "Bethel Farmers", p. 37

³⁰ Makower, Woodstock: The Oral History, p. 178

³¹ Makower, Woodstock: The Oral History, p. 178

“ everybody loved it, it got everybody up, everybody was into it. There’s nothing like telling somebody whose in the middle of a field of a few thousand people for free that they’re there for free and it’s ok, But it worked. It was share with your neighbor and if you got a can of beans and the guy next to you has a can opener....it was one of the greatest things in the world”³².

This decision beyond doubt led to the financial failure of the Woodstock Event. By allowing everyone in for free it was no longer business opportunity for Woodstock Ventures, but an experiment in counterculture society. Woodstock Ventures succeeded in their goal of having the concert, but failed miserably at creating a profit.

The only chance left to make a profit for Woodstock Ventures came from the Food for Love concession stands, setup inside the concert grounds. Originally Woodstock Ventures president John Roberts, had hoped to work with the more legitimate Restaurant Associates, but they had backed out a month earlier.³³ In the end, Food for Love was hired, due to the fact they were the only ones available, who would associate with Woodstock Ventures. This became another fiscal catastrophe for the business. The corporation maintained only two sources of food, so most concertgoers simply quenched themselves with mostly soft drinks and beer.³⁴ The concession stand business failed for many reasons, one being that many stand workers were trading the company’s food for drugs, and alcohol.³⁵ Another downfall of the stands were their overpriced food and consumers were appalled at being forced to pay for water. The capitalistic concession stands are linked to the only threat of violence as Roberts recalls “a band of outraged consumers had organized under a flaming torch and were heading up to the Food for

³² Makower, Woodstock: The Oral History, p. 180

³³ Makower, Woodstock: The Oral History, p. 189

³⁴ Barnard Collier, “Tired Rock Fans Begin Exodus,” *The New York Times*, 18 August, 1969, p.1

³⁵ Makower, Woodstock: The Oral History, p. 198

Love encampment to once and all, get rid of this plague upon the land, selling them five dollar hot dogs”.³⁶

By the end of the first day the Woodstock Ventures Corporation had to stop focusing on profits and use all their resources to keep the festival’s crowd under control. The roadblock had reached its pinnacle, and police and Rosenman had both tried with no avail to turn away cars that were heading to the festival. The New York State Government had declared the area a state of emergency, and a large part of interstate 87 became a parking lot. At first the state government wanted to take complete control of the situation. Government officials had planned to mobilize the National Guard and simply clear everyone out. John Morris, the production’s coordinator, quickly got on the phone and purposed a new plan, he advised that the best way to help was to send supplies.³⁷ Since the crowds had already grown beyond what anyone had prepared for, the major problems became food, water, shelter from the rainstorms, and medical care. As Time magazine writer John Dominis explains, “ the festival had the look of a massive poorly supervised, three day summer camp for city kids. Disaster was always just around the corner.”³⁸ Many people had not adequately prepared themselves, believing that there would be concession stands, or local businesses available. Even those who did prepare found that once they were inside the concert, getting back to their car was an impossible task. Not only that, going back meant losing a spot to watch the concert from

The state and local governments also proved crucial to providing food and resources. The National Guard airlifted food and water, the local towns held food drives,

³⁶ Makower, *Woodstock: The Oral History*, p. 207

³⁷ Makower, *Woodstock: The Oral History*, p. 248

³⁸ John Dominis, “The Big Woodstock Rock Trip; Hundreds of Kids Mob Catskill Mountain Farm,” *Life*, Vol .67, Issue 9, 1969, p. 8

and even local restaurants made sandwiches, which they brought via back roads. The extra help was actually a bit of overkill, because the Hog Farm actually took home 700 pounds of extra bulgur wheat.³⁹ The Hog farm commune had adequately prepared for the festival, the problem was that not everybody was willing to eat what the unfamiliar foods they were serving. Also the media created the idea that people were starving, because they found people hadn't eaten in a day, but never asked if by choice. Some concertgoers were simply uninterested in whether they ate or not as Stanley Goldstein explains, "they were content to sit in the mud so long as they were in front of the stage hearing the music, and if they had to leave that particular patch of ground to go get some food, they weren't gonna do it"⁴⁰ Hunger was definitely not the biggest problem that Woodstock Ventures dealt with thanks to help from the locals and airlifts by the National Guard.

The National Guard played its most important role delivering packages of medical supplies. The first aid building was very busy treating drug overdoses and bad trips. Medical teams at Woodstock also dealt with the major problem of cut feet, which arose due to the high number of people walking shoeless.⁴¹ Still by far the biggest medical concern stemmed from the rampant drug use. The main drug of choice for concertgoers was marijuana, but the use of LSD was the most notable. With no direct police involvement in the concert, drugs were widely available. Within the first twenty-four hours, people suffering from unhealthy reactions to drugs comprised one third of the one thousand people seeking medical attention.⁴² The large percentage of people at the concert taking LSD caused some problems, but it also may have kept things in control.

³⁹ Makower, Woodstock: The Oral History, p. 232

⁴⁰ Makower, Woodstock: The Oral History, p. 213

⁴¹ Dominis, "The Big Woodstock Rock Trip," p. 8

⁴² Bennet, Remembering Woodstock, p. 60

Asides from those attendees on bad acid trips, the LSD helped users tap into the feeling of brotherhood among attendees. It also focused them on the music rather than the situation around them, and no doubt help keep morale up throughout the concert⁴³

Since no profits had been made from concert, even after the concert ended the financial problems continued to grow. The mess left behind by nearly half a million people, took more than two weeks to clean up. The corporation hired a cleaning crew, but could not afford to pay the workers at the end of the job. Eventually the cleaning crews were sent checks, but at the time they received only enough money to send them home after the cleanup was over.⁴⁴ The corporation was also responsible for bringing Max Yasgur's farmland back to a useable quality. This was a daunting task because the rainy weekend did nothing but increase the damage to the farmer's fields. After everything was cleaned and packed up, Woodstock Ventures could put the concert behind them.

Even after the concert ended, residents of Bethel still wanted answers from their local government. Many still wanted to know about why the concert was allowed to proceed. Residents who knew that a temporary permit had been issued expected answers from the town zoning board, which existed to prevent catastrophes such as the concert. At a town board meeting on September 2, residents questioned building inspector Donald Clark so he could explain what happened. He told the upset citizens, that with the advice of the Town Attorney, he had issued the permit according to local zoning ordinances. Clark's account was seconded by the planning consultant, who claimed that the festival

⁴³ Doyle, Statement on the Historical and Cultural Significance, p.8

⁴⁴ "Workers, Who Remain Unpaid Still Cleaning Rock Festival Site", *Special to the New York Times*, 28 August, 1969, p.43

fell under a special uses provision of the zoning laws⁴⁵. The town board next discussed how they would prevent this from ever happening again. The Town Supervisor stated that the local government now realized the town could not handle such gatherings. The town board agreed that another meeting would be held to discuss changes to the zoning laws. As well as call a public hearing to discuss the proposed changes with the town's residents. Finally the town justice thanked all the people of the town for their help and cooperation during the festival.⁴⁶

Many Bethel citizens continued to organize around the issue of the concert even after the September 2 meeting. Still discontent with the local government, "concerned citizens" of Bethel posted an advertisement in an October issue of the Catskill Shopper. The advertisement called the Woodstock Festival "the biggest political swindle since Boss Tweed, the biggest drug and sex orgy since the Roman Empire, the biggest pile of filth since the sewers of Paris"⁴⁷ The advertisement also posed ten "who dunnit" questions. The "concerned citizens" asked why their local government and law enforcement had ignored public outcry against the concert. They wanted answers about why the New York State Health department processed a permit in a few weeks, when it usually took a minimum of several months. This advertisement published the day before the next town meeting implored residents to come ask their own questions.

Bethel citizens received only a few answers, and only from local officials at the October 2 meeting. The meeting began with discussion of the new plan to outlaw gatherings of over one thousand people. The town attorney thought the plan needed some

⁴⁵ September 2, 1969 Town Board Meeting, file 243, Office of the Town Clerk

⁴⁶ September 2, file 243

⁴⁷ Callicoon Center (New York) Catskill Shopper, October 1, 1969: Vol 3, No 16

improvements, so he suggested it be turned over the town planning board. This resolution was seconded voted on, and passed by citizens who felt the planning board was unjustly left out of the Woodstock decision. The meeting turned personal when the town board read excerpts from the inflammatory Catskill shopper advertisement. The town attorney asked each person whose name appeared on the advertisement, if they truly believed the wild accusations. All of the accused responded affirmatively, but also stated that being questioned in that manner upset them. The town attorney, in order to control rising tension, reminded the crowd that a court stenographer is writing everything that was said. Next the advertisement was read in full to the crowd of citizens. After the town attorney had finished reading, an angered citizen spoke up, reminding attendees about what Bethel had suffered during Woodstock, and asked if the board had an answer for the advertisements accusations. Finally the town attorney admitted that the Town Board had no power to issue the permit. Town Official did not take full responsibility as they explained that the building inspector had good reason to believe the permits he gave were covered in the special zoning provision, that he issued tickets to Woodstock Ventures, and the fines had been paid. The meeting ended in a stalemate. The local government took some blame but basically avoided accusations by promising that measures would be taken to prevent further situations.⁴⁸

These empty words did nothing to repair destroyed farmland or to replace gallons of milk lost due to blocked shipping routes. Many farmers had threatened both the Town Board and Woodstock Ventures with lawsuits. Most of these suits were simply dropped

⁴⁸ October 2, 1969 1969 Town Board Meeting, file 245, Office of the Town Clerk

while others lost in court.⁴⁹ Many were outraged at everyone for the damage done to their property. Others blamed their government but sympathized with the concertgoers, realizing that they too were promised adequate conditions by Woodstock Ventures.⁵⁰

The economic and political story of the Woodstock Ventures Corporation, Bethel and the Woodstock Festival is as important as the social. The events chosen for this paper are not meant to tarnish the image of the festival, or to belittle the cultural significance of it. Nothing can change the fact that overall the festival was a social success. But these events are significant because they show a different side of the story. It is important to see the festival for more than just a gathering of young people celebrating counter-culture ideals and listening to some good music. The festival has significance because Woodstock Ventures found ways to get around local laws and regulations. The corporation learned from the Wallkill experience, and knew what town officials they needed to convince to let them in. Bethel town officials ignored the public outcry against the concert because a business promised them fame and fortune. Many residents attempted every legal way to stop the concert from happening. In the end the local government decision couldn't be changed and the citizens were left with the consequences. The complete story of Woodstock is also significant, because it exemplifies the tension between the conservative generation, which was fading and being replaced by the growing liberal/counterculture group. The New York State Troopers showed this animosity when the two deals were broken. If the troopers had arrived on time to direct the traffic, a huge crisis would have been averted. In Wallkill the hostility shown towards Woodstock Ventures' hippy employees caused major problems. If the

⁴⁹ Makower, *Woodstock: The Oral History*, p. 327

⁵⁰ Navraez, "Bethel Farmers", p. 37

corporation had adequate time to construct the fairgrounds the concert would have sold out, and never become the free concert that it is world renowned for. The political and economical story of Woodstock makes it appear less of a myth and more of a story of counterculture entrepreneurs attempting to be successful against all odds. The story is not complete without recognizing that many citizens of Bethel fought the corporation in every legal way possible, and found that in the end they were powerless. The Woodstock Aquarian Arts and Music Festival, was not peace, love, and happiness for everyone, for some in Bethel it was destroyed fields, lost milk, and a local government that turned its back on its citizens.

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