

Keeping the Peace

BY WADE LAWRENCE

Officers planned for the worst as festival goers poured into Bethel.

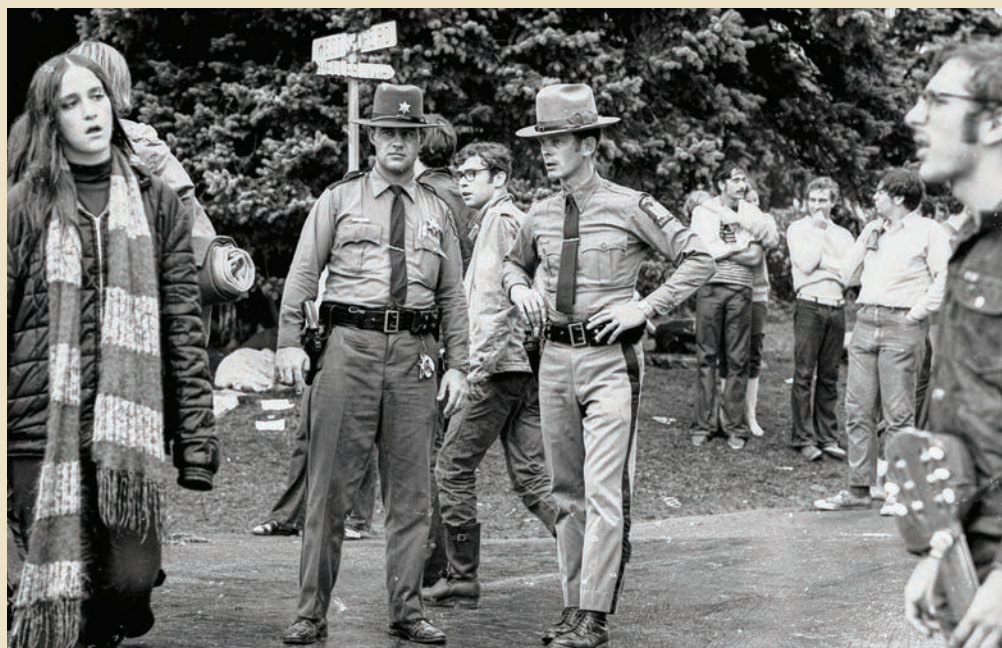


PHOTO BY BARRY SERBEN, BETHEL WOODS COLLECTION, 2015.17.25, FRAME 19

State trooper and sheriff's deputy direct traffic on West Shore Road at the Woodstock festival.

In August 1969, half a million young people converged on a dairy farmer's alfalfa field in the rural town of Bethel, New York, for a rock festival billed as "three days of peace and music." The Woodstock Music and Art Fair—also known as An Aquarian Exposition or, simply, Woodstock—has since come to represent the dreams and optimism of an entire generation.

Woodstock was one of dozens of rock festivals that were staged across America in the aftermath of 1967's "Summer of Love," and many had been

marred by violence and injury.

Woodstock Ventures, the planners, had to leave their half-completed site in the Town of Walkill in mid-July 1969 because of objections from local residents. They had less than a month to find another location, advertise the change, and construct a new site. A deal was struck with Sullivan County dairy farmer Max Yasgur, and Woodstock was moved to Bethel.

Based on what they heard about violence at other rock festivals, the Sullivan County Sheriff's Department immedi-

ately planned for the worst.

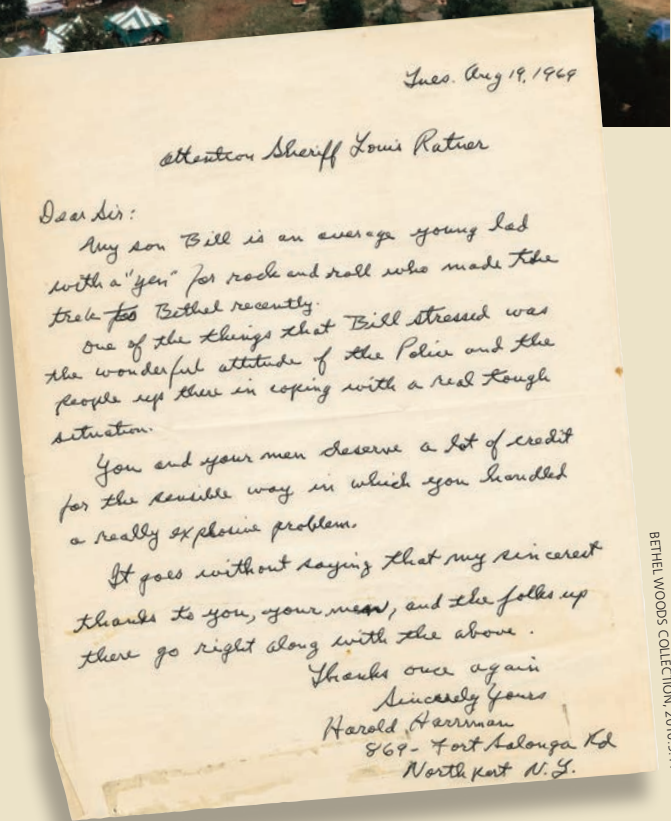
They met with organizers, attended public meetings, and sent out a call for law enforcement in neighboring counties to lend a hand. They knew that the narrow roads would become congested if traffic was not well controlled. They knew they needed officers on the ground to direct traffic and keep the peace. They knew they needed patrols in cars, on motorcycles, on horseback, and in the air in helicopters; communications systems; staging areas and holding areas. They also



Aerial view of the stage and audience at the Woodstock festival, probably Saturday, August 16, 1969.

needed to coordinate with regional medical facilities, for the normal medical emergencies such as heat stroke, dehydration, and broken bones, and for drug overdoses, bad trips, and possible violence. Even three weeks from the festival, officials were expecting up to 50,000 people attending the festival daily. They could not have predicted that the number would be ten times that. Torrential rains, twenty-mile traffic jams, and breakdowns in the provision of food, water, and sanitation exacerbated the overcrowded situation, providing the perfect ingredients for chaos, violence, and injury. By some cosmic miracle—maybe the marijuana or the vibe or a genuine belief in the power of peace and love—Woodstock remained peaceful. In fact, the great restraint shown by the sheriff's department and other police agencies was a major factor contributing to the peace.

In 2006, thirty-seven years after Woodstock, Bethel Woods Center for the Arts opened its gates for its inaugural concert with the New York Philharmonic. The Museum at Bethel Woods opened two years later, on June 2, 2008. The museum's growing collections include ephemera, clothing, photographs, home movies, objects, and oral histories related to the 1969 Woodstock festival and the 1960s. One of the museum's first archival acquisitions was a collection of 216 folders of Woodstock-related personal papers of Sullivan County Sheriff Louis Ratner, including duty reports, after-action reports, correspondence with other law enforcement agencies, and newspaper clippings. These papers tell a compelling story of the law enforcement preparations for Woodstock and the experiences of individual officers who directed traffic and dealt with



neighbor disputes. Numerous hand-written letters from festival attendees and their parents praised the friendly, helpful, and respectful attitudes shown by the sheriff deputies, and many thanked Sheriff Ratner personally. A note on a Gracie Mansion notecard expressed Mayor John Lindsay's appreciation for

Letter from Harold Harriman to Sheriff Louis Ratner, August 19, 1969, thanking the sheriff for the "wonderful attitude" of law enforcement at the Woodstock festival.



Above left: Two young women relax on the hood of a sheriff's patrol car at the Woodstock festival. Below: Telegram from Leon Greenberg to Sheriff Louis Ratner, ca. August 19, 1969, demanding "immediate investigation" of the Woodstock festival. Right: Hand-written statement of R.B. Sinclair and Robert Connors, August 16, 1969, describing circumstances of the death of Raymond Mizsak at the Woodstock festival.

Ratner's "help." There were also letters and telegrams from local citizens who had felt like prisoners in their homes while their streets and yards were overrun by "immoral hippies." These personal notes to Sheriff Ratner, several bearing the name of The Concerned Citizens of Bethel, demanded a full investigation and measures to prevent this from ever happening again in their community.

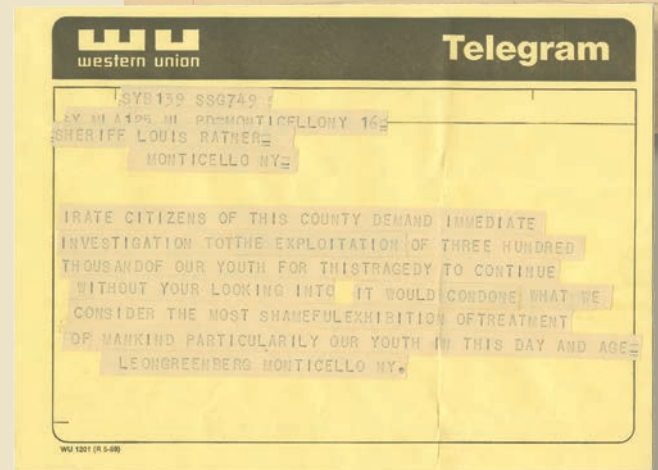
The Ratner papers contain a fascinating perspective on Woodstock through the eyes of law enforcement. An eleven-page after-action report by Lieutenant Ralph S. Breakey illustrates his interactions with members of the Hog Farm and Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters, describing the former as hard-working and the latter as more interested in dancing and relaxing.

A report by Dr. William Abruzzi to his superior outlines the setup and operation of the medical tents, triage, and medical evacuation efforts of his staff of doctors

and nurses. His rambling, sometimes poetic report, which he titled "A White Lake Happening," concluded:

"And in closing, I leave you with the medical, political, psychological, and philosophical conclusion of this entire affair: At no time during the entire festival did any of the one hundred fifty odd medical personnel who worked at the site treat any case, or see any incident, which involved the causing of personal or physical injury from one human being to another. Not a knife wound was sewed, not a punch wound was treated. This might very well have been an example of the first time that a large number of people have come together, lived together, suffered together, and given to the rest of us an indication that it can be done in love and peace. There was no fish or wind, but perhaps in that spirit, the bread went further, the water lasted longer. Christ would have smiled."

The good doctor's boss



didn't share his enthusiasm, responding that he should re-submit his report with less personal opinion.

There are also moving reminders of two tragedies during the festival: the deaths of Raymond Mizsak and Richard Bieler. The matter-of-fact reports of two deputies describe a "John Doe" who was airlifted to a regional hospital and later died of a suspected heroin overdose. The eighteen-year-old Marine on leave was identified as Bieler by his cousin and friends he had traveled to the festival with. An original police accident report of the death

of seventeen-year-old Mizsak describes how the young Trenton, New Jersey, native was run over by a tractor while he was asleep in his sleeping bag on the edge of the festival field. Accompanying the official report, a statement in the tractor driver's own hand reveals little of the charged emotion of the moment.

The museum's archival holdings have been reviewed and stored, pending the creation of finding aids and full cataloguing. Researchers may examine the museum's archival holdings by appointment at 845-583-2079. ■