

Smyth County Jam



“Play it Forward”

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HISTORY

By Larry Hogston

A Brief History and Status of the Smyth County Jam (April 16, 2018)

This started out to be brief speech I was going to make at the jam, but I decided to share parts of the book I've been working on about the Smyth County Jam History.

In case anyone doesn't know me, I'm Larry Hogston and I guess I can take the credit for creating the Smyth County Jam. I've made a lot of very difficult decisions concerning the jam down through the years, and canceling it for any reason is always one of the hardest. It seems like I shocked a lot of people when I closed the jam for 5 months, and then canceled it again after only one night. Well, as difficult as it was, it was probably the best and most important decision I have ever made concerning the jam; in time, you will understand why.

Let me give you a little statistic before we go any farther. We have had 589 jams at our current location. Altogether, we have had 762 jams. To put this in perspective, that's the same as one jam per day for two year straight. I think with a track record like that that we should be able to take some necessary time off occasionally; especially if the overall outcome was to benefit the jam.

Here's our mission statement from our website:

"Our goal is to provide a musical event that will showcase the various musicians and singers in the surrounding area while teaching the aspects of musicianship as well as encouraging the development of new talents while at the same time providing entertainment as a service to the community and the county."

I like to keep a low profile at the jam and try to give all the credit for the success of the jam to the many great people that have helped put it on every week down through the years. There are too many to name so rather than taking a chance of inadvertently leaving someone out, I won't try. That being said, I'd like to take a few minutes to tell you a few things about the Smyth County Jam.

What has driven me to create this type of a jam where there is so much documentation? Well, I'll tell you. When I was growing up as I'm sure it was for all the musicians, you gravitated towards the other musicians in your area who had similar interest. For me it was my aunt Juanita who taught me a few chords on the guitar. It was my uncle Ossie Roberts who once played mandolin and sang with Mac Wiseman. It was Ed Delp the first banjo picker I knew. There was Olie Talbert, Ted Barrett, Hobart Smith, the Lowery Brothers, LW Frye, and the list goes on. You can fill this list in with musicians you have known. So what do all of these great pickers and singers have in common? For one thing, they are all deceased and their music for the most part died with them. They also were rarely heard outside of the area in which they grew up. There are very few recordings of any of them and in some cases no photos. Of course, they didn't have the technology we have today, but the ability was out there to record them; it was just that nobody thought about it much back then or couldn't afford a recorder or camera. I know I would

personally love to be able to sit down at a computer screen and watch all of my heroes perform, but it will never happen. I decided to change that. That's the reason I've worked so hard to document our jam and that's why our jam had to be different. We had to go beyond just enjoying the moment. Every decision I have made throughout this saga was tailored toward this one seemingly simple goal; record as much as possible for future generations.

It's hard to condense a 20 year history into a few pages, but I'll try. By the way, you can read a lot of the detailed history of the jam on our website prior to us moving it to this location. I'd like to start by saying that the Smyth County Jam was originally called the Saltville Jam and it was started from scratch as an annual Labor Day Festival. When we started, we had no name, no place to play, no sound system, no business cards, no logo, no food, no plan, etc.; only an idea that had been on my mind for years. The amount of obstacles we've had to overcome over the years have been staggering; many designed to close us down. But we have survived them all and hopefully we will continue to do so.

I'm hoping you'll go to the website and read the history, but I'll tell you quickly how it started. I was a member of a band "Common Ground" consisting of four other members and myself. My best friend Ken Collins, who really loved our music, had cancer and I knew that he may not have much more time with us; this was in 1997. I was determined to put on a show for him somewhere. Out of luck, members of the Saltville Labor Day committee contacted some of us and wanted to know if we'd play that year. Typically, the local talent was bypassed altogether. We were asked to attend their meeting a few days prior to the event. Three of us from the band got to the meeting early and while sitting talking to the committee members, it seemed unanimous that we would be playing at the Labor Day celebration. That all changed when the head of the committee showed up; I'll not mention any names. His first reason was they didn't have the money to pay us. Then one of the members offered to pay us out of his pocket; we would have played for free. After that excuse didn't fly, the next was that they had already booked some bluegrass bands and didn't need anymore. I found out later, since being friends with so many musicians, that each of the three bluegrass bands were contacted after the meeting. We then asked if we could play one gospel song (Daddy Wasn't Saved) that was written by Stan Dunham, one of our band members, on Sunday. Again we were shot down. So we left the meeting seemingly defeated.

Within a few minutes, after we almost gave up, I said let's do our own show. After a brief discussion we decided to try knowing that we had no plan, no location, no stage, no sound system, no other bands, etc. and only two days to put it together, we decided to try. We approached the owner of Food Country, who welcomed us and gave us the use of his parking lot for four days. We had no sound system as I said so I called Carson Cooper, the owner of a music store in Marion, and asked if he could put me together a sound system today if we could come up with some money. He priced me a system for \$1,600; and true, we had no money. I called one of the bankers from the local bank and told them the story and they gave me the money on a 90 day note. Common Ground had to play a lot of shows to pay off this debt. We now had a sound system. We didn't know how to set it up, but nevertheless, we had one. Now what about a stage.

Well, one of the farmers in Broadford had a 10 foot wooden tobacco trailer that he pulled all the way to town for us. It was old and battered but it would have to do. About the time he got to the parking lot, Emery and Pauline Horn and their son Randy happened by. Randy said do you need a better trailer? I said if it was possible, but we didn't have much time. Within a couple of hours he had us a brand new flatbed trailer sitting in the parking lot. I thought, what if it rains? Well, as it turned out Garland Parks, the member that had offered to pay us and who had just started a canopy rental business said we could use one of his canopies. The canopy was already set up on the other end of town. This is when it got fun. Eight of us went and each picked up one leg of the 20 x 30 foot canopy and marched it all the way through town; a spectacle to behold. This made a great cover for the stage. But now, where do we get musicians? Well, I knew a lot of great musicians and each of them knew a lot. I started making calls. Within a few hours, we had at least 12 bands and countless individual musicians on the bandwagon. I designed a bunch of flyers and it seemed like 100's of people showed up and started passing them out. We put an ad on the radio, and everything came together. We estimated that over 4,000 people attended this very first jam; put together in two days. The next year, we had all of our bands and equipment lined up and all of our flyers printed and passed out, etc. to repeat the previous year on the Food County parking lot. On Thursday, the day the setup was to start, politics had gotten involved and we found out that we could not use the parking lot at Food Country after all. I was contacted by one of our band members who simply said the show was off. Well, I don't give up too easily. Within an hour's time, we had the use of the Lions Club Carnival Grounds next door. This arrangement lasted for the next 11 years but those years were also filled with many obstacles. I guess what I'm trying to say was that creating something from scratch is not always a bed of roses; it's very hard work and takes a lot of multi-level thinking, a lot of dedicated people not to mention some luck.

There were no weekly jams around the immediate area back then. There was a jam in Marion, but it was basically a small group of pickers that did the majority of the picking. They would just sit in a circle and a few listeners would sit or stand around. Other pickers would show up from time-to-time, but mostly it was this one group of pickers. By the way, they were some of the best around. Me and my buddy Ken started going to the jam after being invited by Larry Blevins who ran the jam. He ran the jam for 10 years before he decided to close it. I rarely missed a Monday; yes it was on Monday. There were other small jams around, but something just seemed to be missing. I would attend almost all of these jams to play or just to listen. Something sadly that I don't get to do very often anymore.

In 2002, a friend who was trying to learn to play the mandolin said that I needed to start a weekly jam to help people learn how to play. I had already been contemplating it for years so I went into research mode and spent a lot of time figuring out the best way to make a jam work. Most of this history is also on the website, so I won't discuss much of it here.

In looking for a place to have this jam I became aware that there was not a lot of choices. We ended up in the Allison Gap School building where I had gone to school. This was on Thursdays

and only lasted a couple of weeks. The acoustics in the building was terrible and it had many other problems. I ended up getting the Saltville Rescue Squad building. They would move the trucks out and let us use the garage. We had 14 people who sat around in a circle and shared licks at that first jam. Within a couple of weeks word had gotten out and our audience was starting to grow. We soon had to add a microphone and small PA system. Then it started to snowball we would have over 100 people just come to listen. We had two rooms full of pickers by then and a complete PA system. Now our great little jam was becoming a problem. With this many people and the expensive equipment and vehicles at the Rescue Squad and the possibility of getting in the way if they got a call it was becoming apparent that we were probably nearing the end of our welcome. This jam was on Mondays. The only reason I chose Monday was because there were no other jams on Monday anywhere to my knowledge. I absolutely would not start anything that may hurt one of the other jams in any way. Anyway, we were finally told that they were moving their bingo night to Monday and actually gave us the option to pick another night. As I said, I would not have a jam on the same night as any other jam so we now needed a new place to pick again.

Well, one of my childhood friends, at that time happened to be the president of the Holston River Coon Club in Saltville and I worked up a deal to use their building. We would have to pay rent, set everything up and put the building back to its original condition when finished each night. Since we were going to sell concessions, we would have to clean the kitchen before and after each jam. We couldn't leave anything including drinks in the building so we had to carry everything to and from the jam every Monday. The building consisted of one "big" room, a kitchen area and a couple of bathrooms. It would hold about 75 people comfortably. We had over 150 people at our last jam in this building; we were there one year. We gave the Coon Club all of the money we took in with the exception of the cost of the supplies. We had outgrown our building once again.

We then moved back to the Allison Gap School building that had been improved some since the last time we tried to use it. We spent a lot of time, money and effort helping make changes to the building to accommodate our jam. Three months into the jam, Sandy was diagnosed with breast cancer, one of the toughest things she and I both have gone through. This was in December, 2004.

Then in April, 2005, I suffered sudden sensorial hearing loss in my right ear. I have been for all practical purposes deaf in that ear ever since. On top of that I have the worst case of tinnitus, perceived noise, in my ears that the doctors said they had seen. Added to that, I have Hyperacusis which is an increased sensitivity to certain noises, like bluegrass instruments. So in other words, the frequencies I hear in my right ear make what little bit of language I hear sound like a foreign language. In a normal conversation it's like I'm talking to two people that speak different languages at the same time. The perceived noise is almost defining at times and the increased sensitivity makes the noise always stay louder than the noise in the surrounding room. If you have ever asked me something and I seem to ignore you, or maybe I didn't understand you, now you

understand why. I apologize if I did. The tinnitus is always worse the day after the jam. You can imagine what a nightmare this is to a musician. A normal person would have just left the jam, but I guess I'm not normal. I had worked too hard to build this thing; it wasn't time to quit yet.

So here was Sandy going through chemo and radiation in Bristol and I was going back and forth to Roanoke and Charlottesville trying everything possible to get help for my hearing; nothing helped. Throughout all we were going through, neither of us ever missed a jam. Well, Sandy has beaten her cancer, but my hearing has never improved. I'm not telling you this for any kind of sympathy or seeking pity, etc. I just want you to understand why I may seem distant at times when I'm at the jam. It's so hard to even have a conversation most of the time. The stress level can become seeming unbearable at times.

Almost one year to the day of moving the jam to Allison Gap, it became apparent that it was time to move again. Read about it online on our website. The organization that hosted the jam did not see my vision and continually made the statement that "the musicians were only background noise" they were only interested in the social aspect of everyone getting together and always complained that not enough money was coming in. They controlled the kitchen and all donations. We were never even told how much money they took in. The shocker was that when several of us attended the meetings they said they wouldn't be concerned at all about the amount of money they would take in. So in the interest of the musicians and our large fan-base, I once again had to make a hard decision of which hind-sight showed I made a nearly fatal error. My decision was made at a meeting with the organization. So when everyone showed up at the jam on Monday and me and Sandy wasn't there, the rumors and lies started to fly. They had me and Sandy separated, and every possible thing they could come up with going around. So when we started our jam in Chilhowie, it was almost like starting over. But you can't hide the truth for long. Within a couple of months, the jam had grown to an unbelievable level. I had written a document similar to this and had presented it to the hosting organization. As it happened, many people including Ersel and Deane Fletcher, who have both been a very big part of the Smyth County Jam ever since, happened to read that document and followed us to Chilhowie and became our best friends.

Now, we are once again seeking a new building and as it turned out, another town. The jam had grown to unbelievable proportions and we once again didn't have a name. Now that I had many years of experience with a jam, it was time to put together a complete plan to solidify the jam once and for all. Keep in mind throughout this whole saga, that we had a lot of help all along. There has always been a large support team behind our jam; it was never a one man show so to speak. You know that everything that has ever been accomplished by anyone since the dawn of mankind had to start with an idea. I like this saying; "whatever the mind of man can conceive and believe, he can achieve".

After Allison Gap, we had the next couple of jams at Sherry Worley's (now Goodman's) barber shop. In a chance encounter, she was cutting JC Sheppard's hair who just happened to be the current president of the Chilhowie Lions Club, and the subject of the jam came up. He was very

interested and after he consulted other members, he and I got together and reached an agreement to start the jam the next Monday. What took me by surprise was that the Lions Club trusted me with keys to the building from day one.

I met with Hilda and Jay Schwartz who were Lions Club members and mentioned that we would need to sell concessions to help raise the rent money and to give the ever growing number of musicians and fans something to eat. Three or four hours at an event without food and drinks is tough; cheese crackers and water just don't cut it. According to Hilda, who was proud of her kitchen, said that non-members could not operate the kitchen but she and Jay agreed to run it for us. She was an excellent cook and we still miss them both in the kitchen and at the counter. Jay still comes to the jam occasionally and we are always so happy to see him.

Now, there are those out there that might think that it's easy to put on a jam and in a lot of cases that may be correct. But building something that reaches all over the world and touches as many lives as the Smyth County Jam takes more planning, energy, ingenuity, technical abilities, people skills, etc. than most people could possibly realize.

Let me use the Chilhowie Lions Club/Smyth County Jam relationship as example to show you what I'm talking about. As stated earlier, JC Shepard was the Lions Club president when we started the jam on October 10, 2005. At that point in time even though the jam was in its infancy, it was different than all the rest by design. The Smyth County Jam as we know it now is not nor has ever been part of the Lions Club; they only rent us the building. This is much different than establishing a jam in a privately owned store, school house, multi-million dollar facility or an organization funded by grant money with an existing staff, etc. Those jams are relatively easy for the musicians that may operate it in comparison.

We use donations and concession proceeds to pay for the use of the building. The first several months at the jam in Chilhowie left me and Sandy to pay the difference. Later, I made an agreement with the Lions Club that if they would trust my vision of what the jam would become, they would eventually take in much more money that in turn could be used to enhance the building to better suit the jam. Not long after that, thanks to the very generous donations from the many supporters of the jam, they at times took in 4-5 times the required amount of rent. This money was used to help build the jam rooms in the back, buy much need PA equipment from time-to-time, remodel the stage, add more heating and cooling, etc.

At this point in time, the Lions Club was handling the kitchen as I said, which freed up some of mine and Sandy's time to focus on building the jam. To start with, we needed a new name. A group of us met many times and settled on the Smyth County Jam named for the county. We like to call our jam; "Smyth Counties Best Kept Secret". We couldn't stop there; we needed a logo. So, I designed the logo myself and had some signs made. I then designed business cards and ordered them to help advertise the jam. I wrote press releases. Other friends of the jam wrote articles about us. We put together a complete PA system from bits and pieces of many scrap systems. There are five different owners of the PA system which includes the Lions Club.

Sometimes you have to make do with what you have. I rewired a VHS recorder and connected it to a DVD recorder to record the jams. I later bought two digital video cameras. There are over 300 videos on our website most of which are the entire unedited jams; many more will be added later. We bought a better camera to take the many photos. Sandy and I knew very little about photography at this point in time but we were willing to learn. There are now over 48,000 photos on our website. One of the many purposes of this jam was to document it as much as we could for prosperity. I created our website entirely from scratch; no templates. I created the YouTube channel, Facebook group, etc. to advertise the jam. Anne Gilbert took on the job of writing brief biographies of as many people as she could that attended the jam; there are over 1,000 bios on the website and probably another 300+ that I've not had the chance to add yet. This is just a small sampling of what has gone into the creation of the Smyth County jam.

So back to the Lions Club. They have treated us very well since day one, but we have had situations arise from time-to-time. This is understandable since the president and officers change frequently. With each change, it's like starting almost from scratch as the current people may not have known or realized what each's job was supposed to be nor what the agreement may have been in the past. We always worked it out, but it occasionally took some time and required some changes. Then, we experienced the most drastic change to the way we operated the jam.

Hilda was involved in a near fatal auto accident and was unable to continue with the kitchen. She later passed away in part due to this accident and we really miss her. At that point, Sandy and I agreed to operate the kitchen which more than doubled our workload as it related to the jam. Sandy and Deane does most of the running to buy supplies. It takes a lot of running to buy hamburger, make chili, make slaw, buy all the drinks, chips, cheese, coffee, napkins, etc. Then comes the cooking and preparing. This is all a never-ending job. We have to clean the kitchen, pick up and carry out all the trash. Put the chairs and tables back each night. And we are so thankful that there are so many people that have always volunteered with a lot of these task. We've shoveled snow, installed lights, fixed broken appliances and basically helped the Lions Club any way we can. It's a huge responsibility. This again is just a brief idea of how much work goes into a jam when you must rent the facility and make all the arrangements. We even track all the donations and concessions in a very high-tech computer program and make sure that all money is accounted for and that all of it goes towards the jam via the Lions Club.

Having a relationship like this with the Lions Club allows us together to help so many people in need of glasses or that has been burned out of their homes, etc. The more revenue the jam generates, the more people get helped and so on. The only problem is that in the past 4-5 years, we barely break even. I've said it many times that if I ever become rich, not only would I build an amazing building designed just for the jammers, but I would give each of the musicians and the volunteers an equal part of it.

One major concern I have always had is the safety of everyone who attends the jam; especially the older folks. One fall can become a tragedy. That's why I've always insisted that whatever facility we settle for has to be all on one level; no steps! I've even been asked to run a jam in a

building that had an elevator, but to me that's even scarier than steps. You have a fire on a lower floor that takes out the power and you have a recipe for a very sad outcome. It's not worth it in my book; but that's just me. We do have a stairwell that goes to the basement that has always concerned me, but it is rarely used and has a door that's in an out-of-the-way area. But at least the basement has an entrance that opens to level ground in the event of a fire upstairs.

We have had a couple of people fall on ice and in the snow back when we were too stubborn to close the jam for any reason. We outgrew that and being that typically the first few months of the year has some bad weather which caused us to close the jam a lot, we have closed it for a few months for the past two years. It became obvious that when we canceled the jam, most of the people who run the jam would spend basically all day trying to contact everyone we could to inform them. It would break my heart if one person was injured or killed coming to one of our jams because we had too much pride to close it when necessary.

This past year, due to many unavoidable circumstances, I made the decision to close the jam at the end of October rather than December. It was a hard decision, but there were things that had to be addressed and the only way to do it was with the jam completely shut down. I knew that the musicians and a lot of our supporters would not like it, but I knew that the Heartwood Jam, Allen Hicks jam to name a few would take up the slack and give everyone a place to go.

My decision to close the jam after only one night was also very necessary. The reasons were to help the jam get to the next level. It was one of the better decisions I've ever made concerning the jam. All I can ask is that you trust that my decision was sound.

One of the potential problems I saw going into the jam was basically related to human nature. I knew that when you deal with a large groups of people with similar interest, that differences in ideas could cause many problems. Egos and jealousy abound in human nature; especially where talent is involved. If you've been around music long enough, you know exactly what I'm talking about. You can keep it in check for a while, but eventually you are going to have to deal with problems associated with it. So, I knew that people would come and go at our jam no matter where it was or how good or bad it was. But I looked at it like this, if you like our jam and use some of our ideas, we would be honored. I've tried to help everyone who has started a jam as much as I can. It didn't matter if it was a new jam or wanting to improve an old one. All they have to do is ask. We never start our jam to be in competition with any other jam. I also knew that jams were like churches people are all the time breaking off and starting their own jam. So basically either way, the Smyth County Jam is responsible for a lot more of the music around than you may at first realize.

Here is another statement from our website that simplifies the above paragraph:

"The Smyth County Jam has really grown over the years and is almost solely responsible for exposing our area to the many great talents and people who have adorned our stages and audiences. It's like everywhere we've stepped, a new jam has sprung up. This is a testament to our success. As the old saying goes; imitation is the most sincere form of flattery."

This wouldn't be complete without me saying something about the amazing musicians that make up the Smyth County Jam. I have so much admiration for these people that I get chocked up trying to talk about it. Many of these great musicians and I have been friends since our teenage years. I had the honor years ago of getting to go to the great jam in Hickory Tree Tennessee. There I met a lot of people who are still my heroes today. Since those days playing at the Salt Kettle Theatre and all around, I have met literally thousands of great musicians. I think that is the very reason our jam has been so successful. These people are the real deal. I would trust most of them with my life if need be. It has been such an honor for me not only to occasionally get to play with some of these great people, but just to associate with them. I feel the same way about the loyal fans that have become a part of our musical family. If friends could be counted as money, I'd be a billionaire today.

So, what's the future plans for the Smyth County Jam? Well, I don't think Sandy and I will be able to continue the jam indefinitely. Hopefully someday, we'll find a young couple or group of people that will share our vision and take over the jam. We would eventually give them the website, YouTube channel, etc. and hope that they too would pass it on someday. I would like to think that it would go on for many years to come.

All Sandy and I have ever wanted to do is try to help people and to try to treat everyone fairly. We put all this effort into the jam, not for us but for you. It would be a sad world if we couldn't do stuff for our friends and family. We are only on this world for a flicker and then our light goes out. That's why we've tried so hard to keep our jam family oriented and where you can feel safe not only from harm, but from the barrage of foul language that seems to be becoming the norm these days. We will not tolerate it at the jam nor will we tolerate alcohol. Surprisingly, we've had very little trouble with either. If you want to continue to be a part of our big happy musical family, we'd love to have you. If not, we still wish you well in whatever you pursue. God bless each and every one of you.