

COMING HOME TO WINFIELD: THE HISTORY OF THE WALNUT VALLEY FESTIVAL

A Thesis by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in History.

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DEDICATION

To Emma Eleni and Owen Mathers,
who have the Walnut Valley Festival in their blood.

“You know I’m not traditional and I’ve never claimed to be.
But I come from a tradition that others made for me.
They’re still alive inside my heart although they’re now long gone;
I like to think they trusted me to pass the music on.”
— Si Kahn and Tom Chapin

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ABSTRACT

The Walnut Valley Festival was a multi-day event featuring musical performances, instrument contests, camping, and craft sales held in Winfield, Kansas. The Winfield faithful found solace and certainty in the consistency of the Walnut Valley Festival (WVF) each September. This was one of the ways the event reflected the time of its creation.

In 1972, an increasingly skeptical and conservative America sought certainty in popular culture that reclaimed identities that seemed to be lost. When culture that represented such certainty was blended with sounds that were popular on the radio, one result was the rise of bluegrass, particularly bluegrass consumed in a festival setting. At festivals, attendees were consumers, but they were also creators and participants. Settings such as the Walnut Valley Festival were interactive in a way that encouraged personal fulfillment through supportive communities—and had booths to sell participants what they needed to continue seeking that fulfillment. From the start, the WVF was a musician’s festival. Being a “picker’s paradise” was central to the festival’s brand and placed the event squarely in the context of bluegrass music.

In order to establish itself as commercially viable, the Walnut Valley Association emphasized that its event was family friendly. To a great extent, this was a response to the new nostalgia that emerged in the 1970s as families tried to soothe their anxieties with entertainment that reflected simplicity and connection. It was also a reflection of the personal values of festival organizers. At the same time, emphasizing family friendliness was a defensive move, designed to ward off bad press and governmental regulation. Most importantly, WVF promoters stressed that the people who came to the Winfield Fairgrounds were not like the people who went to rock music festivals in Pittsburg, Kansas, Sedalia, Missouri, or Woodstock, New York.

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INTRODUCTION

THE INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION FOR ACOUSTIC STRING MUSICIANS

It takes a year to recover from Winfield. It takes Winfield to recover from a year.

This memorable summation appeared in the 1990s in “Winfield-1,” an online community for fans of the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas. While it may have been counterintuitive for people who loved acoustic music, traditional crafts, and camping to connect by computer and modem, the community was lively, often with multiple posts per day. Members were only half joking when they referred to attending the annual festival each September as part of their mental health regimen. Many of them built their calendars and vacations around their pilgrimages to Winfield.

The Winfield faithful found solace and certainty in the consistency of the Walnut Valley Festival each September. This was one of the ways the event reflected the time of its creation. In 1972, an increasingly skeptical and conservative America sought popular culture that reclaimed identities that seemed to be lost. The experience of loss sent some people looking for certainty. When culture that represented such certainty was blended with sounds that were popular on the radio, one result was the rise of bluegrass, particularly bluegrass consumed in a festival setting. At festivals, attendees were consumers, but they were also creators and participants. Settings such as the Walnut Valley Festival (WVF) were interactive in a way that encouraged personal

fulfillment through supportive communities—and had booths to sell you what you needed to continue seeking that fulfillment, whether it was hot sauce or a new Mossman guitar.

The WVF was a multi-day music festival sometimes billed as the “International Convention for Acoustic String Musicians.” Professional and amateur musicians gathered in a primarily outdoor setting for concerts, contests, workshops, and informal jam sessions. While virtually every musical style that did not require electrical distortion was represented somewhere at the festival, the WVF was best-known for virtuosic solo guitar performances and lively bluegrass. Concerts took place on four official stages, one longtime officially unofficial stage, a few more recent semi-official stages, and countless camp sites. Sharing the space was a juried craft show. Some participants lived close by and drove in or stayed in area hotels, but during the festival, the campground became its own community—some would say communities—with residents temporarily living in conditions ranging from rustic to ritzy.

The WVF was staged each year by the Walnut Valley Association—and at the time of this writing continues with plans for its 47th year. From 1972 through 2016, the WVA’s president was Bob Redford, a community-minded businessperson who relied on a network of family members, friends, staff members, and city employees to pull off the feat of producing the festival. Although it grew in length, scope, and sophistication, under Redford the WVF remained fundamentally the same event throughout the years. Its anchor was its first instrumental contest, the National Flat-Picking Championship, which honored the guitar style most associated with bluegrass music.

More than an annual event, the WVF—known to most attendees who come from outside Cowley County, Kansas, as “Winfield”—became an icon.¹ Its yellow bumper stickers were on

1. “Its proper name may be the Walnut Valley Festival, . . . but everyone except longhaired engineer types who don’t know better than to make a washtub bass with two washtubs just calls it WINFIELD,” according to one online

cars and campers around the country. At its entrance each year starting in 1985 was an Avenue of Flags, an attempt by festival worker Bob Flottman to display a flag representing the home state or nation of every festival visitor. In 2017, all 50 United States were represented as well as an additional 50 countries.² For many community members in Winfield, the iconic festival was a source of pride and identity but also of anxiety at times when the festival’s future seemed in doubt.

From the beginning, the WVF was a musician’s festival. Being a “picker’s paradise” was central to the festival’s brand. That feature placed the event squarely in the context of bluegrass music. Historian Robert Cantwell underscores the importance of musical virtuosity to bluegrass, suggesting “the bluegrass band, like the New Orleans jazz band, presents an impression of ‘multiple parts in continual interaction.’”³ Bluegrass—though the term was not used immediately—was codified in the period from 1946 to 1948 when mandolin player and tenor singer Bill Monroe fielded the most classic lineup of his Blue Grass Boys, featuring Lester Flatt on guitar and Earl Scruggs on banjo. “[W]hen, in the mid-fifties, country music was suddenly threatened by rock and roll, the demand for bluegrass as a genre appears to have increased. . . . [It is] a distinctive genre which owes its continued existence to rock and roll and the folk revival as well as to country music and the perseverance of Bill Monroe.”⁴ The pre-British Invasion folk boom was populated with young, middle-class intellectuals, typified by Mike Seeger and Ralph Rinzler. They took to bluegrass because of its intersection of rural authenticity and ensemble interplay “and its intensity and volume, about as close as one could get to rock and roll without

commenter. Gary T., “Re: Walnut Valley Festival (Kansas—US),” mudcat.org discussion group, posted September 4, 2012, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=146785>.

2. Walnut Valley Association, *WVA Voice* 20.4, September 11, 2017.

3. Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1984), vi-xiii, 62-67.

4. Neil Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History*, twentieth anniversary ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2005), 95.

electricity.”⁵ In the mid-1960s the country music establishment affirmed its connection to the bluegrass genre. In 1964, the Country Music Association established an official library along with other new institutions “to produce a historical tradition that unified a diverse array of styles—from string bands and western swing to bluegrass and rockabilly—into a single narrative.”⁶ In the years leading up to the WVF, aspects of the bluegrass sound were familiar to American ears through mass media. “The Ballad of Jed Clampett” by Flatt & Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys opened the popular television show *The Beverly Hillbillies* beginning in 1962. Many people could hum “Foggy Mountain Breakdown,” another Flatt & Scruggs song, featured in the movie *Bonnie & Clyde*. The theme from *Deliverance*, “Dueling Banjos,” was recorded by Eric Weissberg but fashioned after a 1950s song by Arthur “Guitar Boogie” Smith that had in turn been performed in the 1960s by the bluegrass group The Dillards.⁷ As bluegrass sounds showed up in living rooms and movie theaters, they were also heard at gatherings in Kansas and Missouri, including local attempts at the kinds of festivals that were emerging in places such as Roanoke, Virginia, and Bean Blossom, Indiana.

The WVF put musical virtuosity front and center in its programming and advertising. As banjo player and historian Neil Rosenberg wrote, “[T]his is often called a musician’s music. And there is here . . . no clear dividing line between amateur and professional.” Rosenberg’s *Bluegrass: A History* is an exploration of the reality and mythology of bluegrass. He asks two questions that are beyond the scope of this thesis but were certainly discussed around the WVF campfires: how and where does one draw the line between folk and popular culture, and how can

5. *Ibid.*, 174-175.

6. Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University, 2007), 190.

7. For the importance of “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” to the bluegrass genre, see Paul Brown, “The Story of ‘Foggy Mountain Breakdown,’” *Weekend Edition*, National Public Radio, April 1, 2000, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2000/04/01/1072355/npr-100-earl-scruggs>. For the impact on the image of bluegrass from these mass media connections, see Rosenberg, *Bluegrass*, 250-271.

a listener be certain there is indeed such a thing as bluegrass music?⁸ Rosenberg also noted “that almost all of the individuals who have contributed significantly to research and writing have also performed the music.”⁹ Cantwell similarly describes himself in *Bluegrass Breakdown* as “one of the more passionate chroniclers” of bluegrass music. Most of his book is devoted to developing the connections among bluegrass and the minstrel tradition, medieval folklife, popular music, and comic archetypes.¹⁰

Bluegrass is one aspect of the larger world of American folk music, an umbrella term that encompasses a vast array of subgenres and whose boundaries are perpetually contested. Commercially, folk music had three peaks in the second half of the twentieth century—one just before the advent of rock-and-roll, one just before the British invasion, and a smaller one in the early 1990s. Codified in December 1945 by the classic lineup of Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys,¹¹ bluegrass spread in the late 1960s in a musical environment that blurred the lines of folk, country, and rock as it was also putting a spotlight on the kind of instrumental heroics associated with progressive rock. By 1970, bluegrass performances were spreading out of their stronghold in the Southeast and into the Southwest, the Ozarks, and the upper Midwest. In 1972, the *Wall Street Journal* investigated bluegrass festivals as a business trend and noted that bluegrass festivals typically lost money in their first years but made it back as the events became established. The musical landscape and growth of the festival concept set the stage for the WVF. Its organizers might have grown faster and with less internal concern if they had heeded the

8. Rosenberg, *Bluegrass*, 5-14.

9. *Ibid.*, 5. Whether this thesis constitutes significant research and writing must be evaluated by the reader, but like Rosenberg and Cantwell, this author has also “performed the music” in amateur and community settings.

10. Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, vi-xiii, 62-67.

11. Ron Roach, “‘The Story of Bluegrass’: Carlton Haney, Bill Monroe, and the Redemption Drama in the First Bluegrass Festivals,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 20 no 1 (Spring 2014), 10-11, accessed April 10, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jappastud.20.1.0007>.

financial newspaper's advice. It quoted Carlton Haney, credited with founding the nation's first bluegrass festival, recommending, "You shouldn't invest more than \$10,000 the first year. . . . Even then you'll lose money."¹²

Financial aspirations were part of the WVF's origin. With the growth of bluegrass festivals and occasions such as the pairing of guitar players Dave Bromberg and Dan Crary on stage at the Philadelphia Folk Festival, the Mossman Guitar Company identified part of its value proposition as fashioning instruments that were best suited for practitioners of the guitar style known as flat-picking. That also contributed to Stuart Mossman's inspiration to anchor the nascent festival with the National Flat-Picking Championship.

If and how to monetize folk music was part of a larger conversation, too. The folk movement was full of factions negotiating a series of tensions such as authenticity vs. topicality and preservation vs. innovation. Various examinations of the Newport Folk Festival illuminate this. The most recent is *I Got a Song* by Rick Massimo. Newport started as a place in which these tensions coexisted peaceably, "a multiday hangout that explored the power of music to change minds and by extension the world, while at the same time, and partially by dint of, keeping alive long-forgotten musical traditions." By the time Bob Dylan played electric guitar during a Newport set in 1965, the folk factionalism was acute, and Newport "went down in a thicket of red tape and red ink." Newport went dormant in 1969 and reemerged in the Reagan 1980s as an abjectly corporate event.¹³

12. Ralph E. Winter, "Sentimental Songs; Awash With Nostalgia, Bluegrass Festivals Revive Old-Time Music," *Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 1972, microfilm.

13. Rick Massimo, *I Got a Song: A History of the Newport Folk Festival* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University, 2017), 3-5.

Ronald Cohen's *Rainbow Quest* is a broader look at the folk music revival—or, more accurately, revivals—in which these factions moved and operated. One theme of Cohen's work is the search for commercial potential, or at least sustainability, in the folk revival:

I am particularly interested in those influential individuals who were usually behind the musical scenes: the record company producers and executives, folk club and store owners, concert promoters, festival organizers, agents and managers, editors and writers. Virtually all white men . . . they had a commitment to changing society as well as encouraging folk music; they were also commercially savvy.¹⁴

The Walnut Valley Association (WVA) did not seek to change the world, but it did aim to help artists and the Winfield community while creating a sustainable, profitable enterprise.

Journalist Fred Goodman illuminated the creative dynamic of artistic achievement and commercial consideration throughout *The Mansion on the Hill*. Goodman recounted Arlo Guthrie contrasting the image of his irreverent train-hopping father, Woody, with the tuxedoed crowd at an induction ceremony for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Goodman also described the calculated, mercenary approach members of the Eagles and Bruce Springsteen's manager, Jon Landau, took to advancing their careers. Goodman acknowledged that billionaire mogul David Geffen's pursuit of profit made influenced politics and popular opinion more profoundly than most art—largely for the good.¹⁵

In order to establish itself as commercially viable, the WVA emphasized that its event was family friendly. To a great extent, this was a response to the new nostalgia that emerged in the 1970s as families tried to soothe their anxieties with entertainment that reflected simplicity and connection. It was also a reflection of the personal values of festival organizers. At the same time, emphasizing family friendliness was a defensive move, designed to ward off bad press and

14. Ronald Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts, 2002), x-xi, 210-211.

15. Fred Goodman, *The Mansion on the Hill: Dylan, Young, Geffen, Springsteen and the Head-On Collision of Rock and Commerce* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), viii—xv, 375-378.

governmental regulation. Most importantly, WVF promoters stressed that the people who came to the Winfield Fairgrounds were not like the people who went to rock festivals in Pittsburg, Kansas, Sedalia, Missouri, or Woodstock, New York. The WVF was orderly and reflected “the simple, the clean, . . . the healthy” aspects that consumers saw in country music.¹⁶

Bluegrass was not rock music—though it shared a great deal of rock’s DNA. Perhaps this is why the WVF was a permeable space in which the audience could perform what was expected in a family-friendly environment and later cross the boundary for some rebellion, which historian David Szatmary considers a defining theme of rock music. In *A Time to Rock*, Szatmary traces rock rebellion from Elvis Presley fans sporting sideburns, through Vietnam war protests, and into the 1970s, when “many baby boomers submerged their anger in material excess as rock became theatrical and extravagant.” This rebellion was also present in 1970s punk and the grunge and hip hop movements of the 1990s, according to Szatmary.¹⁷ Rebellion at the WVF looked like alcohol and nudity in the campgrounds and, on stage, coarse stories and drug humor.

Szatmary also identifies rock as a product of baby boomers who “had become an army of youngsters who demanded their own music. . . . Rock music appealed to and reflected the interests of the baby boom generation.”¹⁸ Although decidedly not a rock festival, the WVF was in many ways a product of the same generation. Young people who came to early editions of the festival and enjoyed what Rosenberg called “the willing suspension of the need for modern amenities like the kitchen and the bathroom, the campers’ good-natured acceptance of deprivation”¹⁹ now attend in RVs and travel the campground in golf carts. “Festival attendees are

16. Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001), xiv.

17. David Szatmary, *A Time to Rock: A Social History of Rock-and-Roll*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schirmer, 1996), xi-xiii.

18. Ibid.

19. Rosenberg, *Bluegrass*, 290.

aging, and with aging comes physical limitations,” festival staff noted in a planning meeting.²⁰

This changing way of recreating and higher expectations for comfort leads the observer to wonder whether this event is timebound to a generation. As the baby boomers pass on, will music fans still be “coming home to Winfield?”²¹ And what will they find?

David Glassberg, a leading voice in the public history field, writes, “Historical consciousness and place consciousness are inextricably intertwined; we attach histories to places, and the environmental value we attach to a place comes largely through the memories and historical associations we have with it.”²² The annual Walnut Valley Festival is not a permanent place. Like Brigadoon (the name of one of the many campsites that populate the festival), the Walnut Valley Festival emerges each year, witnesses love, loss, magic, and music, and then recedes into memory. It emerges in the same spot, the fairground at Winfield, Kansas, but the festival does not have an exclusive claim on those 141 acres.

Glassberg acknowledges that childhood experiences are foundational to forging a bond with one’s environment, but he also asserts, “A sense of place is further developed and reinforced by the social networks participated in as an adult; the longer one lives in a place, the more likely that the environment becomes saturated with memories of significant life experiences with family and friends.”²³ The power of the social networks associated with the Walnut Valley Festival, then, is what makes the festival a significant part of many of its participants’ lives. The

20. Becky Conway, “Walnut Valley Association Coordinators Meeting,” May 20, 2007, in Walnut Valley Association, “Black Book,” 2007.

21. “Home” was a common refrain as the festival organizers chose a theme each year: 1993, “Headin’ Home,” 1994, “Headin’ Home to Picker’s Paradise,” 1995, “Coming Home to Winfield,” 1996, “Home at Winfield,” 1999, “Coming Home to Pass the Music On,” 2016, “Goin’ Home to Winfield.”

22. David Glassberg, “Public History and the Study of Memory,” *Public Historian* 18 no 2 (Spring 1996): 17.

23. *Ibid.*, 18.

sense of place, the feeling of being at home^{24 25}, shared by the denizens of the Walnut Valley Festival's campgrounds is a combination of geography and memory set to a soundtrack of guitars and dulcimers.

24. For a sociological view of home and nostalgia as represented by the Walnut Valley Festival, see Lori Holfield, Maggie Cobb, Kimberly Murray, and Ashleigh McKinzie, "Musical Ties That Bind: Nostalgia, Affect, and Heritage in Festival Narratives," *Symbolic Interaction* 36 no. 4 (November 2013): 457-477, accessed April 11, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/symbinte.36.4.457>.

25. Donald DePoy investigated bluegrass music through a multidisciplinary lens. His overview of Victor Turber's anthropological approach is a helpful starting place. See Donald DePoy, "Cultural Context of Bluegrass Music: Preference, Familiarity & Sterotypes," doctoral dissertation, University of Maine, 1996, 53-54.

CHAPTER ONE

DOWN IN WALNUT VALLEY: THE ORIGINS AND EARLY YEARS OF THE WALNUT VALLEY FESTIVAL

The documentary *Festival!* captured the four peak years of the Newport Folk Festival, 1963-1966. It portrayed an atmosphere in which folksinger Joan Baez was mobbed by fans in a way that she found both unnerving and gratifying. Since Baez had been one of those fans at the edge of the stage just a few years earlier, perhaps her mixed feelings made sense. *Festival!* showed that the largest, loudest audiences turned out for chart-topping artists such as Peter, Paul & Mary and Bob Dylan but respect was shown for less commercial musicians who represented rural and roots music. There was room for topical and protest songs. A mostly white audience, including members of Peter, Paul & Mary, gathered around the Freedom Singers, a choir that sang galvanizing civil rights anthems, many repurposed from the African-American tradition. Finally, the festival showed that when the stages were quiet, festivalgoers gathered in parking lots and shady spots to play and sing themselves.¹

As a result of a folk music boom in the late 1950s and early 1960s, organizers including George Wein, Theodore Bikel, and Pete and Toshi Seeger re-launched a struggling festival in Newport, Rhode Island. The Newport Folk Festival “dim[med] the spotlight on the stars and include[d] newer as well as more traditional performers.”² Pete Seeger in particular imagined the festival as a utopian blend of accessibility, inclusivity, and joy. The unknown folk artist would

1. Murray Lerner, *Festival!* (Janus Films, 1967), DVD.

2. Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Revival & American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts, 2002), 209.

sing next to the household name, and audiences would learn and be inspired to action even as they were clapping along.³

The lineup for 1963 included Peter, Paul & Mary and Bob Dylan; bluegrass acts such as Bill Monroe; traditionalists such as John Lee Hooker; and urban folkies including Dave Van Ronk. Doc Watson, a guitar player who straddled several folk genres, was prominently featured at Newport Folk, though the discovery of the festival was bluesman Mississippi John Hurt, whom some music scholars had believed deceased. The non-profit festival's foundation raised more than \$70,000, and a *New York Times* arts reporter wrote that "integrity in folk music had a field day at the box office."⁴

By 1965, Newport was attracting 65,000 people for a four-day event. It continued to use the formula of a few big-name but primarily acoustic acts—Judy Collins, Phil Ochs, the Lovin' Spoonful—along with a few protest singers such as Buffy Sainte-Marie and Rosalie Sorrels and a list of roots and rural musicians, including blues players and bluegrass bands. It also had a popular curated showcase for "Young Performers," who included future stars James Taylor and Van Morrison. Despite its popularity and the boost of publicity it got for being the site where Dylan "went electric," organizational infighting and changing audience tastes tugged at the seams of the festival. The festival died as the decade ended. It took what was supposed to be a one-year hiatus for 1970 but did not return until the mid-1980s.⁵

Leading up to Newport, folk music in the United States had two commercial peaks, one just before the rock-and-roll era, and another just before rock's British invasion. The initial peak happened as the first baby boomers were toddlers, when the Weavers—a sort of folk music

3. Rick Massimo, *I Got a Song: A History of the Newport Folk Festival* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University, 2017), 31-35.

4. Ibid.

5. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 13-14, 208-212, 256-258, 271-274; Massimo, *I Got a Song*, 92.

super-group including Lee Hayes, Ronnie Gilbert, Fred Hellerman, and Pete Seeger—sold two million copies of “Goodnight Irene,” a cleaned-up version of a Leadbelly song, in 1950. The Weavers brought new attention to Woody Guthrie, recording popular versions of his songs including “So Long, It’s Been Good to Know You,” and “This Land is Your Land.” Within a few years, however, the Weavers all but disappeared from the commercial landscape, the victims of both the McCarthyite Communist witch hunt and the emergence of rock-and-roll.⁶

The next folk revival emerged around 1960, as high school and college students looked for an alternative to what musical satirist Tom Lehrer called “rock and roll—and other children’s records.”⁷ This time, the breakout hit was a version of a murder ballad by Tom Proffitt, a North Carolina banjo player. A serious but slicker version of “Tom Dooley” was a number one hit for the Kingston Trio in 1958, and the group supplanted Frank Sinatra as the biggest moneymaker for Capitol Records. In the 1960s, folk music was widely enough accepted that the term “hootenanny” entered the popular lexicon, affixed to a television show and even a pinball game. Innocuous acts such as the Limelighters and New Christy Minstrels shared the charts and stages with acts such as Peter, Paul & Mary, who combined soft sounds and civil rights protest songs, and the Chad Mitchell Trio, who chose songs with a satirical bite. Historian Ronald D. Cohen argued that the peak of the folk music revival was in 1963 and 1964.⁸ The Google Music Timeline, which measured popularity of music based on its prevalence in the collections of Google Play users, had a similar assessment. Both the music Google labeled “folk” and the music it called “folk rock” reached their apex in 1963 and 1964.⁹ Not coincidentally, in February

6. David Szatmary, *A Time to Rock: A Social History of Rock 'N' Roll* (New York: Schirmer, 1996), 93-94.

7. Tom Lehrer, “Oedipus Rex,” recorded March 20 and 21, 1959, from *An Evening Wasted With Tom Lehrer*, in the compilation *The Remains of Tom Lehrer*, Rhino Records, 2000, compact disc.

8. Szatmary, *A Time to Rock*, 94-97; Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 13-14, 208-210, 255-256.

9. Big Picture Research Group, Google, “Music Timeline,” accessed April 8, 2018, https://research.google.com/bigpicture/music/#FOLK%2CFOLK_ROCK.

1964, the Beatles hit the top of the United States album charts for the first time with *Meet the Beatles*. In later years, urban folksinger Dave Van Ronk called this era the “folk scare,” referring both to the moment when it looked as though folk music could supplant rock and to the leftist politics of many of the “folkies.”¹⁰

The more commercial music of the folk scare also helped the public, including young people seeking authenticity, find older and less polished music. Jean Ritchie, an Appalachian singer and mountain dulcimer player, Odetta, an African-American singer of spirituals, and proto-bluegrass guitar wizard Doc Watson grew their audiences.^{11 12} The purists’ folk music, along with folk dancing and storytelling, were on the bill at other festivals well before Newport. The movement to preserve traditional arts coalesced in 1928 with the launch of the annual Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville, North Carolina. Although its founder, Bascom Lamar Lunsford, died in 1973, the festival is still operating in 2018. The itinerant National Folk Festival debuted in 1931. Other traditional festivals came and went over the next three decades, and they often met with financial insecurity. By the late 1960s, the venerable National Folk Festival had been moved to Wolf Trap in Virginia in an effort to save it. A festival at the University of California Los Angeles launched in 1963 with great promise, interspersing performances by the Dillards, Bill Monroe, and Pete Seeger with academic presentations and a heavy dose of audience participation. The 1965 edition lost money, however. (The Newport Folk Festival organizers donated to fill the gap.) A year later, the event folded.¹³

10. Peter Dreier and Dick Flacks, “Folk Music and Movements: The Tradition Continues,” Bill Moyers and Company website, accessed March 27, 2018, <http://billmoyers.com/2014/05/28/music-and-movements-the-tradition-continues/>.

11. Szatmary, *A Time to Rock*, 97.

12. The Google “Music Timeline” results for Watson showed his peak years of popularity were 1965 and thirty years later in 1995. Accessed April 8, 2018; <https://research.google.com/bigpicture/music/#s%3ADoc%20Watson>.

13. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 13-14, 208-210, 255-256; Folk Heritage Committee, “History and Event Overview,” Mountain Dance and Folk Festival website, accessed February 27, 2018. <http://www.folkheritage.org/ourhistory.htm>; National Council for the Traditional Arts, “A Brief History of the

Some festivals leaned traditional but sprinkled in a few artists that listeners may have heard on the radio. The University of Chicago Folk Festival in 1963 presented traditional blues guitarists and a singer from the Georgia Sea Islands along with father of bluegrass Monroe. The festival also booked Jimmy Driftwood, known for writing popular songs in traditional styles such as “The Battle of New Orleans.” Driftwood’s song “The Tennessee Stud” later became a folk standard in a short time through its inclusion on the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* project. Similarly, the Philadelphia Folk Festival included a couple of newer artists, Dave Van Ronk and Theo Bikel, who helped re-start Newport. These urban singers were sprinkled into a lineup of traditional names such as Elizabeth Cotton, Mississippi John Hurt, and the Jim Kweskin Jug Band. Both festivals continue to the present day.¹⁴

A banjo player from Hutchinson, Kansas, who had just graduated from high school was at the Newport Folk Festival in 1963. Sam Ontjes and his fellow musician, Ron Montgomery, took a bus from Kansas to New York and from there to the Rhode Island festival. Ontjes was thrilled to see his folk music heroes there.

My friend Ron and I, we were sitting in the parking lot, and I had my longneck Pete Seeger banjo out, and I was playing. I had Pete Seeger’s *How to Play the 5-String Banjo* pretty well memorized. I was playing ‘Darlin’ Corey.’ I looked up, and there was Pete Seeger standing there, listening to us. That was pretty thrilling. Then he walked on, but I’ll never forget that.¹⁵

Ontjes was particularly struck by the inclusion of workshops at the festival, which created a chance for participants to learn more about how the musicians approached their artistry and developed their styles: “At Newport they had evening concerts, and then they had workshops during the day, various things like guitar or banjo or oldtime string band or bluegrass. The idea was you could go and ask questions and learn something from the actual artists. We took that

National Folk Festival,” accessed February 27, 2018. <http://ncta-usa.org/a-brief-history-of-the-national-folk-festival/>.

14. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 168-173, 210-212, 274, 289.

15. Sam Ontjes (Southwestern Folk Festival director), interview with the author, March 31, 2018.

seriously as a learning experience and tried to pick up actual licks and ideas and whatnot.”¹⁶

These workshops were part of Seeger’s vision. “Festivalgoers could learn from a workshop on music of the Kiowa tribe or pick up on the fine points of autoharp technique from Mother Maybelle Carter and Mike Seeger (including a Carter version of ‘Never on a Sunday’). Bob Davenport performed the unexpurgated version of the ballad ‘Seven Nights Drunk.’”¹⁷

In later years, Ontjes also attended the Arkansas Folk Festival in Mountain View, Arkansas, several times, sleeping in a barn owned by festival organizer Jimmy Driftwood. “He had been at Newport,” Ontjes remembered. “We used to go down to Mountain View for that festival. He’d put us up. We’d stay in his barn. There would be a whole bunch of people from all over the country in his barn. That was really the place.”¹⁸ “Concerts featuring a variety of acoustic folk musicians” at these festivals stood out to Ontjes. After he transferred from the University of Kansas to the smaller environment of Southwestern College in Winfield, Ontjes took inspiration from his trips, reproducing the educational and interactive elements of Newport and Mountain View, and leaving behind the political.¹⁹

The Southwestern Folk Festival took place April 28-30, 1967. The festival began with “an eye on the growing phenomenon of folk art,” wrote college senior Ontjes, festival director, in the program. Stuart Mossman, who grew up spending summers in Winfield with his grandparents, was publicity director for the effort. Mossman was a guitar player who was experimenting with guitar building.²⁰ Ontjes and his friends spent most of the school year putting the event together:

Southwestern was a wonderful experience, really capped off by the chance to be involved in the festival my senior year. The fact that the college let us do this, I still can’t believe it. We went to

16. Ibid.

17. Massimo, *I Got a Song*, 34-35.

18. Ontjes interview, March 2018.

19. Ontjes to Flottman, March 29, 2011.

20. Sam Ontjes and Danny Fauchier, *Southwestern Folk Festival Souvenir Program*, 1972; Sam Ontjes to Rex Flottman, March 29, 2011; Bob Hamrick and Shannon Littlejohn, ed., *September’s Song: 45 Years of Winfield’s Walnut Valley Festival* (Wichita, Kansas: SqueezePlay Productions, 2016, 75-6.

Dr. [Doug] Moore, who was the dean of students, and asked if we could organize this festival and get some cultural arts funds from the college. They put up \$2,000 and turned us loose. We went out and did it all. We got sponsorships up and down Main Street, patronages, and we hired the people who came. I guess the college had to sign the contracts.²¹

The committee members set a schedule that began with a lecture from a Kansas State University folklorist and continued with musicians, storytellers, and demonstrators. Most acts on the bill would have met the folk purists' approval, including 70-year-old Mance Lipscomb, "of that generation when the blues were but one, unseparated stream in the vast flow of Negro traditions."²² One of the headliners, Doc Watson, had played Newport; he straddled the line between the oral tradition and more commercial contemporary folk music. In a welcome letter to "Purists, Semi-Traditionalists, and People," however, Ontjes signaled that the festival had made a place for contemporary and topical songs. "With all due respect to the serious folklorist and ethnologist [*sic*], we have deemed it necessary to broaden our definition of folk music to include all working songs, love songs, cradle songs, drinking songs, patriotic songs, dancing songs, and narrative songs which deal with people in general."²³ Reflecting this philosophy, the festival brought in another headline act, Driftwood, who had played the eclectic Newport, the traditional-leaning University of Chicago festival, as well as his own festival in Arkansas.²⁴

The Southwestern Folk Festival was well-received, receiving sponsorships or donations from 35 Winfield businesses and families and drawing perhaps 1,500 participants. "It was neat to be able to share it with people, and we hoped that other people would enjoy it as much as we did, and the people didn't let us down. They did enjoy it."²⁵ Artists were generous with their time. For his \$700 fee, Watson spent three days in Winfield and remained accessible to students and

21. Ontjes, March 2018.

22. Ontjes and Fauchier, Southwestern Folk Festival Souvenir Program, 1972.

23. Ibid.

24. Sam Ontjes to Rex Flottman, March 29, 2011; Hamrick, *September's Song*, 5-6.

25. Ontjes, March 2018.

fans. In addition to playing the festival itself, several of the artists performed at the nearby Methodist Church-sponsored, student-run coffeehouse, The Black Eye. Lipscomb not only agreed to appear at the tiny venue, he practically moved in:

During the festival we had that thing going just about 24/7 for three days. I remember we'd get people who were booked on stage to come into the coffee house and play, and several of them would do it. I remember Mance Lipscomb, the black blues sharecropper from Texas. We got him on that stage, and we couldn't get him off. He played for hours. In the morning, we got up and joked, 'Well, Mance is probably still there playing.'²⁶

Even though Ontjes ran the show, he did not take credit for the folk festival idea. "I can't remember it being any one person's idea," Ontjes wrote. "I vaguely remember several of us sitting around talking when the idea blossomed."²⁷

Ontjes was not at the other Southwestern Folk Festival. Following the festival he directed, Ontjes graduated and then, like so many young men of the Baby Boom, went to serve in Vietnam.

It's funny. I went over and my MOS, my Military Occupational Specialty, was demolitions. I didn't know anything about demolitions. I'd spent one day learning how to blow up tree stumps They found out I was a college graduate and that I could read and write, so they made a company clerk out of me in a combat engineer battalion. I certainly had it better than some.²⁸

The second Southwestern festival was a one-day affair on October 23, 1971. Topping the bill were two hot guitar players, Dave Bromberg and Dan Crary. After the two blew away the crowd with solo sets, they joined together in the kind of jam that would be a signature of Walnut Valley Festival. Attendee Tom James said, "They might just as well have taken a big ol' Kansas twister down off God's shelf and said, 'Hey this is mine—I forgot I left it here.'"²⁹ Performers who returned from the previous festival included Art Eskridge, whose repertoire included railroad and gospel songs, the duo Pat and Victoria, who specialized in cowboy songs, and Charlie Cloud, a

26. Ibid.

27. Ontjes and Fauchier, *Southwestern Folk Festival Souvenir Program*, 1972; Ontjes to Flottman, March 29, 2011; Ontjes interview, March 2018.

28. Ontjes to Flottman, March 29, 2011.

29. Hamrick, *September's Song*, 7; *Winfield Courier*, October 16, 1971.

storyteller from Winfield who had been part of the Chautauqua circuit. Joe Muret recalled that Mossman again had a role with this folk festival, and after a guitar lesson—or possibly in place of one—Mossman drafted Muret to help set up tables.³⁰

The Southwestern Folk Festivals were possible because of the support and structure the college provided but also because of the freedom it gave to the students who had the idea. As Ontjes acknowledged, they easily could have failed. “I couldn’t believe how much rope they gave us,” Ontes said.³¹ Perhaps the college dean recognized that the students were serious, reflecting the commitment shown on campuses in the late 1960s. This was a time when community organizer and journalist Nicholas Von Hoffman advocated that college students should be taken seriously as people who took the issues of the day personally and passionately. Because they could not achieve financial independence without attending college, students were fighting for the opportunity to reshape the higher education experience, in Von Hoffman’s view. When compared to campus unrest at places such as Columbia University in New York—where Mark Rudd, leader of the Students for a Democratic Society sent an open letter to the president containing the deliberately shocking New Left catchphrase, “Up against the wall, motherfucker!”—a request to hold a folk festival was tame. The college could afford to be permissive in this way.³²

The next time the idea for a local festival emerged, the college had a smaller role. The Walnut Valley Festival was based in the community. It was more commercially motivated than educational. And the United States was an increasingly different place.

30. Joe Muret (co-founder of Walnut Valley Festival), interview by the author, March 27, 2018.

31. Ontjes, March 2018.

32. Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 9-11.

“If one date delineated the end of the Sixties and the beginning of the Seventies, it was the year 1968,” wrote historian Bruce Schulman. Student unrest, political assassinations, race riots, and a white backlash served to extinguish “the extravagant hopes of the era.” Moreover, the “liberal consensus that made big government possible” was fraying, the economy was stalling, and America’s international hegemony was in question.³³

While processing the tumult of the 1960s and facing the new uncertainty of the 1970s, an increasingly “skeptical, conservative America”³⁴ looked for reassurance, stability, and solace. For small towns such as Winfield, Kansas, in 1972—predominantly white, Christian, and straitlaced—this took the form of reframing some elements of the 1960s into activities that celebrated an idealized rural past and restored a threatened identity. People who were trying to wall off their families from the 1960s, people who were trying to prolong aspects of the 1960s, and people who were ambivalent all found themselves reflected in a nostalgic popular culture. At a folk and bluegrass music festival, the family preservationists would find certainty in the past, hearing and singing country and hillbilly songs with lyrics about times gone by. Longhaired youths could indulge in their own gathering of the tribes, cheering extended guitar solos before swaying back to their tents for a night of back-to-the-land communal living. And farmers and businessmen could simply view the whole thing as another service club project in search of the right balance of community support and commercial appeal.

The Walnut Valley Association began in the living room of a small farmhouse with a native stone fireplace a few miles south of Winfield, Kansas, in March 1972. Joseph Muret had lived

33. *Ibid.*, 2-8.

34. *Ibid.*, 2.

most of his life in that house and now shared it with his wife, Christie Williams Muret. The couple, both in their twenties, were active in the community and busy on the farm. They were expecting their first child.

The Murets' guests for the evening were Robert "Bob" Redford and his wife, Kendra, who farmed east of Winfield and operated an insurance office in Winfield. Bob and Joe were loyal members of the Winfield chapter of Jaycees, more formally the United States Junior Chamber of Commerce, a service club that capped the age for members at 40. The national Jaycees had recently celebrated its golden anniversary.³⁵ The two men had collaborated on a number of Jaycees projects over the years, including an annual motorcycle rally at the Winfield Fairground—an occasion that sometimes drew a rough crowd and spooked the inhabitants of the small town. Muret said Redford "kind of passed it off to me because, I think, that was the kind of project you did once or twice and then wanted to pass it off to someone else. It was a lot of work."³⁶

Muret said the chatter that eventually led to the WVA's founding started when he agreed to work at the Mossman Guitar Company part-time in exchange for a guitar. In his frequent conversations with Redford, Joe Muret would share news about the guitar shop. "I would go tell Bob what a neat deal it was. We were building guitars, and they were world famous guitars — or were going to be." Mossman was often on the road to music festivals, bringing back glowing stories of the music he had heard and the people he had met. He kept pestering Muret to join in the trips so he would not miss the fun. Muret preferred to stay home, mind the quiet shop, and stay current with his farm chores.³⁷

35. Edwin Markham, "The 1970s," History, United States Jaycees Foundation, accessed February 20, 2018, <http://www.usjayceefoundation.org/history/1970/index.htm>; Joe Muret, March 2018.

36. Joe Muret, March 2018.

37. Ibid.

“Finally,” Muret said, “I told him, kind of to get him off my back about going to Mountain View . . . if they had a music festival in Winfield, I would go to it. . . . That sort of not-serious comment led to him saying, ‘Well, if I had \$10,000, I could put on a music festival in Winfield.’ That led me into thinking because of my involvement in Jaycees, young businessman that I was, I could find \$10,000.” Their exchange led Muret to start talking to Redford about the idea of a Winfield-based festival. “It wasn’t an immediate thing. Every time I was with him I would kind of tell him what a great thing we were doing. . . . When I went to him with the idea of getting 10 people to put money in, his reaction was ‘If it’s such a good thing, why get 10 people? If you can sell it to me, I’ll finance it for us.’”³⁸

Redford was impressed by Muret’s enthusiasm. Both men liked the idea of creating an opportunity that would benefit Winfield businesses and organizations rather than the typical community event that required visiting merchants for sponsorships and donations. Knowing they were on the brink of something that would represent significant work, the Murets and the Redfords sat down at the Muret home to decide if they were actually committed to the idea.³⁹ The result was the formation of the Walnut Valley Association (WVA) on March 29, 1972,⁴⁰ and, in September 1972, the debut of its signature product, the Walnut Valley Festival at the Winfield Fairgrounds.

In 1972, the three founders stood for a photo, looking at a piece of paper that may have been a map of the Winfield fairgrounds. Redford, clean-shaven and with a receding hairline, wore a one-piece work jumpsuit and held the paper firmly, showing it to the other men. Muret, with a

38. Ibid.

39. Christie Muret (early staff member, Walnut Valley Association), in conversation with the author, February 2018.

40. Kansas Business Center, Business Entity Search, accessed February 20, 2018. <https://www.kansas.gov/bess/flow/main.jsessionid=C5564CA14881842013B6CAA951DC4B4A.apptcs03-inst0?execution=e1s4>.

full beard, wore jeans with a western style belt buckle and pointed at something on the paper. Mossman, who sported a small moustache, barely touched the paper with a finger and a thumb. Guided by Mossman's connections and the musical tastes of the guitar factory staff, the first WVF featured Norman Blake, the Theobalds' Bluegrass Country Boys, Dan Crary, and Doc & Merle Watson. From the world of traditional bluegrass, the festival brought in Jim & Jesse & the Virginia Boys, Lester Flatt⁴¹, and Country Gazette. Rounding out the bill was New Grass Revival, a prime example of the young bluegrass bands who played with the energy, showmanship, and virtuosity of progressive rock bands. "Right away we were caught between the traditional bluegrass festival and the progressive," said Kendra Redford.⁴²

The moment was right for the first Walnut Valley Festival.

The weather was not.

"[W]e envisioned making a big splash on the bluegrass scene," Redford told the *Kansas Farm Bureau News*. "As fate would have it, the weather that weekend was disastrous and so was the festival attendance." Besides that, the new WVA had spent more than twice its budget.⁴³

Getting to that first, wet festival took about a year. The idea of hosting public events was not new for Winfield; it had been a regional gathering point since the town's founding in 1870. The two festivals at Southwestern College had shown people would come to hear folk music. And Stuart Mossman and his employees at the Mossman Guitar Company were traveling regularly to

41. The stage schedule for September 29, 1972, was 3 p.m.—Open Stage for visiting bands; 7 p.m.—Bluegrass Country Boys; 8 p.m.—Norman Blake; 8:30 p.m.—Dan Crary; 9 p.m.—New Grass Revival; 9:45 p.m.—Byron Berline and the Country Gazette; 10:30 p.m.—Lester Flatt and the Nashville Grass; 11:15 p.m.—Dan Crary and Norman Blake; 11:45 p.m.—New Grass Revival; 12:15 a.m.—Lester Flatt and the Nashville Grass.

42. Kendra Redford (Walnut Valley Association co-owner and wife of Bob Redford), interview with the author, February 3, 2018.

43. Norma Sampson, "Bluegrass Festival Features Family Fun," *Kansas Farm Bureau News*, 1975.

other festivals to promote their instruments. One way to view the festival's origin is an organic result of these conditions. As Ontjes put it,

From my perspective, the birth of the Walnut Valley Festival at the fairgrounds came partly from a desire to promote Mossman Guitars and of course, a love of acoustic music shared by everyone in and around the guitar shop. Stuart's enthusiasm was infectious. We liked the name Walnut Valley because it sounded folksy and painted an accurate picture of where the event would be held.⁴⁴

Leota Coats, who wrote for the WVA's publications and was married to festival publicity coordinator Art Coats, had a similar view. She said there was a clear connection from the folk festivals on campus to the contest and festival at the fairground. In her memory, community members including Art Coats, Mossman, and Redford started talking after the first performances at the college. They said "this should continue. Could we have a festival or something like that? If I remember correctly, the next fall, they had an expanded concert there at Southwestern, and then they started talking about even going [bigger] and started out at the fairgrounds."⁴⁵

Another view of the festival's origin assigns credit to three specific individuals: Mossman, Muret, and Redford. Kendra Redford once recalled, "Stuart was one of the original founders, Bob was one of the original founders, but Joe Muret was also one of the original founders. He was working in the guitar factory at the time and, in fact, I kind of attribute the original idea or suggestion to him. . . . He said, 'Why don't we have a festival, you know, here in Winfield?' In fact, he's the one that approached Bob for the financing because they had worked in Jaycees together."⁴⁶ As Muret put it, "I was sort of an intermediary between Bob and Stuart when we began the festival. . . . Basically Stuart had a concept and I took that idea to Bob to finance it."⁴⁷

44. Ontjes to Flottman, March 29, 2011.

45. Leota Coats (staff writer, Walnut Valley Association, and spouse of Art Coats), interview with the author, April 2018.

46. Kendra Redford interview, February 2018.

47. Joe Muret, March 2018.

From the beginning, the Walnut Valley Association relied on three skill sets, initially embodied by the three founders. Bob Redford represented—and provided—capital, business acumen, and administration. Joe Muret handled operations and the grounds, literally putting blood and sweat into welding the first stage.⁴⁸ Winfield luthier and sometime guitar player Stuart Mossman was the initial force behind booking and maintaining relationships with musical artists—although others quickly filled in, including festival publicist Art Coats and, later, WVA secretary Louise Logsdon, media coordinator Rex Flottman and the Redfords themselves.⁴⁹ The operational areas always bled into one another; indeed, an asset and a vulnerability of the festival’s operation was Redford’s hands-on approach to all aspects of festival production. Still, all three aspects were present from the first year, always augmented by the dedication of dozens—later hundreds—of other people. In 1972, Muret and Redford both enlisted their spouses, and Mossman got help from other guitar company employees. “Other than my stake in the guitar shop, I had no financial interest in the festival,” Ontjes said. “Everybody in the guitar shop worked on it. My job for the 1972 festival was Publicity. We did it because we loved the music. Money was not part of the equation.”⁵⁰ Southwestern College provided support in exchange for student admissions.

The audience responded well to the stage acts, and the Watson, Crary, and Blake jam was electrifying. Unfortunately for the organizers, the weather was extreme even for Kansas, with record cold temperatures on Friday night. “Saturday morning the music fans woke up with a half inch of frost on their sleeping bags. It was snowing before noon.” When the sun finally came out,

48. Christie Muret, February 2018.

49. According to Flottman, starting around 1999, hiring was largely conducted by the Bob Redford with Flottman, Paulette Rush, and Kendra Redford. A few years later, Becky Conway joined the hiring team. As of 2018, the hiring committee is made up of Bart Redford, Flottman, Conway, Karen Deal, and a rotating fifth member, currently Jerry O’Neil. Rex Flottman, email to author, April 10, 2018.

50. Ontjes to Flottman, March 29, 2011.

fierce wind kicked up a dust storm. A Kansas Farm Bureau reporter highlighted the agricultural lens through which the organizers viewed the situation:

‘I knew Sunday morning that we were going to finish the weekend way down in the red. I was ready to throw in the proverbial towel,’ Redford said. ‘But Joe is the typical farmer with a strong constitution, and he convinced me that we were in so far over our heads that the only way out was to hold another festival.’

Muret, who has been farming for 23 years, compares holding a music festival to farming: ‘If you have a bad year and your crops fail, you just have to work harder the next year in hopes of getting your money back. We had to go on. We had a good idea, but circumstances were against us.’⁵¹

The weather was almost as dire the following year. Winfield got rain for nine days before the festival opened in 1973. Despite the soggiess, the rain held off during the festival itself, and the Walnut River did not crest until the next week, when the fairgrounds were under four feet of water. This little bit of luck and the momentum from the previous year brought a 50 percent increase in attendance.⁵² Returning performers included Blake, Crary, Doc & Merle Watson, New Grass Revival, and the Bluegrass Country Boys. J.D. Crowe and the New South were invited for the first time.

It was with the third festival that everything jelled. Weather was “perfect,” and attendance rose 96 percent from the previous year.⁵³ “[A]fter experimenting with various ideas and ways of doing things for two years, things went well. When it was over, we felt like we were beginning to understand how to make a festival operate,” Muret said after the event.⁵⁴ The first three years also set a pattern that would repeat a number of times over the years; poor weather would reduce revenue, and the WVA would carry a loss for a year or two to make up for it. “It used to take about a couple years to come back from what we call the ‘lost year,’” Kendra Redford said.⁵⁵

51. Sampson, *Kansas Farm Bureau News*, 1975.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Coats, “The Flat-Pickin’ Festival,” *Pickin’*, 1975.

54. Sampson, *Kansas Farm Bureau News*, 1975.

55. Kendra Redford interview, February 2018.

Internally, the Walnut Valley Association made its first shift. Though Mossman continued to make suggestions for acts to hire, he was no longer part of the WVA. “Stuart . . . had connections or knew the artists because of his guitar factory. [He put] together the first two or three years of the lineup for the festival. But his guitar factory was growing, so it was kind of hard for him to do both,” Kendra Redford remembered.⁵⁶ Meeting notes from the spring of 1975 suggested that there was some role confusion in the midst of the transition. Muret complained that Mossman was treated in a magazine article as a festival spokesperson. “Stuart was a member of the Board of Directors. . . . He just didn’t have much to do with the festival, and authorized and correct information comes through the publicity director or through Bob’s office.” Muret recommended a “brief and informal” but signed communication asking Mossman to “back off.” Notes from a subsequent meeting showed the message was sent: “It was recommended that a memo from us all be directed to Stuart about who is the spokesman and who does the talking for Walnut Valley.”⁵⁷

When Redford bought Mossman’s share of the Walnut Valley Association, Muret asked for the same treatment out of loyalty to Mossman. Unlike Mossman, however, Muret remained part of the crew for about a dozen years. “Bob bought Stuart out of it. We had a corporation set up. Each of us had a certain percentage of the corporation based on what we did. When the festival was over we each got paid based on that percentage of the profit from the festival,” Muret said. Though Muret was no longer an owner, “Bob kept that same arrangement in what I got paid each

56. Ibid.

57. “Joe Muret’s Comments and Thoughts in Regard to the Story Sent to *Pickin’* and the Situation With Stuart,” April 4, 1975, and Alene Miller, “Committee Report,” in Walnut Valley Association, Outline and Planning Book, 1975.

year.”⁵⁸ Muret was listed as an officer in some publications, but Redford owned the corporation—and the risks and rewards that went with it.

By September 1975, an article Art Coats wrote referred to Mossman obliquely as a former board member now serving as a “consultant owing to a pressing personal work schedule.” A letter from the WVA to potential investors noted that “after the second festival (1973), Stuart Mossman left the organization in order to devote full time to his guitar manufacturing business, the S.L. Mossman Guitar Company. He was replaced by Art Coats.”⁵⁹ To festivalgoers, there was still a strong association between WVA and Mossman guitars. In 1976, Mossman invited people who were winding down their festival weekend to come by the factory for a Sunday morning tour. In 1977, Mossman Guitar Company advertised in the *Flatlands Occasional*, an attempt by the WVA and Coats to spin off its newsletter into a separate publication.⁶⁰

Besides the core directors—now Redford, Muret, and Coats—the festival built and refined its network of workers in the first years.⁶¹ Working for a combination of admission to the festival, an hourly wage, a chance to be close to the music, and a love of community, these workers developed procedures and traditions as they went. Among the early crew members were Troy Boucher and Dan Daniel, faculty members at Southwestern College. “We used a lot of the Southwestern College people in the early years,” Kendra Redford said. “Partly that was because my mother was up there working at Southwestern, and also they had an interest in the festival.”⁶² Muret recalled the effort his spouse put forth to find staff for the ticket trailer, which operated 24

58. Joe Muret interview, March 2018.

59. Coats, “The Flat-Pickin’ Festival,” *Pickin’*, 1975; Walnut Valley Association, prospectus for Japan trip, circa 1976

60. Mossman Guitar Shop flyer in Walnut Valley Association, Outline and Planning for Walnut Valley Bluegrass & Walnut Valley Spring-Thing, 1976; *Flatlands Occasional*, May 1977.

61. A list of duties and responsible parties from the 1976 festival includes tickets, Joe Muret; grounds, Lloyd Stucky, Floyd Stucky, Phil Miller, David Alberding, Brian Redford, Melvin Ruggles; advance tickets, Alene Miller; judging, Louise and John Logsdon; lights, Roger Moon; publicity, Art Coats; crafts, Troy and Michelle Boucher.

62. Kendra Redford interview, 2018.

hours a day during the event. They also had to find people to perform the labor that went with preparing the grounds. “We did it by involving a lot of people, a lot of volunteers who were our friends, family friends, work friends, associates that had ideas and were tickled to death to work in exchange for a ticket in the beginning. . . . There was really a spirit of ‘we want to do something for Winfield.’”⁶³

The new festival was a product of the 1970s, when “America confronted . . . changes every day . . . in the workplace, in the media, and in their homes, schools, and places of worship.”⁶⁴ The Winfield Fairground became a common space for those who were making sense of their world by trying to recast some of the signature elements of the 1960s in ways that recalled the 1950s or even earlier times and for those who were making sense of their world by extending and embracing the permissiveness claimed by the 1960s counterculture. Festival organizers seemed to sense the needs of their divergent audience and intuitively created a space that met both needs. As individuals, however, Redford, Muret, Mossman, and Coats were, like many Americans, “ambivalent at best about the scale and scope of the changes sweeping the nation.”⁶⁵ They were prepared to put in the hard work to create something for the benefit of their community. That turned into a commitment to music and the musicians who created it.

63. Joe Muret, March 2018.

64. Beth Bailey and David Farber, eds., *America in the Seventies* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 5.

65. *Ibid.*

CHAPTER TWO

HOW BLUE IS YOUR GRASS?

Festival culture was in full swing, and new festivals were popping up around the country, including a folk festival in Winfield, Kansas, that brought together some of the individuals who would form the core of the Walnut Valley Festival (WVF). In the aptly titled chapter, “Festivals Get Big,” Neil Rosenberg wrote that festivals specializing in bluegrass music grew from primarily one-day events for fans in 1966 to multiday events welcoming curious music lovers that were documented by *Playboy* and the *Wall Street Journal* in 1972.¹

Meanwhile, in March 1972, the same month in which the Walnut Valley Association (WVA) was formally born, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band released the three-album package *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*. The country-rock outfit, known for its hit version of the Jerry Jeff Walker song “Mr. Bojangles,” featured the sounds and songs of the originators of hillbilly, country, and bluegrass music. It was a modest hit at the time, reaching the top five on the country charts, but it was also an album with legs, eventually reaching platinum sales status and influencing the next two generations of musicians.

The WVF began at a point in history that represented loss and ambiguity for many Americans. An economic transition from traditional manufacturing to a technology- and service-driven global economy was taking place but was not widely understood. As Bailey and Farber point out, the shift is only clear in retrospect. The disequilibrium, however, was palpable at the time.

1. Neil Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History*, twentieth anniversary ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2005), 277-296.

[T]hese large-scale structural changes were disorienting, frustrating, and frightening. Many American families, communities, and even whole regions faced unexpected challenges to their economic viability and ways of life . . . Americans during the 1970s commonly described their world and their future in a language of loss, limits, and failure.²

Small wonder, then, that certainty was highly valued. *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which used Biblical interpretation to describe the coming end of the world, was the best-selling book of the decade. “In the 1970s, it seems, millions found the apocalypse a comforting vision.”³ The Walnut Valley Festival succeeded in the 1970s by providing certainty for its audience. Even as it grew and adapted to changing times, the event remained predictable and even a bit old-fashioned—a reflection of the times and of its president.

The month of the first festival, September 1972, also saw the debut of *The Waltons*, which followed the travails of a Virginia family in the Depression years of the 1930s and, later, the war years of the 1940s. For increasingly conservative Americans who wished to reclaim the primacy of their idea of family, *The Waltons* was both affirming and illustrative. At the same time, the world of the hardworking family spoke to those who were influenced by the environmental activism and back-to-the-land movements found within the 1960s counterculture. Though sometimes mocked for its earnestness, the show debuted to high ratings and, after a few seasons, began to pick up critical awards for its ensemble. A TV critic labeled *The Waltons* a “soft show”:

no loud-hailer jokes, no titillating rattle of gunfire, no high-decibel calls for Dr. Kildare, no heavy confrontations of any kind. . . . Without apology, it extols the simple virtues of chastity, honesty, industry, thrift, family unity and love. Its stories frequently deal with life’s rejects—the faded actress, the failed writer, the lovelorn blacksmith, the unforgiving preacher, etc., who learn and gather strength from their brush with The Waltons. If it has any ‘relevance,’ it is that the Waltons are primarily concerned, in the modern term, with the individual soul.⁴

2. Beth Bailey and David Farber, eds., *America in the Seventies* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 2.

3. *Ibid.*, 1.

4. Dwight Whitney, “The Simple Virtues Are Back in Style,” *TV Guide*, April 28, 1973, in “Waltons in the Media,” All About the Waltons website, accessed February 22, 2018. <http://www.allaboutthewaltons.com/articles/mag11.php>.

The *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*-era Nitty Gritty Dirt Band,⁵ *The Waltons*, and the WVA formed at the intersection of several trends that contributed to their eventual ability to find a sustaining audience. A new interest in American rural life was part of popular culture, and one expression of it was an interest in American folklife demonstrated through arts, crafts, dance, music, and storytelling. Progressive popular music was demonstrating an appreciation for instrumental virtuosity. Perhaps most importantly, after going largely missing from the “folk scare” years of the late 1950s, bluegrass music was experiencing an uptick in mainstream recognition as musicians from folk, country, and rock traditions blended styles and sought out instrumental masters.

A general interest in rural life and history showed up in popular culture in the 1960s and 1970s. There was a demand for up-close and authentic depictions of folklife, including arts, crafts, and the kinds of life skills that families living in urban environments rarely practiced, if they possessed them at all. Ralph Rinzler (who had written a profile of Bill Monroe for *Sing Out!* Magazine in 1963) was part of a small staff hired to stage the first Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 1967, which included basketmakers, potters, dollmakers, and a wrought iron artist whom a reporter called “the world’s greatest anvil virtuoso.”⁶ For a decade before the WVA formed, the tourist village at Branson, Mo., called Silver Dollar City had been hosting a successful craft festival, featuring woodcarving, tie hacking, shingle splitting, blacksmithing, weaving, lye soap making, and candlemaking. A few years later, the Kansas State Historical Society would kick off the Kansas Folklife Festival with a Friday night square dance.⁷

5. The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band has never been on the WVF bill, though its best-known member, John McEuen, was booked in 2017.

6. Herman Schaden and John Sherwood, “Rustic Artisans Bring Folksy Air to Holiday on Mall,” *The Sunday Star* (Washington, D.C.), July 2, 1967, in Smithsonian Institution, *Festival of American Folklife festival report, 1967*, accessed March 31, 2018, <http://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/festivalofameric00festi>.

7. Silver Dollar City, “History,” accessed February 22, 2018. <https://www.silverdollarcity.com/theme-park/Guest-Services/History>; “Celebrating Folklife in Kansas,” *Kansas!* no 3, 1980, 3.

The WVF planners attempted to appeal to those who came to the festival trying to reconnect with their own heritage or to learn about how others lived. In a plan for publicity, Coats floated the name “Walnut Valley Association Music and Folk Arts & Craft Fair.” Demonstrations and hands-on experiences were interspersed with the craft vendors. “We had a lady from our church, Luetta Scott, who still made her own soap,” remembered Kendra Redford. This particular demonstration was not a re-creation from the past. The ashes used in soapmaking came from Scott’s own kitchen. Redford said, “She cooked on a wood-burning stove, so she had ashes, so she made her own. We had a lot of those demonstrations, things like that, people who would actually demonstrate at the festival.”⁸

In September 1972, the month of the inaugural Walnut Valley Festival, Jim Croce was in the Billboard top ten with his boasting character song “You Don’t Mess Around With Jim.” Though the song was decidedly in the folk tradition, it was an example of the kind of composition that drew the derision of folk music purists such as Maud Karpeles, president of the International Folk Music Council. Karpeles called these “folk songs in name only, being contemporary songs composed in a ‘folk’ style. Unfortunately, this type of song had to a great extent become confused in the public mind with the traditional folk song, orally transmitted and evolved by generations of singers.” Karpeles allowed, however, that at the same time there was a growing appreciation for the “real” folk music.⁹

The folk music scene, including its traditional and its commercial aspects, was part of the trend that created an audience for the WVF. Another trend was found among record-buyers and

8. Art Coats, “Advertising campaign for Walnut Valley Festival 1975,” Outline and Planning Book, 1975; Kendra Redford (Walnut Valley Association co-owner and wife of Bob Redford), interview with the author, February 3, 2018.

9. “Jim Croce—Chart History,” Billboard website, accessed February 22, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/music/jim-croce>; Maud Karpeles, “Folk Music,” in *Britannica Book of the Year 1972*, ed., Dean H. Schoelkopf (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1972), 508-509.

concert-goers who were more interested in musical heroics than musical authenticity. In popular music, people were buying complex music performed by highly adept instrumentalists. In September 1972, the month of the first Walnut Valley Festival, the progressive rock group Yes released its album *Close to the Edge*, which stayed on the Billboard charts for 32 weeks, reaching number three. Other “prog” acts on the scene included Jethro Tull, which released its signature album *Thick as a Brick* in 1972, and Emerson, Lake & Palmer, whose *Trilogy* album from 1972 included a rock arrangement of Aaron Copeland’s “Hoedown.”

While people who were used to dressing up to hear live music may have found this version of “Hoedown” surprising, its amalgamation of rock instruments and music from rural America (even through the filter of Copeland) was also present in blurred lines between traditional folk music, country music, and rock. In 1972, the year of the first Walnut Valley Festival, the Eagles released their debut album, including the banjo-heavy single “Take It Easy,” which almost cracked the Billboard Top 10.¹⁰ The same year, Neil Young released *Harvest*, “abundant with pedal-steel ambience as well as a bucolic back-to-the-country vibe.” Even Elton John, hardly an American country boy, put out *Honky Tonk Château*, singing about his redneck ways and orchestrating with mandolin and banjo.¹¹

Other national country-rock artists who released albums in 1972 included the Charlie Daniels Band, The Flying Burrito Brothers, Kris Kristofferson, Michael Martin Murphy¹², Mike

10. For more on the country-rock movement and the use of banjo by the Eagles, see Olivia Carter Mather, “Taking It Easy in the Sunbelt: The Eagles and Country Rock’s Regionalism,” *American Music* 31 no. 1 (Spring 2013), 26-49, accessed April 10, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/americanmusic.31.1.0026>.

11. Classic Rock Review, “The Eagles,” November 12, 2012, accessed February 22, 2018, <http://www.classicrockreview.com/2012/11/1972-the-eagles/>; David Menconi, “Neil Young, Harvest” in “50 Rock Albums Every Country Fan Should Own,” *Rolling Stone* website, November 12, 2014, accessed February 22, 2018, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/50-rock-albums-every-country-fan-should-own-20141112/elton-john-honky-chateau-1972-20141112>.

12. Michael Martin Murphy would go on to play the Walnut Valley Festival in 2011.

Nesmith, New Riders of the Purple Sage, and Poco.¹³ Closer to Winfield, the band Sawdust Charlie played regularly at Wichita's The King Cole and Stagedoor Inn, benefiting from regular airplay on KFDI. Other Wichita area groups with country-rock hybrid identities in the late 1960s and early 1970s included Sweetwater, Southwind, and Potlatch. Sundance had two members in cowboy hats in a publicity photo, representing the honky-tonk and Western swing elements in the band's sound. Winfield native Donny Overstake played in the rootsy-sounding Crow Haven Farm but changed the band's name to Lotus.¹⁴ If bluegrass newcomers already knew rock songs with country and folk elements in them, then the kind of music presented at a bluegrass festival would not be so foreign.

Both country-rock and prog-rock grew in part because they were more likely to be played on the radio in the years leading up to 1972. For a decade before, FM radio stations were allowed to broadcast in stereophonic sound, and starting in 1965 regulators forced AM and FM stations to separate. Rather than simulcast all day, if a station had both an AM and FM side, it was required to have separate programming for at least part of the day. In Wichita, KFDI-FM played "rowdier" music, including the country-rock of Hank Williams Jr., and the rock-country of Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. T-95 debuted with an album rock format that lent itself to playing progressive rock acts.¹⁵ As the 1970s started, about half of all radios purchased were FM-enabled, so these new programming options had a huge potential audience.¹⁶

13. Frank Hoffman, "Country Rock" in "Introduction to Popular Music and Its Fundamentals," last modified spring 2003, accessed February 22, 2018, http://www.shsu.edu/~lis_fwh/book/hybrid_children_of_rock/Country%20Rock2.htm.

14. Wichita Rock Music Project Team and Jay Price, ed., *Wichita Rock & Roll, 1950-1980* (Newton, Kansas: Mennonite Press, 2017), 36-37, 76, 85, 90.

15. Orin Friesen and Bud Norman, *Goat Glands to Ranch Hands: The KFDI Story* (Wichita, Kansas: Rowfan Press, 2013), 150-152.

16. James L. Baughman, *The Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America Since 1941*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins, 2006), 131.

Some of the country-rock hybrids specifically included bluegrass, or at least bluegrass performers and instruments. The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band featured guest guitarists Doc Watson, Merle Travis, and Norman Blake and guest banjo players Earl Scruggs and Bela Fleck among other country and bluegrass luminaries as they performed Carter Family standards such as “Keep On the Sunny Side.” The Grateful Dead’s first single in 1967 was “Sittin’ On Top of the World.” A Mississippi Sheiks song from 1930, it had become one of Doc Watson’s go-to songs. The Dead’s Jerry Garcia in particular came from a tradition of bluegrass, gospel, and hillbilly music, and he was a respected banjo player and teacher in San Francisco before he started seriously acid testing. Garcia said, “I sort of employed a scholarly approach and even went through the South with tape recorders and stuff recording bluegrass bands. I spent about three years playing bluegrass banjo. That was my big thing.” Garcia’s side and post-Dead musical projects especially had bluegrass and country flavors.¹⁷ These bands treated bluegrass with some reverence but also began to remind audiences of—or introduce audiences to—the excitement and variety found in the bluegrass genre.

Since its creation, the bluegrass style had devoted fans but also proponents who viewed themselves as fans of rock, folk, or, especially, country music. “By the late 60s, [bluegrass] had developed a relatively small but avid following in Kansas that included many a long-haired, tie-dyed folkies,” wrote Orin Friesen.¹⁸ KSOK, a station broadcasting in Winfield and nearby Arkansas City, carried a bluegrass show featuring Mike Theobald and his father, Jack, which started in 1963. “Bluegrass Country,” the Theobalds’ band, is recognized as the first bluegrass

17. “Roots of the Grateful Dead from Smithsonian Folkways,” Folkways website, accessed February 22, 2018, <https://folkways.si.edu/roots-of-the-grateful-dead/music/playlist/smithsonian>; Ronald Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts, 2002), 254-255; Szatmary, *A Time to Rock*, 172.

18. Friesen, *Goat Glands to Ranch Hands*, 150-152.

band in Kansas. “People around here didn’t even know what bluegrass was,” Jack Theobald said in 1988. “Probably a few of them wish they’d never found out!” Bluegrass Country hosted a bluegrass festival put together by the Haysville, Kansas, Jaycees in 1971; this was apparently the first bluegrass festival in Kansas. Friesen launched his own long-running weekly bluegrass radio show in 1973 on KBUL, moving it to KFDI in 1977.¹⁹

The early Walnut Valley Festivals drew informed fans, including a young boy who told Don Reno how much his family loved the banjo and guitar player. This surprised a fan club member but turned out to be representative.

This was typical of our weekend. People would come to us and say that they have been Reno and Harrell fans for a long, long time. We thought that we knew the band members pretty well and were amazed by all the people that have known and been fans of the band over the years. This was even more amazing to us when we realized that this was the first time the band has played in Kansas in recent years.²⁰

At the same time, WVF helped to grow a fan base for bluegrass music, introducing it to those who came to the festival for other musical styles, for the crafts, or for the novelty. Don Reno told his fan club members that the new festival had “done more to support Bluegrass in the Midwest than any other. Bridging the gap between the solid base in the East and the growing popularity in the West with people like Jerry Garcia in California.”²¹ Also part of connecting bluegrass in the middle of the country to the rest of the country was the new Society for the Preservation of Bluegrass Music in America, founded by Chuck Stearman in 1974 and initially based in Kansas City, Mo. “There were a lot of traditional bluegrass festivals springing up around that time in Missouri and Oklahoma,” Kendra Redford recalled.²²

19. “Bluegrass Country Celebrates 25th Anniversary at Winfield,” *Walnut Valley Occasional*, festival program (September 1988): 29; Friesen, *Goat Glands to Ranch Hands*, 150-152.

20. John Sutliff, “The Fourth National Guitar Flat Picking Championship—September 19 and 20, 1975,” *Don Reno Bill Harrell Tennessee Cut Ups Fan Club Newsletter* 2 no 1 (1975): 2-3.

21. *Ibid.*

22. John Lawless, “Chuck Stearman Passes,” *Bluegrass Today* blog, June 16, 2016, accessed February 28, 2018. <https://bluegrasstoday.com/chuck-stearman-passes/>; Kendra Redford interview, 2018.

The WVA even tried to launch a couple more festivals of its own. In 1976, the Walnut Valley Association staged a second festival, the Spring Thing. Christie Muret, who helped run and schedule workers for the ticket trailers, said that event was the exception to the good behavior she came to expect from the festival crowd. “People just came to have a good time. They weren’t looking for trouble. All except the Spring Thing. That was a different deal.”²³ The Spring Thing did not return the next year, despite Coats arguing “that had it remained dry and sunny, it would have been by far the most profitable venture that WV has made so far.”²⁴ Kendra Redford recalled, “We thought, ‘OK, we won’t do a second festival.’ We had a pretty good crowd, but we decided it was too much work.

“Well we kind of forgot that piece of advice and we tried again in 1979.” This time, the second event was staged in June and dubbed the June Jamboree. “We had a wonderful line-up” but “a small crowd so we had a mix that year, we lost money on the June Jamboree but we made enough money in the fall that we didn’t have that big of loss. But we did have to subsidize the . . . June Jamboree.” That time, the decision to only hold one festival a year stuck. According to Kendra Redford, focusing on a single event was ultimately an important part of sustaining the WVA. Workloads increased, and the operation required months of planning each year. “People would ask us, you know, ‘Are you working the festival now?’ and they didn’t realize we were working on the festival year ’round.”²⁵

Although it came a few years after the folk music revival crested, the first Walnut Valley Festival was staged at a time when the country held a new interest in traditional folk culture;

23. Christie Muret (early staff member, Walnut Valley Association), in conversation with the author, March 30, 2018.

24. Kendra Redford (Walnut Valley Association co-owner and wife of Bob Redford), interview with the author, February 3, 2018; “Comments by Art Coats Concerning the Spring Thing” in WVA, Outline and Planning, 1976.

25. Kendra Redford interview, February 2018.

when popular music consciously featured elements and influences of country, folk, and bluegrass; when interest in bluegrass was waxing; and when guitar enthusiasts were quickly expanding the relatively new flatpicking style. Winfield had even been the site of two successful folk festivals, suggesting that there was enough interest and infrastructure for something similar to be repeated. Still, organizers had reason to be concerned about community perception; the nail in the coffin for the Newport Folk Festival came when the city council revoked the festival's license.²⁶

26. Rick Massimo, *I Got a Song: A History of the Newport Folk Festival* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University, 2017), 114.

CHAPTER THREE

PICKER'S PARADISE

From the beginning, the Walnut Valley Association was committed to being a musician's festival. Organizers booked performers of the highest caliber, held contests to celebrate instrumental expertise in both new and traditional styles, and designed the festival experience around the premise that ticket-buyers would join together to play music. "We wanted to encourage the people who played an instrument," said Kendra Redford, "and that's part of what has contributed to the campgrounds jams, which are a big part of the festival now."¹ A poster advertising the second festival emphasized "lots of 'good pickin' under the trees." As WVA publicist Coats wrote in a feature for *Pickin'*, a magazine for bluegrass enthusiasts, "[T]he event has as its principle [*sic*] goal a dedication to guitar playing and guitar pickers."² By 1981, if not well before, the efforts to attract musicians as attendees was working. Of the people who answered a survey that year, more than a third played guitar and more than 60 percent played an instrument of some kind. Almost three-quarters of respondents attended an instrument workshop, and two-thirds watched an instrument contest. Most important to the festival's brand, more than 30 percent participated in "Parkin' Lot Pickin'" and another fourteen percent listened.³ Unlike an event such as Woodstock or Monterey Pop, even the artists whose names were on the festival poster were approachable in Winfield, teaching interactive workshops or joining in the campground picking after the stages closed.

1. Kendra Redford (Walnut Valley Association co-owner and wife of Bob Redford), interview with the author, February 3, 2018.

2. Art Coats, "The Flat-Pickin' Festival," *Pickin'* 2 no 8, September 1975: 20-22.

3. Walnut Valley Association, results of questionnaires, "Black Book," 1981.

Bob Redford, Joe Muret, and Art Coats were not musicians, or at least not the kind of musicians who went in for playing music in the parking lot. Some early festival publicity called Muret “an amateur picker by avocation,” which was a generous assessment. “I first got to know Stuart [Mossman] because I wanted to take guitar lessons,” Muret remembered. “I wanted to sing. In those days you had to play an instrument to sing in a group, and I wanted to sing in a group.” Festival publicity emphasized the festival’s relationship with the Mossman’s guitar factory, where Muret worked building guitar necks and doing inlay work.⁴ An early promotional photo showed Muret holding a guitar. For the most part, however, the festival stuck to the story that “none of the three directors is a musician and therefore have no preconceived ideas as to what is or isn’t acceptable music or format for a festival situation.”⁵ The *Walnut Valley Occasional*, the festival’s official newsletter, published a story in 1976 proclaiming “Non-Musician Trio Forms Walnut Valley Association.”

In several early interviews, Redford detailed his lack of experience with bluegrass, telling a similar story each time: “When Joe came to me five years ago about investing in a bluegrass festival, I had no idea what he was talking about. I didn’t know the difference between bluegrass and a British ballad.”⁶ His wife, Kendra Redford, did not know much more. She had a concept of high school and college music competitions, but “I wasn’t familiar with bluegrass festivals and didn’t know what to expect,” she said. “It was just kind of all new to us.”⁷ Muret only knew what he had been told by his guitar factory buddies. Muret later went to a couple of festivals, and the

4. Joe Muret (Walnut Valley Association co-founder), interview with the author, March 27, 2018; Coats, “The Flat-Pickin’ Festival,” *Pickin’*, 1975.

5. Walnut Valley Association, prospectus for Japan trip, circa 1976.

6. “Non-Musician Trio Forms Walnut Valley Association,” *Walnut Valley Occasional*, January 1976, in Bob Hamrick and Shannon Littlejohn, ed., *September’s Song: 45 Years of Winfield’s Walnut Valley Festival* (Wichita, Kansas: SqueezePlay Productions, 2016), 7.

7. Kendra Redford interview, February 2018.

Redfords soon visited a number of them⁸, but it was certainly true that the WVA's principals were in the organization to run a festival, not to play at one, and they knew it.

Doc, Earl, Bill, and Chet

Tut Taylor, an innovative Dobro player and music entrepreneur, might have been the first person to call Winfield, Kansas, "Picker's Paradise." In 1976, Taylor told organizers of the Walnut Valley Festival that at their events, the pickin' by amateurs under the trees and beneath the grandstand was as good as the pickin' by professionals on the stage. Festival publicist Art Coats said he would start using the alliterative phrase.⁹

By the early 1970s, bluegrass had an audience established and devoted enough to support three monthly publications. *Bluegrass Unlimited* began in 1966 as a mimeographed newsletter for the listeners who bought and played bluegrass albums and the radio disc jockeys who played them. In 1970, *Muleskinner News* entered the market, published on standard-format glossy paper with an emphasis on the history of bluegrass as told through photographs. The third issue included the program for Bill Monroe's home festival, held in Bean Blossom, Indiana, as well as an attempt at a comprehensive list of bluegrass festivals, fiddlers' gatherings, and folk music events. *Pickin'* began in 1973. Instruments and the people who played them were the focus of the new publication,¹⁰ and it devoted a fair amount of attention to the stars of the flat-pick guitar.

8. The year of Bob Redford's first visit to a folk festival in Mountain View, Arkansas, is not clear. It may have actually been before the first WVF. Even so, Redford was only beginning to learn about music, musicians, and festivals. The relationship between Winfield and Mountain View was significant, and Art and Leota Coats in particular grew close to Jimmy Driftwood and his wife, Cleda.

9. "Tut Taylor's over-all impression of the 'Spring Thing,'" in *Outline and Planning for Walnut Valley Bluegrass & Walnut Valley Spring-Thing, 1976*.

10. Neil V. Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History*, 20th anniversary ed. (Urbana, Ill.: University of Chicago, 2005), 12, 224-226, 285-286, 347.

Specific interest in flat-picking was part of the confluence of trends that helped the WVF find and keep an audience. In the first wave of bluegrass bands, guitar was primarily a rhythm instrument, taking a backseat to the flashier (and louder) mandolin, fiddle, and banjo. A guitar player who could keep time and throw in a Lester Flatt G-run¹¹ here and there was a fine addition to a band. The 1950s and 1960s folk revival helped guitar players discover Doc Watson, who appeared at several of the high-profile folk festivals. Watson inspired players to rethink what the guitar could accomplish as a solo instrument and in combination with other instruments with his ability to play fiddle tunes such as “Black Mountain Rag” as guitar solos. It helped his reputation that Watson was also a singer and “consummate entertainer. . . . Fancy guitar runs laced the rhythm guitar work behind his vocals, too.”¹² If he had not been blind, Watson said he would probably have been a mechanic or a computer programmer. Music was a pragmatic option given his disability. The style he developed was also a pragmatic response; he needed to be able to play dance music without a fiddle player: “We didn’t have a fiddler so I got a lot of flat-pick practice. To tell you the truth, I tried to learn to play the fiddle. . . . I could get along pretty well with the left hand, but that bow wouldn’t run right for me. So I chucked it and learned the old fiddle tunes on the guitar.”¹³

Watson was a transitional figure, proving that a guitarist could play such melodies fast and clean. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, even guitarists attracted to acoustic instruments were influenced by the guitar heroes of rock and blues music, and they wanted their share of attention in bluegrass bands and jams. Guitarists such as Tony Rice, playing with J.D. Crowe & The New

11. The Flatt G-run is a musical figure that begins on a G on the guitar’s lowest string and ends an octave higher on the guitar’s G string. Bluegrass historian Neil Rosenberg notes that that Flatt did not create the run, but it was a signature part of Flatt’s era in Bill Monroe’s Blue Grass Boys and so bluegrass enthusiasts named it for him.

12. Rosenberg, *Bluegrass*, 192-193.

13. Art Coats, “Doc Watson,” *National Bluegrass News* 3 no 12 (May-June 1975), 12-13.

South, and Charles Sawtelle of Hot Rize garnered as much spotlight time as their louder bandmates. Dan Crary wrote about the emergence of the guitar in 1979, warning young players not to sacrifice audience appeal for speed.

[T]he late 60s came and a few adventuresome flatpickers started to play some fiddle tunes and breaks again. . . . For the last ten years flatpickers have made a lot of mileage on the surprise value of being rhythm players who suddenly proved they can pick fiddle tunes. And ‘proving something’ is exactly what flatpickers have been doing. In the 50s it was the singers of bluegrass who were the aggressive, hungry-eyed, give-everything-for-the-music fanatics. In the 60s you could recognize that same fanaticism in the eyes of the thousands of banjo players who developed ‘[Earl] Scruggs shoulder.’ But in the 70s I see that same feverish look of intense dedication in the eyeballs of flatpickers.¹⁴

The increased recognition of flat-picking as its own guitar style helped set the stage for the WVF. With the right inspiration on stage and the right instruments in hand, aspiring guitarists would have reason to come back to Winfield year after year.

One of the value propositions of Mossman guitars was their ability to cut through the combined volume of the other bluegrass instruments so a guitarist’s runs and solos would stand out. The Mossman Guitar Company incorporated around 1972. Sam Ontjes had returned to Winfield after serving in Vietnam and spending a year working in one of his father’s grocery stores. Ontjes and his wife, Judy, invested in the guitar shop, and Ontjes became a full-time employee for about a year. “Like a lot of people, I had invested money in Mossan Guitars, so I was a stockholder,” Ontjes said. “I could joke [that] everybody in Winfield at one time or another was the majority stockholder in Mossman, and I was no exception. . . . Stu was a pretty good promoter. He would get people to get behind his dreams, and it was fun. People loved it.” Other Mossman craftsmen of the time included Muret, Art Eskridge, Steve Mason, Brooks Herndon, and Pete Young.¹⁵

14. Dan Crary, “Consider Your Audience,” *Frets*, July 1979, 70.

15. Sam Ontjes (Southwestern Folk Festival director), interview with the author, March 31, 2018; Ontjes to Flottman, March 29, 2011.

To signal the festival's commitment to musicians and to distinguish itself from other events, the Walnut Valley Association launched the National Flat-Picking Championship.¹⁶ The flat-picking guitar style employed a plectrum—the pick—to play distinct melodies on an acoustic steel-string guitar. Often, the tunes selected were the same tunes a fiddle player might choose to accompany a dance. Sometimes a flat-picker would play the melody simply by picking out single notes, but as the style evolved, accomplished players mixed in ornamentation, harmony notes, and strummed chords. Despite Crary's warning, the style developed an undercurrent of faster-is-better ethos.¹⁷ According to the rules on the poster for the "2nd National Flat-Picking Championship," contestants were required to "play two instrumental pieces in traditional fiddle tune or bluegrass style. Selection committee reserves the right to eliminate contestants whose selection of material and style of playing is not in keeping with the flavor of the festival. Contestants must play only acoustical guitar. Electrified guitars will not be allowed. Contestants must play with a flat pick. Fingerpicking will not be allowed."

As writer Bob Hamrick noted in his book about the Walnut Valley Festival, *September's Song*, the contest took top billing for flat picking the first year; the weekend event was named "The National Guitar Flat-Picking Championship, Bluegrass Music and Folk Arts and Crafts Festival." The poster from the second year advertised "2nd National Flat-Picking Championship" at the top, followed by the location, dates, a sketch of half a guitar—an early version of what would become one of the festival's logos—and finally "Walnut Valley Bluegrass Festival and Crafts Fair."

16. Sources are inconsistent in the hyphenation of guitar styles. Unless directly quoting a source that does not follow the style, this thesis will hyphenate "flat-pick" but treat "fingerpick," and "fingerstyle" as single words, unhyphenated.

17. For an example of the flat-pick style, see John Hotze, "Tim May, Brad Davis, and Dan Miller—Lonesome Fiddle Blues," YouTube video, 3:59, posted June 15, 2009, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1sLPaAFm2Jk>. May has performed at the WVF eight times from 1998 to 2017. Davis performed at the WVF in 2007.

The contest idea was Mossman's contribution. He saw it as a way to elevate the festival's appeal and give it a hook, much as the National Oldtime Fiddle Contest did for a festival in Weiser, Idaho.¹⁸ Mossman also saw the contest as a way to tie the WVF to this emerging style of guitar playing. He and a fellow traveler had been floored by a visit to the Philadelphia Folk Festival, where they saw Norman Blake and Dave Bromberg trading licks. "[M]y interest lay in guitars and good flat-pickers like Doc Watson, Norman Blake, and Dan Crary. There was no 'National Bluegrass' anything at the time. . . . So, we created the National Guitar Flat-Picking Championship."¹⁹ The contest made the Winfield festival unique, according to a flyer for the sixth festival: "There are more than 500 festivals scheduled across the nation this year, but only one 'National Flat-Picking Championship!'"

The championships reinforced the concept of WVF as a "picker's paradise," where the best of the best players could show they belonged in the same company—and sometimes on the same stages with—the preeminent players of their styles. Flat-picking guitar players all owed something to Doc Watson. The National Bluegrass Banjo Championship debuted at WVF in 1974. Bluegrass banjo players were all indebted to Earl Scruggs, who largely defined the bluegrass banjo style in his tenure with Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys and his own influential band, Flatt & Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys. Scruggs himself never played at WVF, though his immediate successor in the Blue Grass Boys did. Don Reno performed at Winfield in 1975. Bela Fleck, perhaps the foremost banjo player of all time, played at WVF with the 1980s lineup of New Grass Revival. The Walnut Valley Mandolin Championship bowed in 1976. Monroe himself may have been the biggest influence on bluegrass mandolin players, though

18. Joe Muret, March 2018.

19. Hamrick, *September's Song*, 19; Sam Ontjes to Rex Flottman, March 29, 2011; Coats, "The Flat-Pickin' Festival," *Pickin'* (1975).

plenty of players were in awe of Sam Bush, the mandolin player who anchored New Grass Revival; New Grass played at WVF ten times from 1972 to 1989. In 1979, WVF added the National Finger Style Guitar Championship. Fingerstyle guitar players represent an even wider blend of techniques and musical genres than flat-pickers. Even so, they all have some link back to Chet Atkins, the guitar player and music producer who perfected the technique of using the thumb to pluck out a bass accompaniment and using the remaining fingers to play melody and other harmonies. Atkins never played WVF, but another fingerstyle luminary, Merle Travis, performed in 1976. Tommy Emmanuel, one of only five players to receive the official version of the Chet Atkins “Certified Guitar Player” designation, was featured at WVF eight times starting in 2000.²⁰

Of course, the concept of a music competition was hardly new. Fairs and festivals around the country had fiddle contests. In Wichita, a town about an hour’s drive away, a music store and radio station sponsored regular battles of the bands at The Cotillion, often drawing 400 to 500 rock music fans. But it was the fans who got to vote. By the 1970s, the Wichita based country radio station KFDI staged annual talent contests, which helped singer Kenny Starr on the way to a number one hit and was one of the steps to fame for Sharon, Kansas, native Martina McBride. Nevertheless, the Flat-Pick Championship earned instant prestige. Practitioners and fans of the flat-pick style were a small but rabid subset of guitar geeks, and the chance to earn the notice of Watson, Blake, and Crary was a strong motivator.²¹ The annual contest contributed to a rapid

20. For Atkins, the Certified Guitar Player degree started out as an informal show of respect that he bestowed on a number of artists, including Muriel Anderson, who won the National Finger Style Guitar Championship in 1989. Later, Atkins made it an annual, official award. For more, see Muriel Anderson, interview by Mark Sganga, *Music Minutes*, YouTube video, 14:54, posted February 24, 2018, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=349STAQTdZ4>.

21. Wichita Rock Music Project Team and Jay Price, ed., *Wichita Rock & Roll, 1950-1980* (Newton, Kansas: Mennonite Press, 2017), 22-23; Orin Friesen and Bud Norman, *Goat Glands to Ranch Hands: The KFDI Story* (Wichita, Kansas: Rowfant Press, 2013), 127.

growth in the abilities contestants displayed. “Have you been to a flatpicking contest lately?” Crary asked in a column he wrote in 1979. “In many ways, they’re an amazing experience. At last year’s National Flatpicking Championship Festival at Winfield, Kansas, the field of contestants included at least 30 players who were doing things unheard of ten years ago.”²² As the festival organizers added more contests in the ensuing years, they looked for ways to reinforce this prestige factor. As Eric Lugosch, National Fingerstyle Contest winner in 1984, said, “this is the Wimbledon of American acoustic music.”²³

Not surprisingly, one reason the festival sustained an audience in its first years was the quality of the contests. In particular, the prodigy Mark O’Connor made his mark. Not only did he win the fiddle contest and finish second in the flat-pick competition at age 13, O’Connor came back the following year and won the guitar contest. In 1976, O’Connor nabbed another second-place finish in fiddle, and in 1977 he became a two-time National Flat-Pick champion. O’Connor would go on to a stellar career as a solo and session musician, including high-profile collaborations with Yo-Yo Ma and Edgar Meyer. A photo from 1976 showed O’Connor in one of the WVF’s signature three-guitar jams. He wore bellbottom jeans and sandals, and his hair covered his ears and neck. He was playing with Jimmy Gyles, winner of the 1972 and 1973 championships, and Rick George, who won in 1974.²⁴ O’Connor returned for the first time as a festival performer in 1983, a signal to other players that if they devoted themselves to their instruments, they could bridge whatever gap remained between the parking lot picker and the stage performer.

22. Crary, *Frets* (July 1979), 70.

23. Hamrick, *September’s Song*, 20.

24. WVA, prospectus for Japan trip, circa 1976.

The Walnut Valley Festival helped another prodigy break out a few years later. Alison Krauss won the Walnut Valley Old Time Fiddle contest in 1984 at age 13. “The first year I won, I’d buy one of those big turkey drumsticks, pull my sleeve up over my hand, and walk around the fairgrounds gnawing on it. I’d hear people say, ‘Why is that girl who won the fiddle contest eating her hand? She’s not going to win next year if she keeps that up!’”²⁵ Krauss followed her Winfield win with a string of championships around the country. Krauss came back to Winfield as a performer in 1988. She won her first of an astonishing 27 Grammy awards in 1990.

The WVA promoted the winners who made professional advances because of their titles, part of the anyone-can-do-it story that prevailed. *The Flatlands Occasional* in 1977 noted that Orrin Star, who won the 1976 Flat-Pick Championship had teamed up with another picker and was “making a big hit on the East coast folk music circuit. In recent months the duo has opened concerts for the Vassar Clements Band, The Lost Gonzo Band, and Doc and Merle Watson.” Muriel Anderson said her championship in 1989 “means a lot for securing jobs,” and she hoped it would lead to representation and the chance to play colleges. Canadian guitarist Don Ross inked a recording contract the week after he won the fingerstyle contest in 1988.²⁶ Festival publicists always played up the age of young winners, as they had with O’Connor. In a prospectus for a proposed festival in Japan, organizers explained that Rick George won the contest in 1974 on his 21st birthday and included pictures of George on stage with Dan Crary two years after winning. Chris Thile won the mandolin contest in 1993 at age 12. “Holy cow! I won!” yelled Thile backstage, ruining the surprise onstage reveal but earning laughter and applause

25. Hamrick, *September’s Song*, 20.

26. “Walnut Valley, National Flat-Picking Championship Offers a Minimum of \$10,000 in Contests Prizes,” *Flatlands Occasional*, May 1977, 6; “Fingerpick—1st Place,” in “Black Book,” 1989; Susan L. Rife, “Pickers’ Paradise: Rain, Rain or Rain, Winfield Faithful Keep Coming Back to Listen to Beautiful Music,” *Wichita Eagle* September 14, 1989, accessed February 19, 2018, Newsbank database.

from the audience. The next year, the prodigy returned as a stage performer with his band, Nickel Creek, although he insisted his real dream was professional baseball.²⁷

Like O'Connor, Krauss, and Thile, many contest winners returned in later years as performers. This helped promote WVF as a musician's festival. For example, when virtuoso David Schnauffer won the National Mountain Dulcimer Championship in 1976, he was featured in a prospectus for investors. He also entered the rotation of performers, appearing four times before his death in 2006. By contrast, organizers tried not to book talent who emphasized their personalities over their chops. In evaluating the Spring Thing, WVA publicist Art Coats was conflicted. He believed that the lineup was spectacular, though "many of these people were entertainers that we have had this weekend rather than being known as hard core musicians. . . . I think we should have had a little more band stuff."²⁸

Future bookings were a carrot for contestants, but prizes meant instant gratification. Amplifying the prestige of the contests was the prize pool. At the second festival, the National Flat-Picking Championship offered \$600 in cash prizes and trophies for a ten-dollar entry fee. The Bluegrass Band contest put up \$300, and a Bluegrass Fiddle contest offered \$100 but had no entry fee. By the sixth festival, organizers had doubled down on the importance of the contests—and then multiplied that by nearly a factor of ten. "A minimum of \$19,000 in Contest Prizes, Cash and Trophies including custom crafted instruments" were available to contestants in eight contests. Most top three finishers in most contest categories won instruments, which would be the norm for the contests from then on. Leota Coats remembered that Art Coats would offer

27. Susan Rife, "12-Year-Old Surprises Himself With Winfield Win," *Wichita Eagle*, September 19, 1993.

28. "Comments by Art Coats—concerning the Spring Thing," 1976.

luthiers promotion and recognition in exchange for providing instruments as prized. “That became a really big deal,” she said.²⁹

The growth trend continued despite the cautions of Taylor, who lent his name to the Walnut Valley Association’s Spring Thing festival and the dobro contest it featured. “I felt the prize money was a little heavy. \$1,000 was a little heavy. . . . I think the guys that enter would have entered that contest if first prize would have been \$50.” In the same conversation, organizers devised a process for letting winners pick their prize instruments; the first-place finisher would get first pick and so on.³⁰

Whether or not Taylor was right, “the guys that enter” contests seemed to respond to the collegiality of the contest experience. Over the years, winner after winner reported being encouraged by fellow competitors and meeting up before and after the competition to trade tunes. This was true for the contests featuring the instruments and styles of a traditional bluegrass band: flat-pick guitar, fiddle, banjo, and mandolin. If anything, it was even more true for the players who competed with other instruments or styles, such as fingerstyle guitar, mountain dulcimer, hammered dulcimer, and autoharp. It was true even when “the guys that enter” were not guys. After winning the National Finger Style Guitar Championship in 1989, Muriel Anderson said, “The support from other contestants is unbelievable. One contestant loaned me gloves, and another loaned me a jacket because the air was cool that night. This camaraderie is great.” Autoharp builder George Orthey told festival staff member Louise Logsdon about a post-

29. Leota Coats (staff writer, Walnut Valley Association, and spouse of Art Coats), interview with the author, April 2018.

30. “Tut Taylor’s over-all impression of the ‘Spring Thing,’” 1976.

contest campground jam in which the winner of the autoharp contest stayed until 2:30 a.m. “Autoharp isn’t finished at Winfield,” Orthey said.³¹

Not only did the WVA staff book virtuoso performers, it created schedules that encouraged performers to appear with one another. Instrumental jams gave pickers the opportunity to take turns playing variations on a melody, often a traditional fiddle tune. When not playing the lead, the players strummed chords, often using the “bluegrass chop,” a percussive accompaniment most associated with the mandolin. These jams took place throughout the campground and parking lots during the Walnut Valley Festival. When they were on stage, though, they sometimes became the stuff of legend.

The Walnut Valley Festival established its identity with one of those jams in 1972. *Pickin’* carried a photo of “the now famous 3-guitar jam session” with Blake, Crary, and Watson, three flat-pickers trading tunes, without banjos and basses to mask the voices of guitars, as the players brought out the best in each other. The article credited Sam Ontjes with conceiving the three-guitar jam. Facilitating this meeting-of-the-fingers became a point of pride for the festival, which reminded readers of the *National Bluegrass News* “Walnut Valley was the first to put Watson, Crary, and Blake together on stage.” More innovative pairings followed. Watson was photographed playing with Merle Travis, a player so influential he had an entire guitar picking technique named for him. Promotions director Art Coats hyped a three-Dobro jam featuring Blake, Tut Taylor, and Curtis Burch. “Art eventually worked into a position as the finder of talent for the festival. He and Bob worked together, but Bob pretty well let him find the new talent,” Leota Coats said. “Art had really a gift at putting musicians together that hadn’t played together before, and then there would be kind of this magic on stage.” In 1975, a twin banjo set matched

31. Walnut Valley Association, “Fingerpick—1st Place,” and Louise Logsdon, “1989 Festival” in “Black Book,” 1989.

Don Reno with Mike Lilly, then playing in the Larry Sparks Band. “With only about ten minutes’ preparation they came on stage and performed like the professionals they are. It was interesting to see each artist’s different style of playing, and the end result was tremendous.”³²

John McCutcheon and Mike Cross had a fiddle and stories set in 1989 that convinced festival staff member Tim Sidebottom it needed to stay on a small stage so as not to lose its charm: “I think that the magic they had could not be duplicated on any bigger of a stage, not even Stage 2. So I would suggest if they did it again, plan to just let the crowd be an overflow like it was because even those that couldn’t see directly had a great time.” McCutcheon rarely conformed to the jam format of trading tunes and giving every picker equal time, though he often teamed with other performers—sometimes spontaneously and sometimes after detailed planning. By collaborating with Tom Chapin and his band, McCutcheon created an ad hoc supergroup whose antics and inside jokes went well beyond the staid name sometimes given to their shared set in the festival program. “It’s just called ‘group singing,’ but they are a fun pair,” said Redford in 1989. “Anyone who misses this will miss a great part of the festival.”³³

One reason artists return to WVF when they are asked is that they relish this sort of opportunity. According to bluegrass musician and radio host Chris Jones,

For the performers, it’s also an opportunity to spend time with fellow performers, sometimes jamming with them. This can create a musical melting pot and lead to musical growth for the musicians involved. This is very different from the very competitive attitudes musicians had towards each other before this kind of festival became common.³⁴

The life cycle of bands also contributed to reconfiguring familiar, high caliber entertainers at WVF from year to year. For example, an anchor starting in 1972 was Byron Berline, who

32. Coats, “The Flat-Pickin’ Festival,” *Pickin’* (1975): 21-22; Art Coats, “The City Limits,” *National Bluegrass News* 3 no 12 (May-June 1975), 7; WVA, prospectus for Japan trip, circa 1976; Leota Coats interview, April 2018; John Sutliff, “The Fourth National Guitar Flat Picking Chamionship,” *Don Reno Bill Harrell Tennessee Cut Ups Fan Club Newsletter* 2 no 1 (1975): 3.

33. Tim Sidebottom, Walnut Valley Association, “Black Book,” 1989; Rife, “Pickers’ Paradise,” *Wichita Eagle* September 14, 1989, accessed February 19, 2018, Newsbank database.

34. Chris Jones, email to the author, April 12, 2018.

established his “proficiency at old-time, Texas, and bluegrass styles of fiddling.”³⁵ The fiddle player was an alumnus of Bill Monroe’s band and a California session musician who played in the Flying Burrito Brothers. Perhaps best known in the bluegrass world as the founder of the Country Gazette, Berline returned to WVF over the years in a dizzying number of acts including California, Sundance, BCH (Berline, Crary, and Hickman), and the Byron Berline Band.

Besides traditional bluegrass instruments, the WVF prominently featured world-class performers on other acoustic instruments. The unexpected rise in popularity of hammered dulcimer helped the festival capture and keep audiences. “In the early years, there was a hammered dulcimer player that came to the festival by the name of Cathy Barton that just took our crowd by storm because nobody had ever seen the instrument before, and nobody had seen anybody play like that. Cathy Barton and her husband now, Dave Para, have been regulars to the festival over the years,” Kendra Redford said. A college senior at her first festival, Barton was a favorite workshop presenter. Besides hammered dulcimer, she played clawhammer banjo, mountain dulcimer, autoharp, and “found” instruments such as bones and spoons.³⁶

With campgrounds and parking lots full of happy musicians, tents full of stressed-out contest entrants, and stages full of premiere players, the Walnut Valley Festival lived out its commitment to being a musicians’ festival. Each year, musicians came back to a space that welcomed and outfitted their attempts at musical self-reliance. The campground and workshops encouraged personal fulfillment and a positive self-concept that did not rely on experts or authorities.

35. Bill Malone and Jocelyn Neal, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 3rd revised ed. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2010), 362.

36. Kendra Redford interview, 2018.

In a fitting tribute, a song about the festival environment was written by participant Mikel Steven and incorporated into a “Walnut Valley Medley” by longtime festival entertainers Aileen and Elkin Thomas:

“Down in Walnut Valley, playin’ on that guitar
It’s a Bluegrass Heaven, music from the stars
Down in Walnut Valley, strummin’ on the old banjo
It’s a Picker’s Paradide, and everyone’s in the show.”³⁷

37. Mikel Steven, “Walnut Valley,” in “Walnut Valley Medley,” arr. Aileen and Elkin Thomas, *Circles of Rhyme*, Shantih Records, 1991, compact disc.

CHAPTER FOUR

MUSIC MADE BY HAND: ART AND COMMERCE MEET AT THE WALNUT VALLEY FESTIVAL

“Find your own rhythm! Make your own band! Join yourself to the harmony of music made by hand!”¹ So exhorts Tom Chapin, a favorite entertainer at the Walnut Valley Festival. From its inception in 1972, the Walnut Valley Festival (WVF) in Winfield, Kansas, was a gathering place and showcase for amateur musicians. It was also, however, a commercial enterprise that had to find ways to sustain itself over time. For the first few years of the festival, the Walnut Valley Association (WVA) explored new formats, new partnerships, and even new continents in search of quick growth.

Within a decade, however, the WVA settled into the approach of monetizing the event as it was rather than re-inventing or expanding. This pattern privileged control over growth and emphasized musical diversity over purity. Not only did the same people buy tickets year after year, but artists, vendors, and staff members came back to Winfield repeatedly. These returning guests could expect a similar experience each year—often even with opportunity to camp under the same tree. Following the lead of founder and president Bob Redford, the Walnut Valley Festival’s approach to business took the long view, rewarding loyalty of literally generations of guests with predictability and hospitality. “We both wanted to make a quality festival. We

1. Si Kahn and Tom Chapin, “Music Made by Hand,” *Join the Jubilee*, Gadfly Records, 1996, compact disc.

wanted it to be something that we were proud of,” said Kendra Redford. “We had to earn the support of the community.”²

Although it was branded from the beginning as a music festival for musicians, the Walnut Valley Festival was not created for the music. Redford and a co-founder, Joe Muret, wanted to create something that would be good for the community without dinning merchants for donations. The event also needed to be profitable enough to justify Muret’s investment of labor and Redford’s investment of capital. Redford, an insurance salesperson who also had a family farm, at first had little familiarity with the musical styles he was promoting. Muret, a farmer who also worked as a cabinet and guitar builder, preferred the radio-friendly folk music of Peter, Paul & Mary and Simon & Garfunkel to most of what the WVA booked. The third founder, Stuart Mossman, was the guitar evangelist, but it was hard to determine if his enthusiasm for the festival had more to do with a love of music or with the chance to sell the high-end guitars he was building in a factory south of Winfield.³

Fred Goodman, a former *Rolling Stone* editor who has written extensively about the popular music industry, wrote, “[T]he scope and reach of the business often make it impossible to tell what is done for art and what is done for commerce.” In his book *The Mansion on the Hill* Goodman assessed Neil Young as an example of someone who started in music “to be rich and famous and ultimately decided he’d rather be an artist.”⁴ The origins of the influential Newport Folk Festival had a duality of purpose; Pete and Toshi Seeger wanted to blend artistic purity and activism, while to their co-founder George Wein “it was a commercial proposition.”⁵ The WVA

2. Kendra Redford (co-owner of Walnut Valley Association and spouse of Bob Redford), interviewed by the author, February 3, 2018.

3. Joe Muret (co-founder of Walnut Valley Festival), interview by the author, March 27, 2018.

4. Fred Goodman, *The Mansion on the Hill: Dylan, Young, Geffen, Springsteen, and the Head-On Collision of Rock and Commerce* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), xii-ix.

5. Rick Massimo, *I Got a Song: A History of the Newport Folk Festival* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University, 2017), 5.

founders were not as mercenary as Wein or Young in the beginning, nor did they become strictly altruistic over time. Even so, the organization's practices demonstrated that the value its owners placed on commerce was circumscribed by the value they placed on community, relationships, and art—particularly for “music made by hand.” Participants who were drawn to play music were nurtured over the years, trading up instruments as their passions and skills increased. Through holding workshops, encouraging children, and offering fill-in slots, the festival experience supported musicians who were developing skills by helping them connect with an audience and with one another.

Confidence in their relationships and vision allowed festival organizers the freedom to disappoint people, including the vociferous traditional bluegrass fans who did not find their tastes reflected on the festival stages. Confidence in his event's quality and importance also caused Redford to lead at times by force of personality, straining some of the relationships he depended on. The festival's self-confidence appeared contagious. Confidence in the festival as an opportunity to generate revenue, reputation, and a good story made getting to Winfield a priority for media, artists, managers, and booking agents.

The late 1970s and 1980s saw rock music festivals getting bigger and more corporate. Events such as Cal Jam at the Ontario, California, Motor Speedway, Texas Jam at the Cotton Bowl, and the US Festival in San Bernadino, California, drew hundreds of thousands of fans. Meanwhile, in Winfield, Kansas, the Walnut Valley Festival found its sweet spot with about 11,000, allowing organizers to provide the consistent experience that their returning guests expected.

[I]t was real hot that year and we had a big crowd. I think we pushed and put out a lot of advertisements, but it was hot, and it was elbow to elbow people. A lot of the restaurant people in town, they made comments ‘goodness these people are sure grouchy this year,’ and it was the heat and just being packed so close. We decided, you know, that big wasn't necessarily better. Maybe we needed to look at reaching a certain size and we can just stay with that. In the early 80s, I think

for a number of years we had 11,000 and you know, just a nice range there. I think 12,000 was kind of the top, and that seemed to be what we could handle. . . . [E]verybody was comfortable at that attendance, and so we tried to stay with that.^{6 7}

Besides weather, the potential barrier to attendance that concerned festival organizers in the late 1970s was gasoline prices—and shortages. In addition to mileage from major cities to the “Flat-Picking Capitol [*sic*] of the World,” the flyer for the 1979 edition of the festival included advice for travelers: “The WVA suggests that you travel to Winfield by means of the major highways. Gasoline is more readily available at night and on the weekends. Gas is available on the Kansas Turnpike, but purchases are limited.”

In a meeting in October 1975, Redford, Muret, and Art Coats discussed other approaches to sustaining and growing the Walnut Valley Association. “I am not saying that I would like to get out of the bluegrass festival because this is a world of fun, but I would hope we could run another 5-10 years yet.” Muret added, “My interest is in keeping this thing going 4-5-6 years.” In the same meeting, Redford said, “I have always stated in previous years that I wanted Bob Redford as a silent person. I didn’t want my face known, and I didn’t want anything in the way of publicity.”⁸

Strings and Spring Things

Almost as soon as there was a Walnut Valley Festival, its directors were looking for ways to grow, expand, or adapt the model. Because they had no reason to believe the event would last several years, much less several decades, organizers seemed interested in making the most of what they had started. “I was involved in the festival 12 or 13 years, and I don’t think there ever

6. Kendra Redford, February 2018.

7. In a 1990 newspaper interview, Bob Redford pegged the record attendance figure in 1980 at 14,800. By contrast, attendance in 1989 was 9,300. Susan Rife, “There’ll Be Pickin’ and Singing and More Toilets,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 13, 1990, accessed February 19, 2018, Newsbank database.

8. “Bob—Joe—Art” in Walnut Valley Association, *Outline and Planning Book*, 1975.

was any idea that it would last as long as it's lasted. I think it's been a great thing," Muret said.⁹ The most visible ideas that were actually implemented were two additional festivals, the Walnut Valley Spring Thing in 1976 and the June Jamboree in 1979. "We got a little cocky and we thought we knew what we were doing," said Kendra Redford. "It was during spring break, and we got a lot of students, and I think it rained, if I remember right at least on Saturday."¹⁰ The Walnut Valley Festival itself in 1976 was reminiscent of previous years, featuring the now-familiar guitar wizard Norman Blake, a new bluegrass-country-rock hybrid group called Sundance which featured returning performers Dan Crary and Byron Berline, and the folk-leaning New Lost City Ramblers.

The Spring Thing had a different flavor. It was the first to attach an outsider's name to the signature festival event—the new Tut Taylor National Dobro Championship, which Dan Huckabee won. Taylor was himself an innovative Dobro player and also operated a music venue and instrument dealership. The Spring Thing was also the first to be its own album, *The Walnut Valley Spring Thing*, which was recorded by Takoma Records using a mobile truck. (The year before, the Kerrville Folk Festival in Texas had released a two-album recording of its performances.¹¹) With these innovations and the knowledge of festival operations developed over the preceding five years, Art Coats believed in the potential of the event. His fellow directors, Bob Redford and Joe Muret, were more cautious. They relented, according to Coats, to maximize profit potential, the "whole objective that Bob & Joe had in the first place. . . . I said all along that we could double our money, and I still think we could, but unfortunately this year it proved that they were right." Indeed, the Spring Thing did not make money. "[W]e are going to

9. Joe Muret interview, March 2018.

10. Kendra Redford interview, February 2018.

11. Erinn R. Barefield, "The Kerrville Folk Festival: The Path to Kerr-Version," master's thesis, Texas State University—San Marcos, 34.

have to take money out of the Fall to offset the expenses of the Spring. This would mean we would be working for two years without making any money at all.”¹²

As the Walnut Valley Association’s publicity director, Coats attributed some of the spring festival’s financial failure to his own booking choices. “We had an entertainment crowd. The bulk of that responsibility lies with me because of the people I pushed so hard to get. I was so damned intent on having a successful thing out of this by having a lineup of talent that would guarantee that anybody that heard about it would want to come, and I got too heavy into the entertainment stuff.”¹³ Henry the Fiddler introduced Coats to this distinction between a musician’s festival and an entertainment festival.¹⁴ The Walnut Valley Association was a musician’s festival, and musicians behaved better and spent more. The Spring Thing was an entertainment festival, and its crowds were rowdier, less attuned to the nuances of musicianship, and less drawn to shop for instruments or crafts. As Tut Taylor bluntly put it, “It was not a buying crowd. The Fall crowd is a buying crowd.” Coats believed the high energy, humor, and references to alcohol and pot that Bryan Bowers, John Hartford, and New Grass Revival brought to the grandstand of the Winfield Fairground fed this entertainment festival mindset. “It was the closest thing to a rock festival as we have had in this part of the country,” Coats said.¹⁵

Despite his assessment of the Spring Thing’s debut, Coats was disappointed that it did not return. “I disagree totally that we should go back to one festival,” he said. “I still think that 2 festivals are best way because we can put the boogie people in one and the music people in

12. Art Coats, “Comments by Art Coats—Concerning the Spring Thing,” in Walnut Valley Association, “Outline and Planning for Walnut Valley Bluegrass & Walnut Valley Spring-Thing,” 1976.

13. Ibid.

14. Henry Tarrson, known to the world as Henry the Fiddler, was a perpetual wanderer and presence at music festivals around the country, sometimes as a performer or fiddle contestant and sometimes as simply a colorful character. “He was just kind of a fixture,” Kendra Redford remembered. It was not a proper festival “until Henry showed up.”

15. Walnut Valley Association, “Tut Taylor’s Over-All Impression [of] the ‘Spring Thing,’ in “Outline and Planning for Walnut Valley Bluegrass & Walnut Valley Spring-Thing,” 1976.

one.”¹⁶ The Dobro contest left with the end of the Spring Thing, though the WVF incorporated the other contest that began at the Spring Thing, the National Mountain Dulcimer contest.¹⁷ Though she acknowledged the “good crowd” at the Spring Thing, Kendra Redford remembered, “We decided it was too much work and we won’t do a second festival. Well, we kind of forgot that piece of advice, and we tried again in 1979.” Besides moving later in the year, the June Jamboree emphasized the variety of music—“blues, British ballads, and bluegrass,” according to the festival poster— including mandolin wizard Peter Ostroushko, Florida folk singer and storyteller Gamble Rogers, and Celtic band Clanjamfrey. Redford believed it was a strong lineup, but ticket sales were slow—a mixed blessing at best. “[W]e made enough money in the fall that we didn’t have that big of a loss. But we did have to subsidize the . . . June Jamboree. The second time we learned that lesson—we decided not to try to have two festivals a year. And that was probably a good decision because gradually our workload increased, and probably one festival was all we could have” managed.¹⁸

By comparison, the Kerrville Folk Festival in Kerrville, Texas, instituted a practice of holding several events each year. Its organizer and owner, Rod Kennedy, was already an experienced promoter with a background that included both radio and operating a venue when he started what became his signature annual event in 1972. Almost immediately, as a way of creating more cashflow, Kennedy and his organization launched other complementary programs. Some lasted and some folded, but Kerrville was always in the business of managing several events.¹⁹

16. Coats, “Comments by Art Coats,” “Outline and Planning for Walnut Valley Bluegrass & Walnut Valley Spring-Thing,” 1976.

17. David Schnauffer won the first contest and returned as a Walnut Valley Festival performer four times. Perhaps the most influential modern mountain dulcimer player, Schnauffer played on recordings by Mark O’Connor, Johnny Cash, and Mark Knopfler. He was Cyndi Lauper’s dulcimer teacher. Schnauffer died in 2006.

18. Kendra Redford, February 2018.

19. Barefield, “The Kerrville Folk Festival,” 15-17, 29.

Another avenue the WVA pursued was consulting for other music contests. The Walnut Valley festival staff helped Wichita, Kansas, radio station KFDI run the “KFDI/Walnut Valley Fiddlers’ Contest” held at Shepler’s, a western clothing store, in 1983. This may have been an annual event for a few years. A bit further away, the festival provided six consultants to help with various instrument contests at Silver Dollar City in Branson, Missouri, as part of the Silver Dollar City Bluegrass Championship in June 1984. The WVA took responsibility for finding qualified judges, helping to operate the contests, and remaining “amenable to Silver Dollar City employees observing, listening, and being present while their consultants perform their duties in an effort to make such training available as SDC people can pick up or grasp during the time WVA is on site.”²⁰

The WVA attempted to leverage the extensive mailing list that received its publication, the *Walnut Valley Occasional*, by selling items such as guitar, banjo, and mandolin strings through it. An instrument company in Pennsylvania was successful at selling boutique instrument strings through an *Occasional* ad. When Redford complained about the losses the festival was sustaining, the company sold Redford boxes of strings at its dealer price so that the WVA could take over these sales and make back some money. Redford ordered large quantities. Apparently unsatisfied with the arrangement, Redford later shipped the strings back to the dealer expecting a refund. This experiment lost money and strained a relationship.²¹

Other attempts to grow were tried without success. When the festival was a few years old, there was potential for its influence to spread much farther than Missouri. In 1976, the WVA created a prospectus and photo album for potential investors in Japan who were apparently

20. Stephen Davis to Bob Redford, August 19, 1983; Walnut Valley Association, “Letter of Agreement,” December 12, 1983.

21. Breezy Ridge Instruments to Robert Redford, April 4, 1986.

considering starting a new music festival; Japanese bluegrass festivals began in 1970. Japan had and has a small but rabid community of acoustic guitar enthusiasts and bluegrass lovers.²² The WVA had potential to play an advisory or co-ownership role. “In December of ’76 Bob went over to Japan. I can’t remember how that developed; it may have been because we had some Japanese contestants in the early years. He had the idea of taking this overseas,” Kendra Redford remembered. “That didn’t pan out, and I’m kind of glad. The Japanese contestants have continued to come to us and, you know, we haven’t had to go to them.”²³ Joe Muret did not support the investment Redford made in international travel to pursue the activity, and it was a source of contention between them. “I didn’t want to be involved in that. I was farming, and I was working at the guitar shop,” Muret said. “I didn’t want to go to Japan. That kind of created a crack or a different vision of what we wanted out of it.”²⁴

Although a second weekend festival in Winfield was abandoned, organizers considered ways to reconfigure their efforts to increase revenue and, if possible, reduce effort. Coats advocated for a weeklong festival, with each day featuring a contest: “On Monday have fiddle day—Tuesday, mandolin day and have the mandolin contest, etc.—Wednesday, banjo day and workshops—Thursday, dulcimer day—Friday, Fiddle day [*sic*]—Saturday, guitar day and Sunday, bluegrass band day.”²⁵ At one point, Redford and Muret considered reducing the size of the event to make it less weather-dependent,

[G]etting barbershop groups, sweet adeline groups, use more local talent and maybe only have 1 or 2 name acts. Try for a more local crowd and not go for a national crowd. . . . Bob commented that we might use the Red Barn only or Southwestern College and install plenty of fans to cool it. Joe . . . would like to see us get to the point where we could sponsor 6 or 8 concerts a year, bring

22. Neil Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History*, twentieth anniversary ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2005), *xiii*, 231.

23. Kendra Redford, February 2018.

24. Joe Muret, March 2018.

25. Coats, “Comments by Art Coats,” “Outline and Planning for Walnut Valley Bluegrass & Walnut Valley Spring-Thing,” 1976.

in one performer or two, and in that way there would be money coming in to the Corporation all year round.²⁶

On the other hand, organizers considered adding or switching to a concert series on a much larger scale, probably based in Wichita. “We could hire the entertainers for one day and use no manpower at all to put on a concert,” Coats said. Depending on the venue, Muret noted that the weather would be an even bigger risk than the weekend festival at the fairground; if we invest heavily “for a one-night deal, and it got rained out, then it could wipe us out completely.” WVA organizers considered names such as Chet Atkins and Roy Clark for these concerts, likely paired with the kinds of performers that brought people to the Spring Thing. Though the music industry was becoming increasingly professionalized, the planning notes demonstrated that the WVA relied on personal networks more than agencies. They were enthusiastic about promoting a John Denver show: “If we announced a John Denver program was going to be put on here, between now and Christmas we could probably sell at least 10,000 tickets for Christmas presents.” Rather than engaging Denver through a strictly contractual effort, organizers put considerable thought into who could approach Denver on their behalf and “get him excited about our festival, plus he knows we [are] going to treat him well.” Curiously, the organizers saw festival performer and emcee Roz Brown as the ideal person to reach Denver because he lived in Colorado rather than turning to Stuart Mossman, who built a guitar for Denver.²⁷

Expanding the existing festival, supporting other festivals and contests, and adding a concert series were all reasonable ideas, particularly given that Muret and Coats saw the lifespan of the Walnut Valley as a decade or less. Finding a way to get a quick and substantial return on investment made sense. Muret and Coats likely held this view because their contribution to the

26. Walnut Valley Association, June 6, 1975, in Walnut Valley Association, Outline and Planning Book, 1975.

27. Coats, “Comments by Art Coats,” “Outline and Planning for Walnut Valley Bluegrass & Walnut Valley Spring-Thing,” 1976; “Bob—Joe—Art,” October 7, 1975, in WVA, Outline and Planning Book, 1975.

corporation largely came in the form of labor, and for that labor to pay off, the company needed to grow—the faster the better. “To me the bottom line of the festival was how much I got paid when it got done. . . . Make it a good festival, but make it make money,” Muret recalled. “I had no money in it. I had nothing to lose really.”²⁸

The ideas that the WVA pursued and successfully implemented, however, reflected the longer view Redford took of the festival operation. This is not to say that Redford expected to be associated with the festival for 44 years; at one time he believed the 20th festival would be its last. Nevertheless, Redford saw the annual Walnut Valley Festival and National Flat-Picking Championship as the Walnut Valley Association’s product, and he strove to continue and monetize it more or less in its original form year after year. Redford’s approach was seemingly influenced by his own financial stake in the company and his perspective as an insurance salesperson; steady growth over the long term was a desirable outcome, some year-to-year variance was to be expected, and early investments were likely to pay off later.

If this was Redford’s philosophy, it was a flexible financing arrangement that made it possible to live out, especially in the first years. “I should mention that we had a very understanding banker in those early years. I think the banking industry has changed enough that if it hadn’t been for him, Raymond King, we wouldn’t have made it through the early years,” Kendra Redford remembered. Some years the association had to borrow against the next year to get through the current one, and after a year with low revenue—usually weather-related—the directors might carry a loss for two or three years.²⁹

28. Joe Muret interview, March 2018.

29. Kendra Redford, February 2018.

‘It’s a Major Show For Us’

As the Walnut Valley Association settled into the idea that the annual Walnut Valley Festival was its singular opportunity each year to make money, it began improving systems in ways that rewarded returning participants with a familiar but continually improving experience and in ways that captured as much revenue as possible. A reliable ticket sales process was critical. Unlike the Colorado Bluegrass Music Festival, for example, the WVF had a ticket audit process which meant organizers had a reliable count for their own purposes and for reporting to the City of Winfield staff.

At the same time, the WVF had to police against fraud. After the Spring Thing in 1976, Art Coats said a new process, stamping a ticket, had helped reduce losses from cheaters. He recommended transitioning from paper tickets “to wristbands, even though that will take a little more time at the gate.” In 1981, staff members “discussed the fact that the festival is slowly becoming a weekend ticket crowd with about 10 percent fence jumpers.” The fraud sometimes took the form of people sneaking into the campground and staying there. More boldly, people would sneak into the stages wearing fake bands—“many our own from last year”—and “bands put on too loose—some we know were being passed around.” Sometimes Winfield community members who were helping with an aspect of the event took advantage of the opportunity, claiming they needed through the gate to work at a booth and going to the grandstand instead. “They should have been thrown out. That’s a pet peeve,” said a note from the festival’s review of operations in 1989. For some Winfield area teenagers, attempting to sneak in was a rite of passage. In 2002, Redford received a letter from a young woman requesting permission to return the next year by purchasing a ticket after being removed for trying to get inside. “You were very nice and let me go with a warning and little bit more,” she wrote. Another teenager was caught

trying to enter by claiming that he was supposed to get a complimentary ticket by claiming that a longtime festival worker was his grandmother!³⁰

To generate the most possible revenue from the festival, it was also necessary to get a handle on camping fees. The poster for the second festival in 1973 advertised free camping with access to electric plugs for two dollars. An advertisement for 1976 specified “free camping with ticket.” Subsequent meeting notes showed laborious conversations about what exactly a ticket holder was entitled to, where, and when. In 1981, the WVA tested the idea of a camping fee of two dollars a night plus three dollars for weekend access to electricity. Staff members were cautious about rolling this out, warning “Don’t advertise camping sticker.” By implementing more uniform enforcement of rules and adding colored labels and personnel to direct traffic, the WVA reduced the instances of people camping on days that did not coincide with their tickets. Some nagging problems persisted. In 1981, one of those was what to do with cars that were parked on festival grounds before the whole thing started. “How are we going to enforce removal of them from the grounds? That is something that needs to be discussed with Tom Herlocker as judge and” the police chief.³¹

Another way the WVA attempted to maximize the earning potential of the festival itself was through controlling merchandise sales. In its early years, event-themed merchandise appeared to be simple; the most prominent example was a series of T-shirts from the National Flat-Picking Contest. Other items followed, and as the festival reached its teen years, the WVA was licensing its name and logos to companies that made and sold apparel, belt buckles, pins, mugs, and more.

30. Walnut Valley Association, “Comments by [Charles] Sawtelle & [Dave] Wilson & Co.,” and Art Coats, “Comments by Art Coats Concerning the Spring Thing,” in *Outline and Planning for Walnut Valley Bluegrass & Walnut Valley Spring-Thing, 1976*; Walnut Valley Association, “Meeting at WVA Office,” February 19, 1981, and “1981 Festival Review,” in “Black Book,” 1981; Walnut Valley Association, “Black Book,” 1989; Walnut Valley Association, “Black Book,” 2002.

31. “Meeting at WVA Office,” February 19, 1981, and “Corporate Meeting,” June 2, 1981, in “Black Book,” 1981.

Vendors held exclusive licenses, and the WVA protected their profits and its trademark by legal action. In 1991, for example, Judge Robert Bishop ordered a restraining order against an Arkansas graphics company and Wal-Mart, barring them from selling products containing festival trademarks. An accompanying lawsuit asked for \$10,000 and accounting of products sold.³²

Besides looking after the interests of its licensees, the WVA attempted to create a quality experience for art and craft vendors. The crafts fair aspect of the Walnut Valley Festival helped to broaden the appeal of the entire event, at the very least providing a diversion for attendees who did not listen to or play music around the clock. In a 1976 document, Redford outlined his concept for the craft area, which emphasized an approval and selection process, prominence in advertising and the festival program, and security, “to make it beneficial for all craftsmen to make a good profit.” While not every detail of Redford’s vision was implemented, its essence was. Booth fees and commissions from crafters and concessionaires were an important part of the festival’s income, and for at least three years in the early 1990s, Redford said those fees “pushed it into the black.”³³

Because of the selection process, there was some variation in the vendor area each year. As with the musicians on its stages, however, the WVF placed a high value on providing its audience with a consistent shopping experience year to year. This required managing relationships over time, which made the role of the craft crew particularly important. It also made the festival weekend critical in the business plans of the vendors. In 2004, for instance, there were 100 arts and crafts booths, not counting luthiers and other music-related vendors.

32. “Festival Sues Store Over Trademark,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 20, 1991.

33. Walnut Valley Association, “Redford Ideas—Craft Comments,” in *Outline and Planning for Walnut Valley Bluegrass & Walnut Valley Spring-Thing, 1976*; Susan Rife, “Pickin’ Up the Pieces at Winfield,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 10, 1995, accessed February 19, 2018, Newsbank database.

Items available included the ubiquitous tie-dyed apparel as well as ceramic vases, carved wood bowls, leather goods, and specialty foods. One vendor reported selling 20 cases of hot sauce the year before. “His sales goal of \$2,500 this year—made one \$5 bottle of hot sauce or salsa at a time—would represent one-tenth of the year’s total sales. ‘It’s a major show for us,’ [vendor Monty] Fritt said.”³⁴

Pass the Music On

In order to get the best possible return on the annual Walnut Valley Festival, its organizers created effective systems to manage ticket sales, camping fees, merchandise, and craft booths. Its central brand, however, was music. Longterm relationships with emcees and artists provided stability and, it might be conjectured, favorable contract terms. Organizers also reinforced an environment that nurtured amateur musicians in ways that favored luthiers and instrument dealers.

Starting in the early years of the festival, the WVA understood the utility of emcees; a good emcee helped keep stages moving, provided information to audience members, facilitated backstage problem solving, encouraged audience enthusiasm, and lent a certain credibility to the proceedings.³⁵ Organizers sought outside opinions on which emcees were most helpful; Charles Sawtelle and Dave Wilson of the Colorado Bluegrass Music Festival were especially complimentary of Mike Flynn and Glen Godsey at the Spring Thing in 1976. Emcees who were viewed as particularly valuable were invited back each year. Flynn, a folk music radio host since

34. Chris Shull, “Walnut Valley’s Mecca For Merchants, Too,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 17, 2004, accessed February 19, 2018, Newsbank database.

35. The author has served as a festival emcee and stage manager for a number of years. For a humorous and revealing description of this role at a music festival, see Chris Jones, “Be Afraid . . . Be Very Afraid,” *Bluegrass Today* blog post, April 2, 2012, accessed March 11, 2018.

1957, and Roz Brown, a singer and autoharp player, both began in the 1970s and served as emcees for more than 40 years. Orin Friesen, host of a bluegrass radio show and member of a succession of bluegrass and western bands, served nearly as long. Besides fulfilling a role during the festival, these emcees created a feedback loop for festival staff who could not be at all the stages and who did not necessarily have deep knowledge of musical styles. Letters from these men were kept in festival correspondence, and that festival staff reached out to them with questions like “Where does Orin think bluegrass is going in 1985?” and “Does he think we can raise the festival ticket price without too much a problem with festival goers?”³⁶

The WVA established a similar way of working with musical artists. It maintained an extensive internal process for evaluating entertainers, using a combination of surveys collected during the festival, mail-in questionnaires, and in-house ratings—which took into account any difficulties encountered in hosting or working with talent. By the early 1990s, Redford followed a formula of booking about half returning acts and half artists who were new to the festival stages, sometimes drawn from the ranks of contest winners. For musicians who earned high marks from audiences and the trust of WVA staff, Winfield became a dependable stop. Furthermore, the Winfield audience had a reputation for buying, and bands that went over well were sometimes overwhelmed by the demand for their recordings and T-shirts. Festival staff did not interfere with the artistic choices of performers. “We treat the performers as friends, which is exactly what many of them have become,” wrote Art Coats in 1976. “Many festival promoters go so far as to tell performers what particular songs they want to hear . . . We want our performers to go out on stage and do their own thing. This philosophy has allowed us to put

36. “Comments by Sawtelle & Wilson,” and “Titles & Duties,” in *Outline and Planning for Walnut Valley Bluegrass & Walnut Valley Spring-Thing*, 1976; Phee Sherline, “Mike Flynn and the Folk Sampler,” *Walnut Valley Occasional*, September 1988; Orin Friesen to Bob Redford, September 17, 1984; Walnut Valley Association, memo, “Call Orin Friesen,” January 9, 1985.

some things together that other festivals will never have.” In contrast, Rod Kennedy helped Bobby Bridger select the songs he would play at Kennedy’s Kerrville Folk Festival.³⁷ Artists who came to Winfield particularly expressed appreciation for a sales space open throughout the festival that stocked, sold, inventoried, and returned their recordings. For most of the festival’s history, this service was offered at no cost to the musicians.³⁸

For many, perhaps most, of the musicians on the festival’s bill, their recordings were created and released without any kind of record company behind them. As in rock music, a sign of mainstream success in the 1960s through 1990s was establishing a contract with a label. Such contracts typically gave recording artists assistance with costs associated with recording, engineering, and promoting records, tapes, and compact discs. Most importantly, record companies had established distribution channels, which meant that recordings could be found in music stores. Rock music began with small, independent companies such as Sun Records and Chess before bigger names got interested, taking gross revenue from \$189 million in 1950 to \$2 billion in 1973 and \$4 billion in 1978. By the 1970s, consolidation and the growth of rock-and-roll meant the record industry was more popular than professional sports or network television. Just seven major labels—CBS, Capitol, MCA, Polygram, RCA, A&M, and Warner—dominated the business by 1973. After a dip starting in 1978, when independent labels captured some of the market by emphasizing genre music such as punk and rap, major record companies again dominated the commercial music landscape through the 1980s and mid-1990s.³⁹

37. Joy Reid, *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock*, new ed. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas, 2004), 165.

38. Susan Rife, “Bluegrass Festival is About Family,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 15, 1991, accessed February 19, 2018, Newsbank database; Walnut Valley Association, “Non-Musician Trio Forms Walnut Valley Association,” *Walnut Valley Occasional*, January 1976, in Bob Hamrick and Shannon Littlejohn, ed., *September’s Song: 45 Years of Winfield’s Walnut Valley Festival* (Wichita, Kansas: SqueezePlay Productions, 2016), 7; Bart Redford, email to author, April 10, 2018.

39. David Szatmary, *A Time to Rock: A Social History of Rock ’N’ Roll* (New York: Schirmer, 1996), *xiii*, 247-250.

A few names in the top tier of the bluegrass and folk world had contracts with major labels. In his career, Earl Scruggs recorded for Mercury, Columbia, and MCA Nashville. However, the more commercially successful musicians who appeared at the WVF were more likely to be associated with independent labels that specialized in their musical style. Grammy winner Alison Krauss, for instance, released almost all of her recordings from 1987 through 2007 on Rounder Records; this included a duet album with Robert Plant of the heavy metal pioneers Led Zeppelin. Nickel Creek were with Sugar Hill Records for their first five albums. The WVA also maintained relationships with such record companies such as Takoma, Arhoolie, Signature Sounds, and Flying Fish. In largely ignoring major-label artists, the WVA likely gave up chances to increase attendance among casual fans who would show up for a big name. What it gained was the opportunity to work with other small businesses who were operating at the commercial edges of the marketplace. In so doing, the WVA could provide the certainty and consistency that kept its core audience returning.

By the turn of the twentieth century, digital distribution disrupted the music industry, reducing the importance of record companies and music stores and increasing the importance of touring for commercial viability. For the artists who performed at festivals such as WVF, this meant technology for home recording became more available. Online access democratized distribution, making it easy for fans to buy recordings directly from the artists or through distribution channels such as CD Baby and Amazon. At the same time, the opportunity to stream music meant even devoted music fans were less likely to purchase music—or only purchased a song rather than an album. At the time of this writing, the future direction of the music industry, including the bluegrass and folk genres, is in significant flux. While the chance to sell albums

directly to fans after a show remains part of an artist's revenue model, the relevance of a record label in a folk musician's career is in doubt.⁴⁰

One of the most important aspects of the Walnut Valley Festival's commercial environment was its efforts, both symbolic and explicit, to follow the advice of a Tom Chapin song and "pass the music on."⁴¹ It was not a given that such an environment would be associated with the festival. The festival began more than a decade after the folk boom that made two-chord songs like "Tom Dooley" radio hits and inspired many young people to learn rudimentary guitar and banjo. Moreover, features such as the National Flat-Picking Championship and the signature three-guitar stage jams put virtuosity on a pedestal. Closet pickers and new players might not have felt welcome.

Instead, festival organizers made a conscious choice to inspire non-players to start and beginning players to get better. In the articles that were part of WVF publicity, artists and contest winners were often asked about how they started playing. In an interview with Art Coats, a star of the first festivals provided the prototypical beginner's story. Doc Watson said, "I started my music thing in life with a little ole home-made fretless banjo when I was 11. I got my first guitar when I was 13." Muriel Anderson, who won the National Fingerpicking Championship in 1989, provided an example of another theme that was typically highlighted in such publicity, being influenced by other WVF veterans. "Doc Watson was my first influence, back in the early '70s,"

40. Making sense of the online-era music industry is beyond the scope of this project, but for an interesting proposed solution, see Dee Snider, "How to Save the Music Industry," *Snider Comments* podcast, July 29, 2015, accessed April 24, 2018, <https://podtail.com/en/podcast/snider-comments-with-dee-snider/sc-ep-11-how-to-save-the-music-industry/>.

41. Si Kahn and Tom Chapin, "Music Made by Hand," on John McCutcheon and Tom Chapin, *Doing Our Job*, Rounder Records, 1997, compact disc.

Anderson said. She got a “Doc Watson record for Christmas. Put it on the turntable and didn’t take it off. That was my first real passion. I had just started playing, only a year at that time.”⁴²

The everyone-can-play ethos of the Walnut Valley Festival was a reflection of three interrelated ways that Americans were making sense of their lives in the 1970s: adoption of a positive self-concept, a focus on personal fulfillment, and a consumer culture that commodified self-reliance.

In an age of uncertainty, establishing a self-concept of personal acceptance was a way forward for many Americans as demonstrated in the success of the book *I’m OK—You’re OK* by Thomas Harris. The self-help book was released in 1969 and was a bestseller in 1972. It preached that the power of adult effectiveness was within each reader. This approach was markedly different than the permission-seeking, expert-driven cultural norms that to some Americans seemed to have failed, resulting in the tumult of the 1960s and the malaise of the 1970s. At an event such as the Walnut Valley Festival, everyone with an instrument was OK.

Another hallmark of the 1970s was the pursuit of individual fulfillment as a way of finding hope, purpose, or certainty. Some viewed this as a regression—elevating self-actualization over family obligations or social justice movements. Others viewed the trend as a growth opportunity, pun intended, for conservative Christian denominations, New Age spiritual movements, and therapeutic self-empowerment practices such as EST. There was a collective creativity in the activity of deep reflection and the bonds that connected practitioners. “[T]he vibrancy, originality, and hopefulness of the communities that were formed during this era are often overlooked.”⁴³ There was a similarity in mindset between meditation to reach a higher

42. Art Coats, “Art Coats Interviews Doc Watson,” *National Bluegrass News* 3 no 12 (May-June 1975), 12; Walnut Valley Association, “Fingerpick—1st Place,” in “Black Book,” 1989.

43. Beth Bailey and David Farber, eds., *America in the Seventies* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 6-7.

consciousness and practicing an instrument to unlock new sounds or perfect a Chet Atkins lick. To some instrumentalists at the Winfield Fairground, there was no difference. This was further reinforced by the opportunity to gather with others who shared and supported the aspiration. Americans, including those who visited Winfield, sought to attain personal enlightenment within the embrace of a small community.⁴⁴

Making your own music on wooden instruments with no amplification required represented a third way that people made sense of the 1970s. A do-it-yourself mentality was increasingly supported by opportunities to purchase products that supported consumers' real or aspirational self-reliance. Publications such as *The Whole Earth Catalog* and *Mother Earth News* provided practical tips and mail order sources for those who wanted to retreat from civilization. Brown rice, carob, and vegetarianism signaled both independence and virtue. Indian shawls and shades of beige were everyday fashion.⁴⁵ As Bailey and Farber quipped, it was "a time when 'earth-tone polyester' made sense."⁴⁶ Buying an autoharp, or better yet a kit for building a mountain dulcimer, was a way for consumers literally to take music making into their own hands.

Craft booths at the festivals invited musicians who wanted a complete hands-on experience the opportunity to construct their own instruments. The option also appealed to customers who wanted a (supposedly) more affordable instrument. Additionally, this offering was directed at the same customer segments who were buying books in the *Foxfire* series and investigating log cabins as living options—people with one foot in the natural living wing of the counterculture and one foot in the new nostalgia of *The Waltons*. "Since my wife had just begun to learn the rudiments of guitar playing, I splurged and purchased a dulcimer kit," reported a visitor to the

44. Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001), xvi.

45. *Ibid.*, 89-92.

46. Bailey and Farber, *American in the Seventies*, 1.

1974 festival who wrote to protest the festival's rules prohibiting alcohol and requiring shirts. A photo from 1976 showed a man with hair to the collar of his plaid long-sleeve shirt at a booth with a hand-painted sign for "DO-IT-YOURSELF KITS!" Options included guitar, dulcimer, Irish harp, and balalaika. In 1990, Homespun Tapes advertised its home study recordings in the festival program, proclaiming "We have music instruction . . . for *Everyone*—From Beginners to Professional Players!"⁴⁷

Mountain dulcimers were a common choice for beginning players and kit-builders. Facing as few as three strings and a smaller number of frets than a guitar, a new dulcimer player could pick out "Boil That Cabbage Down, Boys" almost immediately. A festival booth hosted by Cripple Creek Dulcimers both fed and profited from this image. In a photo from 1976, co-owner Donna Ford is looking on while a man in a full beard, plaid jacket, and jeans is playing a dulcimer, while co-owner Bud Ford is demonstrating a dulcimer to a woman in dark-rimmed glasses and a cardigan sweater. The festival reinforced the dulcimer as an approachable instrument through onstage workshops. Cathy Barton taught about the instrument at the fifth festival, wearing bellbottom jeans as she smiled at the audience.⁴⁸

These efforts continued to inspire players to build, purchase, and practice instruments. A participant from McPherson, Kansas, wrote in 1989 about seeing "lots of different music being played. Gives me encouragement that maybe I can play my dulcimer that well someday." Phyllis Dunne accomplished what many others imagined. Bitten by the dulcimer bug, she started attending WVF about 1980 to find other players. "She and her husband drove their little Ford Pinto station wagon to Winfield from Nebraska and 'just slept in the back of it and put aluminum

47. Marion J. Schroll to Jean [Duncan], 1974, in Walnut Valley Association, Outline and Planning Book, 1975; Walnut Valley Association, prospectus for Japan trip, circa 1976; Walnut Valley Association, *Walnut Valley Occasional*, Festival program, September 1990.

48. WVA, prospectus for Japan trip, 1976.

foil on the windows.” Over the course of 15 years, Dunne went from campground player to school artist-in-resident to paid entertainer at WVF, including co-teaching a dulcimer workshop with Cindy Mangsen.⁴⁹

For some new musicians, particularly children, even a dulcimer might be too complicated or too expensive. Some vendors supplied simple percussion instruments, jaw harps, and tin whistles. Festival staff member Tim Sidebottom suggested reinforcing these with a “kazoo workshop or a tin whistle workshop or puppet workshop” for kids.⁵⁰ Whatever age they started, the hope was to grow musicians over time, as attendee Dave Gustafson experienced:

My wife, Kathleen, and I have . . . not miss[ed] a year since my first Winfield in 1986. It has been a very positive effect on introducing me to some of the very best music I have ever heard. I started to learn to flatpick and have spent many hundreds of dollars and enjoyable hours and am now a very solid intermediate player. My wife has also become a mandolin player, bass player, and has developed a beautiful voice that she uses to entertain friends and acquaintances.⁵¹

Of course, the festival and its vendors hoped musical maturity would be complemented by instrument purchases, with instrumentalists trading up in quality and price over time. “We take a booth and about 40 instruments—a little chunk of our store—and work our tails off,” said Jay Keim of the Lawrence, Kansas, music store Harmonic Arts. “This is a high-end market for people who love playing guitars,” said Jim Baggett of Mass Street Music, another Lawrence-based store. A representative of the Deering Banjo company said that coming to Winfield allowed the company to assess what serious players wanted in an instrument as well as to sell a lot of accessories: “I’m sure we’ll sell out of banjo strings. People break strings all the time. They’re like shoelaces.”⁵²

49. Walnut Valley Association, “Survey Results,” in “Black Book,” 1989; Susan Rife, “Musician’s Memories of Walnut Valley Linger,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 14, 1995.

50. Tim Sidebottom, “Black Book,” 1989.

51. Dave Gustafson to Bob Redford, September 19, 1994, in “Black Book,” 1994.

52. Anne Tangeman, “Acoustic Music Fans to Gather in Winfield,” *Lawrence Journal-World*, September 11, 1997, Newsbank database, accessed February 18, 2018; Shull, “Walnut Valley’s Mecca For Merchants, Too,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 17, 2004.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHERE ARE THE BATHROOMS?: MANAGING THE WALNUT VALLEY FESTIVAL

Because Bob Redford and the Walnut Valley Association (WVA) adopted a model of using the Walnut Valley Festival (WVF) itself as its signature product and sole opportunity to generate revenue, they paid close attention to media coverage of the event, benchmarked against other festivals, and reviewed data—solicited and otherwise—on how the festival was perceived. These efforts were complicated by Redford’s tendency to shift his story based on his audience, a behavior that those close to him associated with both his interest in pleasing people and his psychiatric diagnosis.

Starting in the 1970s, the WVA pursued a relationship with the specialty music media that covered bluegrass and acoustic music. The importance of niche publications reflected a national trend after television dominated the entertainment landscape in the 1950s. General interest magazines in the vein of *Look* and *Life* struggled, while magazines with a narrow focus and specialized audience flourished.¹ In 1975, Art Coats recommended an aggressive advertising schedule, including buying spots in the magazines *Muleskinner News* and *Pickin’*. The festival enjoyed a particularly cozy relationship with the latter publication, which debuted in 1973. *Pickin’* attempted to bring bluegrass news to the sophisticated fan and player. As with Mossman’s approach to guitar building, Roger Siminoff, president of *Pickin’*, saw potential in an

1. James L. Baughman, *The Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America Since 1941*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins), 2006, 127.

audience with an appreciation for high-end instruments and technical expertise. Coats wrote an article about the WVF in 1975 for the magazine. A photo from 1976 showed Coats with Siminoff and Steve Davis, advertising manager of *Pickin'*, with the caption, "Coats does some freelance writing for *Pickin'*!" For the potential investors in Japan who were meant to view the photo, this coziness represented credibility. To another American festival organizer it would likely represent favoritism. In 1977, the Winfield city manager proclaimed Siminoff and *Pickin'* contributor Don Kissil "honorary Winfield Citizens," along with musicians Dan Crary and Norman Blake.² When Siminoff bolted from the magazine to its new rival (and eventual purchaser) *Frets*, he remembered his relationships with the Winfield crew. *Frets* had a full-page ad on the back of the WVF schedule in 1983, and it carried a column by Crary, which often mentioned the National Flat-Picking Championship. The festival's in-house publication, *The Walnut Valley Occasional*, reprinted articles from *Guitar Player*, a sister publication of *Frets*.³

To reach a local and regional audience, the WVA also had to build relationships with and purchase advertising in general-interest media outlets. Internal notes over the years routinely included thoughts about newspaper coverage and advertising, particularly with the festival's hometown paper, *The Winfield Courier*, and the closest large daily, *The Wichita Eagle*. The festival developed the internal capacity to send news releases almost immediately after every contest to news outlets—including the papers in the winners' hometowns. In the 1980s and 1990s, the *Eagle* provided extensive festival coverage; it was no coincidence that several members of the paper's editorial and production staff were devoted fans. When Redford spoke to

2. Don Kissil, "Winfield '77," *Pickin'*, March 1978, 64.

3. Art Coats, "Advertising Campaign for Walnut Valley Festival," in Walnut Valley Association, Outline and Planning Book, 1975; Coats, "The Flat-Pickin' Festival," *Pickin'* 2 no 8 (September 1975), 20; Sean Barry, "Pickin' Magazine," Banjo-L listserv, December 19, 1996, on ZEPP Country Music website, <http://www.zeppmusic.com/banjo/pickin.htm>, accessed March 16, 2018; WVA, prospectus for Japan trip, 1976; Jan Altman to Louise Logsdon, May 16, 1986.

the newspapers, he sometimes made sweeping statements, including a series of pronouncements on the festival's future in the 1990s. Sometimes these statements contradicted one another or simply were not the decisions that were ultimately implemented. For example, Redford told *Eagle* writer and festival enthusiast Susan Rife in 1995 that he had made a "solid pledge" to Kendra to transfer responsibility of the WVF. Encountering statements like that and then seeing her husband continue to hang on to responsibility was hard and sad for Kendra Redford. She said that he would open up to people he perceived as sympathetic and tell them about the difficulties of managing the event and his desire to move on. "Bob would say that quite a lot," she remembered. "He would talk quite a lot, but sometimes what he would say was more in the fact of that was what he would like to do" or what he believed the listener expected or wanted him to say. These shifts were a symptom of Redford's bipolar depression, his wife came to understand. Redford was diagnosed in 1996.⁴

The festival received television coverage and advertised on TV periodically, as when public television station KPTS from Wichita attended in 1976. It had a much stronger association with radio, however. As with newspapers, festival staff studied and debated which radio relationships would generate the most return. Using emcees from the world of radio, such as Orin Friesen and Mike Flynn, was one strategy. In 1975, the staff considered its options for beefing up partnerships with commercial radio, especially with KBUL, then home to Friesen's bluegrass show, and KFDI, the country station to which Friesen would eventually move. The WVA also started establishing ties with non-commercial radio stations. Coats worked with KMUW, the station associated with Wichita State University, for local coverage but also to get the WVF featured on National Public Radio's *Folk Festival USA*, a program that ran from 1975 to 1979.

4. Rife, "Pickin' Up the Pieces at Winfield," *Wichita Eagle*, September 10, 1995; Kendra Redford (co-owner of Walnut Valley Association and spouse of Bob Redford), interview by the author, March 10, 2018.

Radio Kansas, a network of public radio stations anchored by KHCC in Hutchinson, Kansas, recorded at the event in 1982. High Plains Public Radio from western Kansas was on site in 1994. In the era of satellite radio, Chris Jones and Ned Luberecki mentioned the WVF frequently on their shows, and Jones hosted his show, *Bluegrass Junction*, from the fairground.⁵ “Walnut Valley Festival has always been very hospitable about providing me assistance to do my SiriusXM shows on site at the festival,” Jones said. “[T]he festival gains national exposure by exposing listeners to information about the festival and lots of mentions of the festival name. Listeners gain because they get to hear a show out in the field where the music is going on instead of in a studio environment.”⁶

These relationships with the media were of mutual benefit. The WVF needed to build and keep a base of ticket-buyers, and it desired to have a high percentage of those be musicians themselves. The media needed something to write or talk about and, for the specialty music media especially, access to the world-class musicians who populated the Winfield fairground each September.

The WVA also tried to establish symbiotic relationships with organizations that shared some of its purposes. Efforts to work with the Kansas Bluegrass Association in the early years did not pay off as much as hoped, according to an assessment by Art Coats. “We should try to impress upon the KBA that the Walnut Valley event is the major event of this nature to be held in Kansas,” Coats wrote. The two groups ultimately established a cordial relationship, and the KBA advertised its Haysville-based festival in the *Flatlands Occasional* in 1977. Similarly,

5. Coats, “Advertising Campaign for Walnut Valley Festival,” and “Committee Meeting,” May 14, 1975, in Walnut Valley Association, *Outline and Planning Book*, 1975; WVA, prospectus for Japan trip, 1976; Bryan Bowers to KHCC, August 2, 1982; WVA, “Walnut Valley Staff Meeting,” August 3, 1994; Walnut Valley Association, “Coordinators Meeting,” May 20, 2007, “Black Book,” 2007.

6. Chris Jones, email to author, April 12, 2018.

interactions with Chuck Stearman and the Society for the Preservation of Bluegrass Music in America (SPBGMA) documented in internal notes suggest some tension but also an exchange of useful information. A likely reason that these organizations did not establish a greater degree of interdependence was the WVA's relatively broad selection of entertainers. Both KBA and SPBGMA advocated for bluegrass musicians over other styles.⁷

The WVA also participated in efforts by Winfield, the region, and the state to promote tourism; for example, the festival program in 1988 details its participation in the "Linger Longer" campaign organized by the Kansas Travel and Tourism Program.⁸

An orienting idea from the early days of the WVF was benchmarking against other festivals. The WVA sent staff members to various events in the region to assess their operations, scout for talent, network with others who worked on the presenting and management side of the bluegrass world, and bring back notes. "Joe brought out the idea that we ought to have a grading system for festivals to show what kind of facilities they have, if they are accurate in their publicity, if there is no camping charges, etc."⁹ Some reviews were generally positive.

The crowd was entirely different from the one last year. They did have some hippies, but they were made to wear shirts and shoes, they were required to straighten up a bit or they were thrown out. There wasn't any sign of alcohol in evidence.¹⁰

Other assessments were more matter-of-fact, focusing on such details as food vendors and their prices. In general, the fact-finding trips contributed to the WVA's self-perception of quality, and some of the reviews were blistering.¹¹

They are a different crowd of people. They don't know the music they are listening to. They are 10 years behind us. . . . [Because of poor sound,] all of the entertainers asked for monitors to be completely turned off.¹²

7. Coats, "Advertising Campaign for Walnut Valley Festival," and "Chuck Stearman Interview," June 4, 1976, in *Outline and Planning Book*, 1975.

8. "'Linger Longer' in Kansas," *Walnut Valley Occasional*, September 1988.

9. *Outline and Planning Book*, 1975.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. Walnut Valley Association, "Black Book," 1981.

Redford and the WVA staff also invested a great deal of effort in collecting feedback from people who attended their event over the years. Sometimes this came in the form of conversations with notes taken or exchanged letters. In addition to his emcees, Redford asked for suggestions from entertainers, sound crew members, and people associated with other festivals, including Charles Sawtelle from the band Hot Rize and Dave Wilson, a radio personality, who ran sound for the Colorado Bluegrass festival.¹³ In 1975, festival staff tallied license plates in an effort to understand where advertising was most effective. By 1980, staff were also looking over mailing list destinations to spot patterns. Efforts to evaluate performers grew more sophisticated over the years. In 1975, Judy Ontjes, John Hartzell, and a third person not yet identified—“perhaps a music major from the colleges”—were tasked with evaluating the performances. Audience surveys were implemented, with the opportunity for ticket buyers to complete a survey onsite during the weekend and/or mail one in after the fact. It appears that starting in the 1980s, these two data points were compiled and then compared to a survey of staff members. For instance, in 1989, the favorite performers by audience vote were New Grass Revival and John McCutcheon, tied for first, and Tom Chapin, a close second. WVA personnel had the same top three with the addition of the group Berline, Crary, and Hickman. The staff also read unsolicited comments. One of the most enthusiastic letter writers was Bill Holman, who strongly believed Doc Watson should be invited to perform every year and was not a bit impressed with Jimmy Driftwood. “Every year Bill has made a lengthy letter to us since we were looking for criticisms and comments,” noted an entry in the staff planning book. “He was more than willing to share them with us.”¹⁴

13. “Comments by Sawtelle & Wilson,” in *Outline and Planning for Walnut Valley Bluegrass & Walnut Valley Spring-Thing*, 1976.

14. “Committee Meeting,” May 14, 1975, and “Comments Made by Bill Holman,” August 7, 1975, in *Outline and Planning Book*, 1975; WVA, “Black Book,” 1981 and 1989.

‘Bob Needs an Office’

A mock-up of an advertisement for the fifth “National Guitar Flat-Picking Championship, Bluegrass Music, Folk Arts & Crafts Festival” in 1976 explained the scope of the event: “Not the Biggest Festival But Possibly the Best.” A letter to potential investors in Japan amplified this message: “There is no desire on the part of the W.V.A. to produce the largest festival in the U.S.A.; rather, the goal is to produce the BEST all-round acoustic music festival to be found anywhere.” Unquestionably, organizers wanted to grow the festival’s influence. As Redford wrote in 1974, “We are pretty concerned that we want the National Flat-Picking Championship to become world-wide. This year we had 38 states represented and hopefully we can extend to more than just the four countries that came.”¹⁵ After experimenting with other models and testing other ideas, however, organizers decided to limit growth to what could be achieved within the annual Walnut Valley Festival, ensuring a consistent product.

This decision was based on what made good financial sense and, perhaps unconsciously, the desires of Americans living in an uncertain age to have something dependable in their lives. It was also based on the work capacity and habits of the staff under their president, Bob Redford. This was evidenced in the founding of the festival, when Redford volunteered to put up the money needed in the first year rather than pay for a ten percent stake. Redford kept work and decisions close, sometimes to the consternation of the people around him. When not satisfied with progress on an issue, Redford would use his own force of personality and also leverage the loyalty of festival fans. Redford avoided steps that would reduce his control, and he kept some festival information close to the vest—except for the times when he did not.

15. WVA, prospectus for Japan trip, 1976; Bob Redford to Marion Schroll, November 6, 1974, in Outline and Planning Book, 1975.

“Bob was always kind of the ideas person, or . . . he found people with ideas and he was enthusiastic about running with those ideas. In fact, we used to have a term, you know, ‘running with Bob,’” remembered Kendra Redford.¹⁶ Bob Redford knew about this personality trait. “I have another hare brained idea,” he wrote at the start of a note about a new way of approaching one aspect of the festival in 1975. In a meeting the same year, Art Coats and Joe Muret told Redford that continuing to generate ideas was leading to more work but not more income. “It really should be simplifying itself,” Coats said. “We have got to simplify it,” Muret echoed. “You have to get the ideas, but we just can’t do everything that we are coming up with. Bob, you are going to have to simplify your end of the work.”¹⁷ After the Spring Thing festival in 1976, Coats more bluntly wrote about what he believed Redford should and should not do during an event:

I know there were several times this weekend that Bob was out chasing some guy who was drunk or causing trouble or something like that, and I don’t think that is necessary because it is taking time away from something where you possibly need to be making some decision . . . [I]f each of us during the course of the festival would take care of our own responsibilities, I think . . . some of these things would go a lot smoother. By this, I think that if Bob would sit somewhere or get himself a location where he was going to spend most of his time, then that would be his base location during the festival.¹⁸

This was still evidently a challenge for staff almost 30 years later, when a post-festival report from a staff accountant said, “BOB NEEDS AN OFFICE!”¹⁹

The WVA staff developed ways to support—and sometimes work around—Redford. “[F]estival staff . . . have learned to ignore his more outlandish demands when sleep deprivation gets the better of him. His staff schedules him for daily massages and forces him off the fairgrounds periodically to get some sleep.” After he was diagnosed with bipolar depression,

16. Kendra Redford, February 2018.

17. “Bob—Joe—Art” in *Outline and Planning Book*, 1975.

18. Coats, “Concerning the Spring Thing,” in “*Outline and Planning for Walnut Valley Bluegrass & Walnut Valley Spring-Thing*,” 1976.

19. Walnut Valley Association, “*Black Book*,” 2002.

those closest to him came to understand that what a newspaper writer called a “Jekyll-and-Hyde personality”²⁰ was a manifestation of Redford’s illness. The mood changes Redford experienced sometimes led to shifts in direction or conflicting decisions. “It wasn’t the sleep deprivation,” Kendra Redford said.²¹

Redford was warm, loyal, and courtly to festival guests, especially entertainers. But his regular complaints about the festival’s financial situation and threats to end or move the event elicited eyerolls among Winfield residents. Redford’s tendency to get emotionally worked up over challenges encountered during the festival and to get involved in details that were better left to others were sometimes a challenge for his own staff.

The WVA president was driven to succeed and solve problems when addressing external obstacles. In 1989 and 1990, tensions between the WVA and the city government of Winfield were high. There seems to have been a disagreement about whether the WVA in previous years had completed all of the clean-up work spelled out in the contract between the entities. (A version of the contract from 2015 is probably similar to the one from the 1980s. It specified that the WVA would be responsible for damage, litter, disposing of decorations, removing all festival property, and cleaning all buildings. The City received five percent of gross gate receipts in exchange for the lease of the fairground for fifteen days.²²) Festival staff notes from a meeting with the city manager state, “We desire RICK COTTON to come PERSONALLY to see how we left the grounds.”²³

20. Susan Rife, “Pickin’ Up the Pieces at Winfield,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 10, 1995, accessed February 19, 2018, Newsbank database.

21. Kendra Redford, March 10, 2018.

22. Richard Meyer to Gary Mangus, August 10, 2015; “Fairgrounds Special Event Agreement,” August 6, 2012.

23. Walnut Valley Association, “Meeting Notes,” August 23, 1989, in “Black Book,” 1989.

Differences of opinion about the state of the grounds were kept private. A longtime request for more bathroom facilities at the Winfield Fairground, however, became a campaign. Some community members led by H.T. Hittle formed a group to identify a way to add flush toilets and possibly showers on the grounds. At a meeting with city staff, the “committee about the improvements of the fairgrounds was never mentioned,” according to WVA meeting notes. “Bob hinted about no progress or intentions or plans for anything on the fairgrounds. They said none at this time.”²⁴ Redford and festival staff member Wayne Steadham told stage managers at a pre-festival meeting in 1989 “We’re going to go to the newsways with that. We’re going to have it somehow. . . . It takes pressure. That pressure is going down to the City. We do not wish to have 10,000 people go down and line up at City Hall. We do not wish to have rotten tomatoes thrown at Rick Cotton as he comes on grounds. He does not understand yet.”²⁵

Redford began making public statements on the issue. Some were about the value the WVF brought to the community:

WALNUT VALLEY ASSOCIATION reports that as a result of good weather, good crowd, and the friendly nature of Winfield and its citizens, we are proud to pay in to our city the amount of \$40,108. This money comes as a result of our agreement to pay fairground use fees, electrical outlet fees, and city taxes. We are pleased to consider ourselves a contributing member of this community, that we are able to put \$40,108 of non-taxpayer generated revenues into the general revenues and budgeted funds of the City of Winfield.²⁶

Redford also took the approach of complaining about the city’s inaction and asking festival fans to get involved through an article in the program.

For over 20 years, Bob Redford has compiled research, recommended plans, offered funding, and aggressively served as an impetus to encourage the City of Winfield to build a bathroom to serve the needs of the users of the fairground. In addition, Wayne Steadham has made three different presentations over the years to City Managers and City Commissioners to improve restroom facilities, and each time was told that the City would ‘go for it!’ . . . [T]he management of the Walnut Valley Festival requests your help to inform the City Manager, Rick Cotton, and the City Commissioners directly of the importance of a bathroom improvement at the fairgrounds. This is an extreme measure by WVA standards, but we are left with little choice.²⁷

24. Ibid.

25. Wayne Steadham, “Stage Managers Meeting 1989,” in Walnut Valley Association, “Black Book,” 1989.

26. WVA, “Black Book,” 1989.

27. “Where Are the Bathrooms?” in *Walnut Valley Occasional*, festival program, 1989.

By some accounts, Cotton was angry when denizens of the campground started popping in to see him at City Hall. Nevertheless, an article in the following year's *Wichita Eagle* testified to the city's change of heart: "New facilities include an additional 22 toilets installed on the south end of the grandstand, along with a ramp for wheelchair access."²⁸ The festival program in 1990 trumpeted, "There should be at least 22 new stools, and double the area. The increased space, as well as the number of units, will help make everyone's visit more pleasant."²⁹

Besides campaigning for bathrooms, operating a music festival required managing a lot of privileged information. Perhaps using skills they learned from operating Redford's insurance company, Redford and his staff kept a lot close to the vest. The identities of judges in the instrument contests were not disclosed. Hiring details for entertainers, especially their fees, were a secret. Redford also generally kept mum on particulars of the WVA's financial information, though he often emphasized the risky nature of the enterprise. Muret was bothered by Redford's not-making-any-money routine, particularly when the campground and grandstands were full. "I fumed a lot about him saying this because I thought that put is in a bad light. . . . The people downtown would joke about, 'Bob, another year with no money.'" One year, Muret heard Redford conduct an interview with KFDI radio in which he said the crowd was good so he hoped the festival would make some money. "I finally told him, 'When you say that, Bob, people are thinking one of two things: either you're lying or you're inept.' . . . I wanted people thinking that what we were doing was good and smart."³⁰

Uncharacteristically, Redford sometimes broke his practice of discussing monetary details himself. In 1989, he and Steadham informed stage managers that the operation was 10 to 15

28. Susan Rife, "There'll Be Pickin' and Singin' and More Toilets," *Wichita Eagle*, September 13, 1990, accessed February 19, 2018, Newsbank database.

29. Walnut Valley Association, "What's New at Walnut Valley?," *Walnut Valley Occasional*, September 1990.

30. Joe Muret (co-founder of Walnut Valley Festival), interview by the author, March 27, 2018..

percent over budget “on everything we are doing. We’re trying to keep it down, but we have no control.” This compounded the previous year’s loss because of poor weather, including KFDI radio telling people “It’s raining like hell down in Winfield. Be sure not to go down there.” Because of that, “we are not in any way in the black [this year.] We’re a long ways in the red at this time.” In 1990, Redford gave an *Eagle* writer a surprisingly specific financial insight: “It’ll take us \$323,000 just to break even, and that is a gob of people.” In 1995, the same writer explained, “The Redfords don’t like to talk specific dollars on the festival’s annual budget, which is in the neighborhood of a half million dollars.” Nevertheless, Redford specified, “We need 11,000 paying customers to make this festival pay, to break even.”³¹

Maintaining close control meant eschewing sponsorships or acquisitions. With the exception of the Spring Thing, which featured an association with Tut Taylor, the WVA never had a presenting sponsor’s name attached to an event. In 1975, the organizers discussed partnering with Pepsi for advertising help but did not act on the concept. They also quickly rejected the idea of a partnership with a Wichita radio station because its format was too exclusively country. This was a marked difference from the Kerrville Folk Festival, which survived its early days in part because owner Rod Kennedy sold area businesses sponsorships, initially at \$100 per year. Later, Southwest Airlines became a corporate sponsor for Kerrville—even through its Chapter 11 bankruptcy—and was joined by a Texas human services business, La Hacienda. When those sponsors dropped, Elixir Strings picked up the sponsorship.³² When the Newport Folk Festival was resurrected in the mid-1980s, it left behind its “nonprofit, utopian, determinedly egalitarian”

31. Steadham, “Stage Managers Meeting 1989,” in WVA, “Black Book,” 1989; Rife, “There’ll Be Pickin’ and Singin’ and More Toilets,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 13, 1990; Rife, “Pickin’ Up the Pieces at Winfield,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 10, 1995.

32. Barefield, “The Kerrville Folk Festival,” master’s thesis, Texas State University—San Marcos, 2010, 39-42, 46, 52-53, 58, 66, 78.

roots and “reemerged as a sleek, commercial, corporately sponsored weekend of individual concerts.”³³

Like the WVA, Kerrville generated revenue from ads in its program; unlike the WVA, Kerrville included ads for Budweiser beer.³⁴ The inside cover of the program for the Telluride Bluegrass Festival in 1988 is a full-page advertisement for Coors. Following the rules of the City of Winfield and its own inclinations, the WVA never instituted beer sales, much less beer company sponsorship. Even after the city commission allowed limited beer sales for rock and country music events at the same location, the WVA did not shift; in 2017, for instance, the Rock’N’Country Festival had Bud Light as a sponsor.

Even for the possibility of increased fiscal stability and a smooth ownership transition, Redford would not move into a role that diminished his control. Kendra Redford said the Redfords’ son, Brian, began the process of taking over the reins in 1994. By 1996, the family seriously considered selling and began asking close friends and advisors for their counsel. “Every time the question came up [about] selling it, Bob would talk about it, but he couldn’t really commit.” The best solution at first seemed to be an arrangement through which the Redfords could transfer management or ownership but retrain an advisory role; they were, in fact, experts on running a music festival. One of their close friends advised that this was not sustainable. “He did not think that would work with Bob ... He would want to take it back over. We kind of discarded that idea.” On at least three occasions, the Redfords entertained a serious offer to acquire the festival. The last one came from a local economic development group. In each case, Bob Redford ended the negotiation. Kendra Redford remembered, “The last time that

33. Rick Massimo, *I Got a Song: A History of the Newport Folk Festival* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University, 2017), 4.

34. Barefield, “The Kerrville Folk Festival,” 64.

happened I said, ‘You know, it puts him through so much turmoil. If he doesn’t sell the festival, so be it. Trying to make the decision was hard on him.’³⁵

‘They Don’t Come, I Don’t Come.’

Bob and Kendra Redford learned that one of the major responsibilities of operating the Walnut Valley festival was to disappoint people. The festival managers did not take every suggestion made to them, even from trusted sources. They had to weigh in on minutiae of contests. Though they diligently polled audience members and staff, they could not bring everyone’s pet band every year, and they steadfastly refused to limit the music they presented to what would satisfy bluegrass traditionalists. Kendra Redford remembered that key decisions were made in consultation with their staff members, especially those who served for many years:

They were the ones on the front line, dealing with the complaints I call them—people’s ideas of what our festival should be like. We tried from the beginning to listen to people and incorporate what people thought should be, but when it came right down to the bottom line, it was kind of like, ‘OK, we can’t quite do it that way.’ So the decision had to be made that, ‘OK, this is the way it is going to be, and you may not like it, and I’m sorry if we lose some people along the way.’ You can’t please everybody. I guess that’s the big thing we had to learn.³⁶

Though Bob Redford actively sought feedback, not every suggestion made it to implementation. For example, even though emcees Orien Friesen and Mike Flynn were respected veterans, they offered a similar unrealized tip decades apart. In 1984, Friesen “recommend[ed] that you cut out one act from each night-time show and build in a pad for encores and sets running long.” In 2002, Flynn wrote, “[M]ake the ‘Big Shows’ on Stage One 90 minutes long.” Neither version of the idea was used. Another change came when two contests were discontinued, one for best bluegrass band and one for Dobro. For the contests that remained, crew members had to make judgement calls on detailed questions—but questions which could

35. Kendra Redford, March 10, 2018.

36. Kendra Redford, February 3, 2018.

determine whether a player was eligible to compete and win. In 2002, for example, WVA staff had to decide if a mountain harp was the same as an Autoharp. Similarly, they had to rule over whether a Chinese dulcimer was a hammered dulcimer for the sake of competition.³⁷

Hiring entertainers meant disappointing both artists and attendees. A music festival is a soft ticket enterprise, meaning people pay to attend the event rather than to gain access to a particular act. For artists in a niche market, this was usually an advantage. The solo guitar wizard who could attract 50 people to a coffee shop performance or music store clinic likely came out ahead making a guaranteed fee to appear on a festival bill. In addition, there was the prestige-by-association factor that came with sharing a bill with other musicians. Some festivals, including the WVF's predecessor, the 1960s-era Newport Folk Festival and its contemporary, the Kerrville Folk Festival, had a completely democratic no-star policy, in which every act was paid the same fee.

While the WVA did not disclose its financial arrangements with artists, it presumably did not follow that practice. Still, the WVA shared Kerrville's practice of not designating a headliner and listing all entertainers on publicity alphabetically or by what names best fit the space available on a poster or flyer.³⁸ This was unlike, for instance, the Rocklahoma Festival in Pryor, Oklahoma, roughly halfway between Winfield and Kerrville, Texas, which in 2007 clearly designated Poison, Vince Neil, and Twisted Sister as its nightly headliners. Equality of billing made the WVF a desirable venue for musicians.

The competition to get hired was also fierce because it sometimes led to future work. The WVA established a pattern of bringing back audience favorites multiple times. In addition, in

37. Friesen to Redford, September 17, 1984; Mike Flynn to Bob Redford, October 18, 2002, and "Contest Notes" in "Black Book," 2002.

38. Massimo, *I Got a Song*, 32; Barefield, "The Kerrville Folk Festival," 5.

most years, the WVA booked at least one artist who specialized in each instrument for which it had a contest. (While the identity of contest judges was a secret, it was widely assumed that featured performers who specialized in instruments such as mountain dulcimer, hammered dulcimer, and autoharp also performed double duty as judges.) These factors meant that WVA staff had to say no to many more acts than they accepted. Once in a while, an artist would stop being invited because of his behavior. In an assessment of one entertainer, a staff member acknowledged that he “insults the audience. So to speak, he made his own bed, now let him lay in it, ticks, fleas, and all.”³⁹

While rotating performers inevitably led to disappointments, the loudest complaints over the decades seemed to come from fans of bluegrass who believed that there was too much non-bluegrass music on the stages at Winfield and, especially, from fans of traditional bluegrass who did not approve of the pop- and prog-influenced “new grass” bands who were on the bill. Kendra Redford said people delivered their complaints by letter, phone call, and word of mouth.

We billed ourselves as a bluegrass festival, and the very first year we had a very traditional line-up, but we also had New Grass Revival. And so right away we caught between the traditional bluegrass festival and the progressive. . . . We were trying to stay in the middle between both groups and finally decided that wasn't working, that we were never going to please the traditional bluegrass people completely. So we had to go with what we felt comfortable with or what we wanted to do. There were a lot of traditional bluegrass festivals springing up around that time in Missouri and Oklahoma, and we got a lot of flak from them because . . . they said we weren't bluegrass.⁴⁰

Finding the way to express that the WVF featured traditional bluegrass, progressive bluegrass, and other genres in one name proved challenging. Kendra Redford recalled that the festival tried to emphasize that it was an “acoustic music festival,” but bands such as New Grass Revival traveled with electric bass guitars instead of standup acoustic basses, so that label was technically incorrect.⁴¹

39. “Sawtelle & Wilson,” in *Walnut Valley Bluegrass & Walnut Valley Spring-Thing*, 1976.

40. Kendra Redford, February 3, 2018.

41. *Ibid.*

While finding a pithy way to summarize the WVA's philosophy of booking was a challenge, its practice was consistent. The association told potential investors the WVF had "as wide a scope or as broad a programming schedule" as possible. Certainly, some luminaries of the traditional bluegrass world were included; in 1972, Lester Flatt performed and so did Jim and Jesse & the Virginia Boys. Reno, Harrell, and the Tennessee Cutups were booked in 1975. Given that bluegrass was an art form that only dated back about 35 years when the WVA was formed, the vehemence of the traditionalists must have been surprising. Coats wrote, "Many fans of traditional bluegrass still refuse to accept the [New Grass] Revival as being related in any form or fashion in the tight kinsmanship of the followers of Mr. [Bill] Monroe's creation."⁴² Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass, never played at the Walnut Valley Festival. He did play the annual KFDI Radio Listener Appreciation Show in Wichita in 1986. "We tried to book him several times," Bob Redford told the *Wichita Eagle*. "When we were younger in the business, we couldn't afford him." Later, Monroe only performed at festivals in which he received an ownership stake, as he did with festivals in Colorado and Indiana. This idea, of course, violated Redford's practice of maintaining close control.⁴³

"The Walnut Valley Association has made a directional shift in their format from bluegrass to folk," wrote Don Kissil of *Pickin'* in 1977. Kissil identified that more of the entertainers on the bill—Crary, Blake, Bowers, Barton—"were solo performers backed up by a number of good, even great sidemen. . . . '[G]roupness' or total band sound was not there this year. . . . These musicians are extremely accomplished and talented people, but they are solo performers, not

42. WVA, prospectus for Japan trip, 1976; Art Coats, "Sam Bush & The New Grass Revival: Bluegrass, Rock, Country, or Whatever?," *Flatlands Occasional* 2 no 2, May 1977.

43. Diane Samms Rush, "Bluegrass Legend Monroe Dies," *Wichita Eagle*, September 10, 1996, accessed February 19, 2018, Newsbank database.

bands.” While Kissil identified the loss represented in this shift, he gave it a pass because of the “participatory” focus of the event.⁴⁴

The bluegrass generation gap was still alive more than 20 years later, as demonstrated by survey results: “The New Grass Revival is about as close to ‘MTV’ bluegrass as I would care to see you go. . . . Let the hard bluegrass moderns play late on Stage II.” “New Grass Revival has talented musicians, but they are rock with string instruments, and as far as we are concerned, a disgrace to the spirit of the Walnut Valley ‘Bluegrass’ Festival. They totally destroyed the sound of Bill Monroe’s music.” In contrast, “New Grass Revival is the biggest draw. They don’t come, I don’t come.”⁴⁵

Though not as forceful in their comments as the traditional bluegrass fans, Celtic music lovers often asked for more of what they liked, too. Particularly after the mammoth popularity of *Riverdance* in the 1990s, audiences became more accustomed to and enthusiastic about Celtic sounds. Most years, the WVF featured one band fitting the description. Eileen Ivers, a *Riverdance* fiddle player, got the slot with her band, Cherish the Ladies, five different years. Kendra Redford said one reason these acts were hard to land was that the Irish music festival season was primarily in the spring, while the WVF was in the fall.⁴⁶

The WVA booking philosophy also disappointed those who hoped for bigger names—though in the bluegrass and acoustic music world, big is in the eye of the beholder. In 1976, Coats floated the idea of experimenting with having performers who might be familiar from the radio. A survey response in 1989 said, “My friends and I agree we’d gladly pay more to get to see as many big name groups as the Festival used to have,” which left the readers wondering what the

44. Kissil, “Winfield ’77,” *Pickin’*, March 1978, 60-61.

45. Tom Milne and “Survey Results,” in Walnut Valley Association, “Black Book,” 1989.

46. Kendra Redford, February 3, 2018.

past big names were. Another survey suggested booking Dan Fogelberg,⁴⁷ who had released a bluegrass album. Other high-profile festivals featured artists who had radio hits. In the late 1990s, Nashville names including Ricky Skaggs, Jim Lauderdale, Steve Earle, and Dolly Parton all recorded bluegrass projects and could have been approached.⁴⁸ Instead, the WVA continued its everyone's-a-star booking practices.

Though it sometimes required the hard job of telling people no, the Walnut Valley Association's approach to sustainability proved itself over more than 40 years. By the mid-1980s Muret was no longer part of the Walnut Valley Association. Mossman stopped building guitars, eventually selling his company to luthiers who moved it out of state. After a series of heart attacks in the early 1990s, Coats had to bow out as well.⁴⁹ Though hundreds contributed to the festival's operation each year, Bob Redford became the name most associated with the festival. The festival flyer from 1986 specified that the Walnut Valley Festival, 15th National Guitar Flat-Picking Championships, and Arts & Crafts Festival was "presented by the Walnut Valley Association, Bob Redford, President." "[P]erhaps because he had to, I think," Muret said, "he finally realized there had to be a face of the Walnut Valley Festival, and it was him."⁵⁰ For the next 30 years, no one had more authority over or responsibility for the Walnut Valley Festival.

Rather than chasing trends, operating multiple festivals, or branching into ancillary businesses, Bob Redford and his crew members focused on one signature event and how to monetize it. The strategy of staying modestly sized and maintaining control led to consistency of brand, audience experience, and ownership. Festivals that started around the same time in

47. Coats, "Comments by Art Coats," "Outline and Planning for Walnut Valley Bluegrass & Walnut Valley Spring-Thing," 1976; "Survey Results," in "Black Book," 1989

48. Bill Malone and Jocelyn Neal, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 3rd revised ed. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2010), 458.

49. Leota Coats (contributor to *Walnut Valley Occasional* and spouse of Art Coats), interviewed by the author, April 9, 2018.

50. Joe Muret, March 2018.

Colorado reached a crisis point and had to merge and reorganize in order to survive. The Kerrville Folk Festival in Texas also nearly folded and only survived through a significant change in role for its founder.⁵¹ Festivals that existed primarily as fundraisers for a cause faded away as core volunteers moved on to other interests. One example was the Bluegrass Jamboree in Butler County, Kansas, for the benefit of people with cerebral palsy.⁵²

The WVA demonstrated care for the community of Winfield and its festival audience while maintaining its prime mission of profitability. “We have the support of the City of Winfield and the community of Winfield,” said Kendra Redford. “What we have is a larger community actually, and it’s the Walnut Valley community of all these people [from] . . . all of these years. And they are pretty demanding about what they want, and what they want you to do, and what they want to see at the festival.” The Walnut Valley Association engaged in commerce using methods that supported art and community.⁵³

51. Charlotte Bell, “Thirty Years of Bluegrass, Telluride-Style,” Planet Bluegrass website, accessed March 25, 2018, <https://www.bluegrass.com/rockygrass/archive/Article-RGFortyYears.html>; Barefield, 88-95, 103.

52. Diane Samms Rush, “Kansas Jaycees Sponsor Bluegrass Jamboree,” *Wichita Eagle and Beacon*, May 22, 1981.

53. Kendra Redford, February 2018.

CHAPTER SIX

“NO ALCOHOL, PLEASE. IT’S A FAMILY AFFAIR!”: A FAMILY FRIENDLY FESTIVAL

An earlier version of this chapter appeared in Farmount Folio 16, 2015, 49-60.

Luthier Stuart Mossman, one of the organizers of the first Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas, spoke to the local Rotary Club about his plans during a meeting in September 1972. The *Winfield Courier* summarized his presentation: “Those attending will be people who like country and bluegrass music. Many are over fifty years of age and will bring their families along. Mossman pointed out the entire festival will provide good, clean family entertainment.” The message was reinforced after the fact by Winfield police chief A.V. “Gus” Froemming, who praised the event in the newspaper, calling it a “very professional” atmosphere. The *Courier* said “possibly those who may have had qualms about the weekend had confused a bluegrass festival with a rock and roll festival. However, the police chief remarked that ‘this would be a fine place to take the whole family.’”¹ In fact, the festival organizers had their children at the festival, and over the years all of co-founder Bob Redford’s children helped at the event.

In its first decade, the Walnut Valley Festival made a strong commitment to providing entertainment that was safe and fun for families. The festival’s definition of family friendliness was first and foremost a prohibition on alcohol and illicit drugs, along with social pressure to refrain from nudity. It also included efforts to provide plenty of space, modern facilities, and an

1. “Mossman Tells Plans for Bluegrass Festival,” *Winfield Courier*, Sept. 25, 1972; “First Bluegrass Festival Considered ‘Big Success,’” *Winfield Courier*, Oct. 2, 1972.

atmosphere that made music the central activity. Finally, the festival provided family friendliness by playing up its elements that came from the tradition of folklife festivals and gospel meetings.

In a larger context, the festival's commitment to family friendliness was indicative of the 1970s wave of nostalgia, preservation of folk traditions, and patriotism. In the minds of some Americans, the ideal of family togetherness was under threat. An activity such as a bluegrass festival could be a poignant, potent reminder of a time when people made music by hand with acoustic instruments—a time that some would nostalgically call “simpler.”

More specifically, the commitment to family friendliness was a defensive stance because organizers could not be sure of community support for the event. Without community support for everything from fairground permits to hospitality for out-of-town visitors, the undercapitalized organization could have easily failed. In addition, its organizers risked the judgment of the community where they lived and did business the rest of the year. Winfield residents had reason to be wary. A motorcycle gathering that had gotten out of hand was, in some people's minds, associated with the festival founders. Also, local residents certainly were aware of rock music festivals through media accounts and documentary films even if they had not attended one. Such festivals gained as much attention for nudity and illegal drug use as they did for music in an era that saw Woodstock and anti-war protests. It is reasonable to assume most residents of the small, Republican-leaning community would not have been enthusiastic about hosting such an event, particularly because free tickets available to students at the local United Methodist-affiliated Southwestern College would mean mixing college students with the campers.

The Walnut Valley Festival was a setting in which people navigated the seeming dichotomy of a conservative expectation to guard against the trappings of a 1960s rock festival and still welcome the counterculture and counter consumer. In fact, the counterculture was alive and well

at the Winfield Fairground, as demonstrated through widespread use of alcohol, aspects of drug culture, occasional nudity, coarse language, progressive politics, and even dancing. While the fence around the midway and grandstand area created an official demarcation between the family friendly zone and the more permissive campground, the barrier was permeable. Almost certainly, many of the same people who drank beer and caroused the campground also participated in the respectable intergenerational aspects of the event.

The new nostalgia

During the Cold War, American families were widely viewed as the building blocks that would form a wall against insecurity, socialism, and what some saw as moral decay. Families, consisting of men and women married for the first and only time and focused on raising children, would steer the country through any damaging internal conflicts. The common conception of the family included “a set of beliefs so widespread that it was largely taken for a fact,” including

A family comprises a married couple and their minor children living together in a common residence

...

Marriage is a lifelong commitment and sex should be confined to marriage

Parents have exclusive responsibilities for their children’s care until the children enter kindergarten and, that even after that time, parents are free to discipline and care for their children as they see fit, without outside interference

Families that fail to conform to one or more of these givens may be regarded as ‘troubled’ or ‘problem’ families.²

“The family seemed to offer a psychological fortress that would protect them against themselves. Bolstered by heterosexual virility, scientific expertise, and wholesome abundance, it might ward off the hazards of the age.”³ In the 1950s, “[F]amily togetherness quickly became a national ideal, seized upon by advertisers, ministers, and newspaper editors.”⁴

2. Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of Domestic Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988), *xiii*.

3. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 20th anniversary edition (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 13-14, 105-106.

4. Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 180.

A perceptible, even rapid, shift away from the 1950s suburban ideal of family togetherness caused anxiety. Baby boomers “had been born soon enough to take the lingering traces of an earlier way of life into [their] own imagination.” Trends through the 1960s diminished the importance of or replaced domesticity. Robert Cantwell said those who were born in the “upward slope” of the baby boom from 1941 to 1950 experienced an “environment of new neighborhoods, new schools, new businesses, new forms of recreation and entertainment, and technologies that would nearly abolish the world in which your parents had grown up.”⁵ Elaine Tyler May said, “Critics of the youths of the 1960s complained that the family-centered ethic of ‘togetherness’ gave way to a hedonistic celebration of ‘doing your own thing.’” In the late 1960s and 1970s, counterculture became mainstream, and civil rights were hard won. “Between 1965 and 1975, the land of togetherness became the land of swinging singles, open marriage, creative divorce, encounter groups, communes, alternative lifestyles, women’s liberation, the Woodstock Nation, and the ‘greening of America.’”⁶ “The distinguishing characteristic of American family life since 1960 has been increasing diversity in family arrangements.”⁷ Some clung to the concept of marriage and family in spite of the rising divorce rate; from 1969 to the end of the 1970s, the rate of divorce had increased by more than 75 percent. “[F]or every five Americans who married, three divorced.” Based on surveys, perhaps nearly a third of college students at the beginning of the 1970s questioned the viability of marriage as an institution.⁸

People were also talking about sex more publicly and more frequently. Naturally, sexual expression found its way into popular culture, leading to conflicts such as the Wichita City Council

5. Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival*, (Cambridge: Harvard, 1996), 318-319.

6. May, 211; Arlene Skolnick, *Embattled Paradise: The American Family in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 4.

7. Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of Domestic Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988), *xiii*.

8. David Szatmary, *A Time to Rock: A Social History of Rock 'N' Roll* (New York: Schirmer, 1996), 226.

attempting to prevent a closed-circuit television broadcast of the musical *Oh! Calcutta!* known for its all-nude scenes. The gay rights movement spurred Anita Bryant to “Save Our Children” from people who identified as LGBT. New fashions reflected an increasing openness about sex and sexuality. “A land where teenage girls wore girdles even to gym class became a land of miniskirts, bralessness, topless bathing suits, and nude beaches.”⁹ As the “Me” Decade of the 1970s progressed, some young people “sought excitement in their personal relationships, especially through open sexual relations. . . . [M]any practiced freewheeling sex. . . . More than a few married boomers discussed open marriage [and] engaged in wife swapping.”¹⁰

Clothing and hair choices were contested throughout the postwar era into the 1970s.

Allied to the interest in folk music . . . was an intriguing new style of uncertain origin: young women with long, natural hair, peasant skirts, handcrafted sandals and barrettes, young men whose hair had been clipped by their girlfriends, not by the barber, with sideburns or beards, workshirts, handmade leather belts with brass buckles—all brought to campus by children of urban, middle-class background.¹¹

Television comedies and procedurals ridiculed the “hippie,” partially in an attempt to trivialize Vietnam War opponents. Beloved comic actor Bob Hope’s “monologues included jokes at the expense of the war’s more unusually attired critics.”¹² Hair length, in particular, created controversy. “To distinguish themselves from, and many times to antagonize, the middle-class American mainstream, male hippies generally wore their hair long.”¹³ A poll in 1965 showed that 80 percent of people who responded believed schools should not allow boys to display long hair. It seems people of all ages and stations were under scrutiny. An AP article in the *Winfield Courier* had Spiro Agnew, vice president of the United States, confirming rumors that he was wearing his

9. May, 90, 111, 3, 210-211; “Commissioners Seek to Block TV Showing of ‘Oh! Calcutta!’ *Wichita Eagle*, September 15, 1970; Skolnick, 4.

10. Szatmary, *A Time to Rock*, 233.

11. Cantwell, 323-324

12. May, 210; James L. Baughman, *The Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America Since 1941*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins, 2006), 111.

13. Szatmary, *A Time to Rock*, 166.

hair longer. He treated the situation with humor, claiming it was meant to draw attention from the hair he was losing. *The Wichita Eagle* made a front page story out of a Baldwin City sixth grade student who was suspended from school for the length of his hair.¹⁴

Next to sex, perhaps the activity that was most antithetical to family togetherness was drug use, a signature part of the increasingly mainstream counterculture. Getting high in the 1960s and 1970s was sometimes a communal activity but one undertaken with peers or even strangers, not across the generations of a family. “Suddenly it was hip to smoke marijuana and ingest various abundantly available hallucinogens and narcotics, pastimes once reserved for society’s marginal elements. Drug use was widely reported by the news media and became the fodder for what could be called its own genre of drug related popular music.”¹⁵ Interestingly, the Beat movement that helped establish the drug culture had strong ties to Wichita, Kansas, the closest city to Winfield.

The shift away from the ideal of family togetherness, including attitude and behavior changes related to sexuality, hair length, and drug use, did not dislodge the importance of family in the broad culture. Even in 1976, the year when the phrase “the Me Generation” was coined, a survey showed “both men and women were ‘extraordinarily certain’ that marriage and family were of prime importance in their lives.” Similarly, a pollster who found a variety of examples of ways that Americans sought personal fulfillment in the 1970s also found that the majority of people were oriented to normative values. “They strongly believed, for example, that drug use and extramarital affairs are morally wrong, and that women should put their children and husband ahead of their careers.”¹⁶

14. Associated Press, *Winfield Courier*, August 30, 1970; *Wichita Eagle*, September 16, 1970.

15. Thomas R. Gruning, *Millenium Folk: American Folk Music Since the Sixties* (Athens: University of Georgia), 2006, 31.

16. Skolnick, 146-147.

The 1970s “yielded both a culture of freedom and experimentation and a movement toward conservatism.”¹⁷ These right and left perspectives in a nostalgic view of the centrality of family life, symbolized in television shows such as *The Waltons* and *Little House on the Prairie* and acted on by parents preparing natural honey-sweetened, carob chip cookies for their children. “Americans indulged in a newfound appreciation of folk art, Americana, and material culture.” This was especially apparent as the bicentennial approached and “celebrations around the country took a local approach, avoiding contentious national issues by focusing instead on folk culture, such as genealogy, quilting, bluegrass music, and local history.” The new nostalgia elevated family, patriotism, community, and the ideal of honest work.¹⁸

Mossman’s careful words to the Rotary Club suggest that the organizers felt community pressure to present the event as family-friendly, perhaps even nostalgic. Their experience was not unique. Two states away, Rod Kennedy was attempting to garner support for a folk festival in Kerrville, Texas, to coincide with a folk art and craft festival. In his first meeting with local officials, the promoter brought along a friend and musician, “Allen Damron, because he was a clean-cut, clean-shaven singer in hopes of showing the crowd that this festival was not just about sex, drugs, and rock and roll.”¹⁹ Similarly, when the Kerrville Folk Festival outgrew its initial theater space a few years later, Kennedy dubbed its new outdoor venue Quiet Valley Ranch in hopes of soothing neighbors who held fears of a loud rock extravaganza. His event “was accused

17. Beth Bailey and David Farber, eds., *America in the Seventies* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 38

18. Christopher Capozzola, “‘It Makes You Want to Believe in the Country’: Celebrating the Bicentennial in an Age of Limits,” in *America in the 70s*, ed. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 38; Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History From Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton, 2012), 8.

19. Erinn R. Barefield, “The Kerrville Folk Festival: The Path to Kerr-Version,” master’s thesis, Texas State University—San Marcos, 17n26.

of just about everything that first year, and I guess to the townspeople it looked like every hippie in the country was converging on Kerrville.”²⁰

Efforts to promote the festival at Winfield as family-friendly were motivated by community perception. It seems clear, though, that the effort was also sincere; the organizers believed in family, community, and hard work. They ranged from college age to young professionals, mostly young men and women with children of their own. They had ties to community service organizations, local churches, and Southwestern College. “Truthfully, bluegrass is a family type of entertainment,” festival president Bob Redford told a *Kansas Farm Bureau* publication in 1976. “We planned from the start to have one of the top festivals in the country with the event being designed for the entire family.” Redford credited the festival’s success to the farmfed work ethic of co-founder Joe Muret.²¹

Historian Arlene Skolnick said the new nostalgia created a meeting ground for the political right and the political left. At Winfield, it created a common ground between the freaks and the fogies amid the craft and demonstration booths. Even though bluegrass music’s strongest lineage is from Appalachia, the rural setting of the Walnut Valley made its music and crafts an authentic, if elevated, celebration of Midwest heritage. “By and large, the region’s sustained rural heritage with its attendant interest in land and agriculture, seasons and life cycles, rural communities and interdependence, small towns and cities, as well as the weather, have all come to represent the Midwest to the rest of the nation.” Ethnomusicologist Thomas R. Gruning says authentic rural culture was what he sought as a young folkie. Walnut Valley Festival organizers and supporters emphasized that the festival was grounded in rural heritage and, increasingly, in the life of the community. Organizers relied on friends from church and civic clubs to provide hospitality,

20. *Ibid.*, 25.

21. Norma Sampson, “Bluegrass Festival Features Family Fun,” *Kansas Farm Bureau News*, 1976.

providing them the chance to make some money to support their charitable missions. “The Tisdale church and the Winfield Jaycees are preparing to meet your food needs,” organizers wrote when promoting the second festival. “Our town of Winfield this year is backing our Festival wholeheartedly.”²²

Not rock, and no motorcycles

Some Winfield residents undoubtedly held concerns about changing families, including sexual expression and drug use. Organizers of the Walnut Valley Festival had to contend with such concerns in seeking support for their event. The effort was complicated by the high visibility in recent years of rock music festivals. Even people who eschewed popular music or did not know it well enough to tell a Joan Baez from a Loretta Lynn from a Grace Slick knew about the Woodstock festival in 1969 from extensive press coverage and a widely released documentary film the following year. After all, “throughout much of its existence, rebellion defined rock-and-roll.”²³ Winfield residents were also likely familiar with Pittsburg Peace, a “Kansas Woodstock” held in Crawford County, Kansas, in September 1970, which commanded statewide headlines. A few years later they may have seen reports about the Ozark Music Festival in Sedalia, Missouri, about which a Missouri senate report concluded, “The scene made the degradation of Sodom and Gomorrah appear mild.”²⁴

22. Ginette Aley, “Knotted Together Like Roots in the Darkness: Rural Midwestern Women and Region, a Bibliographic Guide,” *Agricultural History* 77, no. 3 (Summer 2003), 455 (accessed October 17, 2014); Gruning, 2; Joe Muret, Stuart Mossman, and Bob Redford, “Welcome to the Walnut Valley Bluegrass Festival and Crafts Fair,” *Bluegrass Central*, September 15, 1973.

23. Szatmary, *A Time to Rock*, xiii.

24. Donald Bradley, “Film Looks Back at 1974 Sedalia Rock Festival,” *Kansas City Star*, July 18, 2015, accessed March 23, 2018, <http://www.kansascity.com/entertainment/music-news-reviews/article27672037.html#storylink=cpy>.

Rock festivals did not cause the shift away from family togetherness, but to some cultural critics and worried parents, they may have symbolized it. “Parents of teenagers . . . were confronted with ‘sex, drugs, and rock and roll’—a new youth culture radically different from their own. To the public at large, these changes seemed to support arguments that Americans were abandoning family ties in general and ties to children in particular.”²⁵

Sexual intercourse was not depicted in the documentary about the Woodstock rock festival, but nudity during and after a rainstorm was prominent. Images showed people walking around in the rain without clothes, and bare breasts are visible in the muddy aftermath. In one image, a man and woman strip to the skin after the rain to put on dry clothes that are offered. In both the film and widely published photographs, festivalgoers in various states of undress swim and bathe together. “I think skinnydipping is beautiful if you can do it,” said one woman interviewed in the documentary, “but we’ve been made to believe it’s wrong.” Sex was also talked about during and after the festival. A young couple interviewed several times in the film say they reside together in a family situation, “what others might call a commune.” The woman acknowledges that they “ball and everything” but do not necessarily plan to stay sexually exclusive during the festival. Rock singer Grace Slick told talk show host Dick Cavett that she passed the time at Woodstock “getting it on.”²⁶

New York may have seemed a world away from Winfield, but Sedalia, Missouri, was a short day’s drive. To describe the scene at the Ozark Music Festival in 1974, critics warned their audiences to “picture naked hippie chicks showering at the livestock washing stations while

25. Skolnick, 130; Letter to the editor, *Wichita Eagle*, September 16, 1970; Michael Wadleigh, *Woodstock*, Warner Brothers, 1970, television broadcast on VH1 Classic, November 21, 2014.

26. *Woodstock*; Mike Evans and Paul Kingsbury, eds., *Woodstock: Three Days That Rocked the World* (New York: Sterling Publishing), 2009, 238. The same episode of Dick Cavett’s show that included Slick’s comment featured a performance of the song “We Can Be Together,” including the New Left catchphrase “Up against the wall, motherfuckers,” which was not obscured.

singing ‘California Dreamin’.’” An investigative report that labeled the festival a disaster claimed, “Natural and unnatural sex acts became a spectator sport.” Judy Bell, a Sedalia resident, was still disgusted 40 years later. “I never saw so many naked people,” she said.²⁷

With rock and roll and sex came drugs. In the Haight district of San Francisco, California, in the mid-1960s—the birthplace of their culture—“hippies turned to mind-expanding drugs to enhance their individual potential. Most rolled marijuana or the more expensive hashish into joints or smoked the weed Indian-style in pipes. . . . Another drug, the hallucinogen LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), defined the hippie experience.”²⁸ The documentary on Woodstock noted that it was known for a possibly tongue-in-cheek announcement about the “brown acid” not being very good, but the documentary account of it specifically and explicitly depicts marijuana use. Both Jerry Garcia and Country Joe McDonald hold up joints to the camera. An unidentified man fashions a pipe and starts using it. There is a whole montage of participants passing joints while Arlo Guthrie’s song “Customs Man” plays. A silent, amateur film of Pittsburg Peace does not show any explicit drug use besides beer drinking, though lingering shots of mushrooms and use of psychedelic designs to delineate scenes speak to the influence of drug culture. There were, however, clearly drugs including marijuana and mescaline widely available and casually used during the festival, which infuriated local residents and state politicians. Not coincidentally, state and local elections in 1970 included candidates voicing strong views on curbing drug sales in Kansas.²⁹

27. Bradley, *Kansas City Star*, July 18, 2015.

28. David Szatmary, *A Time to Rock: A Social History of Rock 'N' Roll* (New York: Schirmer, 1996), 167.

29. *Woodstock*; Robert Blunk Jr., “Pittsburg Peace Festival, Cherokee County, Kansas,” filmed September 4-7, 1970, Kansas Memory video, four parts, 8:56, 6:19, 8:29, 9:37, accessed October 29, 2014, <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/222527>.

For community members who disapproved of drugs, the Ozark Music Festival was especially vexing. Enforcement was difficult. The undercover Highway Patrol officers wrote in their report: “As dusk turned to night, the crowd grew larger and more emotional as the music got into full swing and the drugs became more effective. . . . On Saturday at approximately 7:45 a.m., a male subject entered our camp site and offered us each a ‘toke’ (to smoke) from his electric marijuana pipe. We declined.” Even for those who saw drugs as acceptable, news that a man at the festival died from an overdose was disturbing.³⁰

Woodstock was also associated with the progressive, anti-war politics of many of its artists. Country Joe McDonald performed the anti-Vietnam war protest song “Feel Like I’m Fixing to Die Rag” with its signature cheer “F-U-C-K.” “From the first response to ‘Give me an F,’ when they all stopped talking and looked at me and yelled ‘F,’ I knew there was no turning back,” McDonald remembered. Jimi Hendrix wove screaming rockets and explosions into his rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” capturing “the militant outlook sixties youth held toward the government.”³¹

News of rock festivals may have simply raised Winfield residents’ concerns with logistics and safety associated with a large event. The Pittsburg festival created a great deal of trash and attracted a number of motorcycles. *Woodstock* depicts festival goers knocking down and climbing over fences and has several scenes about the difficulty of providing enough food and gasoline. Townspeople are shown with attitudes ranging from supportive to sympathetic but concerned to condemning; organizers consistently describe the participants as peaceful, however.³²

30. Bradley, *Kansas City Star*, July 18, 2015.

31. Szatmary, *A Time to Rock*, 212.

32. Blunk, “Pittsburg Peace,” *Kansas Memory*; *Woodstock*.

Closer to home, Winfield residents were still unnerved from a motorcycle rally on their Main Street. “One of the Jaycees projects we got into was Hugo’s Harley Davidson would come to Winfield, and the Jaycees would sponsor motorcycle races at the fairgrounds,” Joe Muret said. Bikers came to town for the races, and there were “a lot of beer cans up and down the street, empty beer cans, so Winfield just kind of closed up Main Street when that went on.”³³ The Kansas State Motorcycle Rally was held in Winfield each spring from 1962 through 1972. It included the races themselves and, some years, a picnic in Winfield’s Island Park. “Bob was the chairman of that,” Kendra Redford recalled. “The last year they had that the town got over-ran by the motorcycles. Bob didn’t happen to be the chairman that year—he had been in previous years— . . . but it didn’t make any difference because he had been associated so closely with that, that the people called us and . . . let Bob know that they were not happy.” Kendra Redford said this actually made the bluegrass festival concept more appealing to Bob. “He thought, ‘OK, let’s switch gears and get away from the motorcycle crowd and go to a music crowd.’”³⁴

National awareness about rock music festivals was seemingly an obstacle to the fledgling Walnut Valley Festival in 1972 and beyond. This was an existential threat. Chuck Stearman, founder of the Society for the Preservation of Bluegrass Music in America, approached Bob Redford to advocate for using SPBGMA standards as a way of holding off threatened restrictions for music festivals. “We need to emphasize good, clean family entertainment for our festivals, and by organizing we can have a better chance to fight” legislative initiatives, Stearman said.³⁵ WVA

33. Joe Muret (co-founder of Walnut Valley Festival), interview by the author, March 27, 2018.

34. Kendra Redford (Walnut Valley Association co-owner and wife of Bob Redford), interview with the author, February 3, 2018.

35. “Stearman-Redford,” August 1975, in Walnut Valley Association, Outline and Planning Book, 1975.

staff noted the Sedalia fiasco “was billed as a bluegrass festival but really was rock and hippie. Drugs and a bunch of stuff. This really hurts.”³⁶

In response, organizers continually made the case that the festival at Winfield was different. First, it was a bluegrass festival, firmly grounded in the much tamer tradition of folklife and folk music festivals, including traditional crafts. Its focus was on the music, particularly the growing interest in flatpick guitar, an acoustic lead style that made guitar as important as mandolin or banjo in a bluegrass ensemble. Festival literature consistently asked participants to keep alcohol and drugs away from the music and promoted this aspect of the festival. Finally, it was held in a spacious and safe environment.

Walnut Valley Festival organizers demonstrated a strong commitment to musicianship and craftsmanship, in part to send a message that their festival was about something more substantial than skinnydipping or sharing joints. This music-first attitude started with Mossman and other organizers declaring the festival’s first contest, for flatpick guitar performance, a national championship. Mossman told Winfield Rotarians before the first festival he hoped Winfield would become known as the home of the championship. A year later, Mossman, Redford, and Muret wrote, “Last year’s comments confirmed our interest in making a National Flat-Picking Championship available to the Midwest. Our contestants came from every part of the nation and one came all the way from Hawaii . . . This year we have added a Fiddle contest, and we hope to add more next year if interest is shown.” A few years later, a writer gushed about Mark O’Connor, who won both the flatpick guitar and fiddle contests in 1977. The writer asked why there were only 31 guitar contestants when the campground was full of pickers. “As one contestant explained simply, ‘The entry fee is only a few dollars, but a lot of people who plan to enter change their

36. WVA, *Outline and Planning Book*, 1975.

minds when they hear some of the jamming going in the campground the day before the contest. You can easily be persuaded into thinking . . . an appearance on your part could lead to public embarrassment.” After his double win, O’Connor commented on the steep level of competition: “I won the 1975 guitar contest, but I didn’t even make the cut last year.”³⁷

Along with the contests, organizers booked some widely recognized talent for the first few festivals. Byron Berline was a Caldwell, Kansas, native who had performed and recorded with Chris Hillman of the Byrds in the country-rock act The Flying Burrito Brothers. Berline brought his bluegrass band The Country Gazette, including fellow Burrito Brother Roger Bush, to the first festival. A picture published in *Frets* showed Dan Crary, Tony Rice, Norman Blake, and Doc Watson on stage together at the festival in 1973. At a time when acoustic lead guitar was only beginning to be explored, those were among the preeminent practitioners. The high level of musicianship extended beyond the stages. Good festival settings “offer weekend, amateur, and semiprofessional players places to meet and play with each other and with professionals in the context of the campground. For some, the opportunity to spend extended periods of time in which music is the central daytime and evening activity is the primary attraction.” Walnut Valley Festival organizers emphasized the importance of this jamming culture, and local press showed it in action, almost every year publishing pictures of multigenerational amateur picking circles.³⁸

WVF officials protected the music to such a degree that they policed dancing. “We thought the announcer was out of place when he asked for no dancing and no drinking and compared Winfield to a possible Sedalia riot. . . . Let people dance where the safety of others is to impaired,” wrote an indignant festivalgoer protesting “puritanical censorship.” Festival staff member Art Coats replied,

37. “Mossman Tells Plans for Bluegrass Festival,” *Courier*; Muret, Mossman, and Redford, *Bluegrass Central*, September 15, 1973, 5; Dan Rhodes, “Weekend at Walnut Valley,” *Bluegrass Unlimited*, December 1977, 28, 31.

38. *Winfield Courier*, September 30, 1972; Jim Hatlo, “Dan Crary,” *Frets*, February 1980, 34; Gruning, 110.

“We have had some performers tell us that if the people are going to dance then they will not play. They feel the dancing crowd distracts the audience.”³⁹ The festival was also protecting its image. Kendra Redford said there were complaints about “flower children . . . dancing barefoot in the rain,” which led some community members to think that the organizers were specifically trying to attract hippies. “We weren’t exactly, but it just seemed that way,” she said.⁴⁰

Along with quality music, organizers invited craft vendors who combined artistry and tradition. Everyone could agree on the inherent goodness of fresh-pressed cider, a hand-stitched quilt, and an Irish ballad.⁴¹ “We had 45 craft booths last year which created a lot of interest,” organizers wrote after the first festival. “Most of them made enough profit that they plan to come again this year and are helping us line up some 100 craft exhibits.” Photos of craft booths tend to feature women shopping at them, as in a photo from 1979 in *The Moundbuilder* of Southwestern College student Ellen Pederson buying jewelry.⁴²

Festival organizers in the 1970s worked hard to promote the festival as family-friendly and specifically as an environment that restricted alcohol and drugs. Allies in the local press and acoustic music media cooperated. A typical advertisement was for the 1974 festival, held September 20-22. It began with the assumption that the entire family would attend and that the pace would be slow. “Relaxing isn’t so hard. Just pack up the family and get yourself to Winfield, Kansas, for a grand way to wind down your summer bluegrass style.” The ad listed demonstrations and activities typical of a folklife festival, such as dollmaking, basket weaving, quilting, and

39. Marion Schroll to Jean Duncan, 1974, and Art Coats to Marion Schroll, November 28, 1974, in *Outline and Planning Book*, 1975.

40. Kendra Redford, February 2018.

41. Clanjamfrey, a band from Connecticut that played Irish music, was booked the Walnut Valley Festival in 1979, and the local press said the performance was the first by an Irish band at a Kansas festival. “Something Different,” *Winfield Courier*, June 2, 1979.

42. Muret, Mossman, and Redford, *Bluegrass Central*, September 15, 1973; “Walnut Valley Festival,” in *The Moundbuilder*, yearbook of Southwestern College, Winfield, Kansas, 1980.

woodcarving, and instructed visitors, “Be sure the kids see how grandmother used to make lye soap!” The ad is tagged with a friendly but clear warning: “No alcohol please. It’s a family affair.”

The ban on alcohol, drugs, and motorcycles was a consistent festival rule from the beginning and a part of nearly every piece of print advertising reviewed in the research process for this paper. In an interview with a bluegrass magazine in 1977, director Bob Redford claimed that a festival survey showed one hundred percent of respondents wanted good security. “‘I believe if you advertise something, you should back it up,’ Redford said of his no alcohol or drugs on the grounds rule.” It is not clear if the distinction between the fairgrounds, where possession of alcohol could get a person removed, and the campground, where moderate and discreet alcohol consumption was typically tolerated, was in place from the beginning of the festival, but it seems to be the way Redford was operating by 1977: “He observed, without sounding pious, [that] he is a lay minister at his Methodist church. ‘I’d give my eye-tooth to control the drinking in the campsites, but it is close to impossible. Although I don’t drink, that doesn’t mean I am against all people who do drink.’” The festival newsletter reiterated, “If you have to have booze with your bluegrass, you are emphatically not welcome in Winfield in September. . . . We don’t want or need you and your alcohol at Winfield.”⁴³ Being able to claim with a measure of confidence that the festival removed people who had alcohol or drugs was important in Winfield, which had a strong tie to the only recently formed United Methodist Church⁴⁴ and at least one operating chapter of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union at the time. Southwestern College was a Methodist institution, and St. John’s was associated with the Lutheran church. Winfield had been the site of a Carry Nation-style saloon smashing in 1901. The town did not allow the sale of liquor by the drink until 1996

43. Rhodes, *Bluegrass Unlimited*, 30.

44. Before a 1968 merger, the church had been simply Methodist.

and did not allow the sale of packaged liquor for another decade. When it came to policy on alcohol and drugs, the festival was family-friendly and reflected the norms of the town.

The festival was also not a place where the cultural contests regarding clothing and sexual expression were waged. Based on viewing photographs in newspapers and Southwestern College yearbooks, women who performed and attended dressed with a higher concern for the fall Kansas weather than for any attempt at overt sexuality. Commonly worn long skirts, prairie dresses, and flannel shirts were family-friendly and perhaps even indicative of the new “nostalgic rhetoric of family, flag, neighborhood, and work.”⁴⁵

Walnut Valley Festival organizers emphasized its operations and facilities as part of the case for the event’s family friendliness. No Woodstock fence-climbing would be necessary. “For those of you who have not been to Winfield before, we would like to let you know a little about our facilities. We have a very large fairgrounds where our Festival is held. The all-weather grandstand holds at least 5,000 people and we have room in front of it for 3,000 more.” Promotional materials for the second festival claimed that \$60,000 had been invested into the “unlimited shady” camping area, including electrical hookups, restroom facilities, and access to fresh water. “We are trying to make this the cleanest and most comfortable festival you ever attended, with something of interest for everybody.”⁴⁶ An account of the June Jamboree, a summer festival put on by the Walnut Valley Festival operation in June 1979, begins with a staff member assuring, “We had a good, well-behaved crowd.” The music press reinforced the Walnut Valley Festival reputation for smoothness and safety. A bluegrass magazine said the festival was

headed up by a stocky, partially-balding, intelligent man named Robert ‘Bob’ Redford. He says proudly, ‘I’m an organizer.’ The Association informed its patrons ‘Dogs, drugs, motorcycles, and alcohol are not permitted on grounds. Offenders will be removed from the festival site.’ Amazingly,

45. Skolnick, 134.

46. Muret, Mossman, and Redford, *Bluegrass Central*, September 15, 1973; “Winners Take Home Big Prizes,” *Winfield Courier*, June 4, 1979.

not one dog was seen on the grounds; not one motorcycle interrupted the festival, and no one suffering from overindulgence was seen in our area.⁴⁷

The festival's effectiveness in communicating its message is shown in the way the event was increasingly knitted into the fabric of the Winfield community through the 1970s. Though the contractual arrangements between the college and the festival shifted over the years, the first Walnut Valley Festival was presented in conjunction with Southwestern College, and all students received free tickets. Its inclusion in most of the college yearbooks through the 1970s is evidence that the festival remained a significant event in the college calendar. In 1978, the Winfield High School yearbook included a picture of a festival stage in the same photo spread as prom, homecoming, and a school theatre performance. Community authority figures blessed the event in local media coverage. In addition to the police chief praising the professionalism of the first festival, city commissioner Homer Hetherington praised the organizers' "overplanning," and mayor Milton Nida commended the city personnel who assisted. The town's fire chief, Joe Sanders, was an enthusiastic participant in campground jamming, as shown in newspaper photos from 1978 and 1979. Even the state's attorney general, Curt Schneider, spent time in the festival campground, combining music with a campaign stop.⁴⁸

The Walnut Valley Festival was consistent and effective in promoting itself as family-friendly, fitting comfortably into the new nostalgia. Photo and film evidence, along with online recollections, show that it was the norm for participants to have a family-friendly experience, even a multigenerational one. A participant's home movies show a happy toddler in the campground and the grandstand. A yearbook picture of the 1978 festival shows a younger, bearded banjo player

47. Rhodes, *Bluegrass Unlimited*, 1977.

48. Muret, Mossman, and Redford, *Bluegrass Central*, September 15, 1973; "Mossman Tells Plans for Bluegrass Festival," *Courier*; *Royal Viking*, yearbook of Winfield High School, Winfield, Kansas, 1978; "It's Becoming a Tradition," *Winfield Courier*, September 14, 1978; "Harmonica Player," *Winfield Courier*, June 4, 1979; "Schneider Predicts Knockout of Liquor Petitions," *Winfield Courier*, September 16, 1978.

in a t-shirt consulting with three older, clean-shaven men in collared shirts. A crowd shot from the same festival shows people on bleachers and the ground listening to music. There are more men than women, and the most provocative elements in the shot are a bare foot and a bored-looking child. The Kansas Farm Bureau article said “It’s not unusual to see a 75-year-old man sitting in the Winfield fairgrounds grandstand with his fiddle on his lap tapping his foot. And beside him sits a ‘long-haired’ college student tapping his foot.” It was even possible to have an explicitly Christian experience at the festival, as bluegrass bands typically include a generous amount of gospel music in their sets. Each festival included a gospel sing and/or a church service on Sunday morning.⁴⁹

Counterculture in the campground

The festival’s family-friendly reputation stayed intact even though some participants and performers enthusiastically participated in public nudity, alcohol consumption, and aspects of drug culture, including songs about drug use performed on the festival’s main stage. In part, this was because there were a few committed members of the counterculture in the campground in any given year. The festival drew widely recognizable characters such as Washboard Leo and Henry the Fiddler and performers such as Bryan Bowers who were easily recognizable as hippies, or at least hippie-inspired.

Realistically, though, most of the activities that flew in the face of the festival’s family-friendly atmosphere were perpetuated by people who were influenced by the culture changing around them—and who were to some degree performing the activities they associated with a music

49. “Festival Draws Together Common Interests,” *The Moundbuilder*, yearbook of Southwestern College, Winfield, Kansas, 1979; Mike Ward, “Walnut Valley Festival – 1975 & 1976,” YouTube video, 6:13, posted December 28, 2011, accessed October 29, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5dy07Hz7QE; Sampson, *Kansas Farm Bureau News*, 1976.

festival. “A significant majority of Americans adopted permissive attitudes on such matters as premarital sex, cohabitation outside of marriage,”⁵⁰ and perhaps even the occasional bit of public nudity.

Several scenes in a home movie show nude people swimming and bathing in the river, reminiscent of *Woodstock*. Online responses to the video include these comments from Walnut Valley Bluegrass Festival Facebook users Julie Bales Buresh and Connie Phillips Lawson: “That was back when nobody had showers. We used to jump in the river in our clothes to bathe.” “Saw my first naked man while riding with my sister through the grove ([they] didn’t block the roads then). Must have been about 1975 or so. The river shots in this film reminded me of that. He was swimming. Maybe it was one of these people! LOL.”⁵¹

Recollections in online discussion groups suggest that alcohol consumption was an assumed part of the experience for some festivalgoers. “Back then, of course, the shows started on Friday night and lasted through Sunday night. The shorter length made for perhaps a bit more intensity—get down, set up, start partying,” wrote Jeff Boyer. “In a weird way, I miss the old ‘all or nothing’ feeling of the shorter fest. It had a kind of frontier rawness to it—fewer frills, fewer shows, frenetic activity all the time, run to a show, hurry to a jam, ‘don’t stop now,’ forget about food, don’t worry about showers, ohmygod it’s almost over, seems like we just got here . . . boyhowdy, back when we were all young—we sure knew how to PARTY!!” While presumably drug use was part of some participants’ partying, there is documentation of a story and song about drug use at the “Spring Thing,” a bonus event put on by the Walnut Valley Association in April 1976. In a recording, John Hartford introduced a song he wrote for festival favorite Norman Blake, a guitar

50. Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 209.

51. Ward, “Walnut Valley Festival – 1975 & 1976,” YouTube video; Facebook Group, “Walnut Valley Bluegrass Festival,” comments posted September 22, 2014, accessed November 27, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2208526957/>.

wizard, and got four seconds of enthusiastic calls from the audience at the mention of the name. When Hartford went on to say the song is about “two freaks who decide they are going to get together and smoke some dope,” he received a full nine seconds of applause before he can continue. One interpretation is that the Spring Thing audience was more than twice as enthusiastic about marijuana as it was about guitar performance.⁵²

Boyer said a spirit of camaraderie prevented the party atmosphere from marring the Walnut Valley Festival for most people; this perhaps was another way of saying that the family-friendly ideals were shared even among the people who included beer and weed in their festival weekend.

The 1975-79 or so festivals (including the 1976 Spring Thing and the 1979 June Jamboree) were fairly rough and rowdy by current standards—hard partying all around as the event moved from a relatively small, confined affair to the megafest we’ve come to know and love. It seemed to me that those of us who had been with the Walnut Valley gatherings from the beginnings began to exert our own ‘calming down’ notices to those among us going a bit beyond enthusiasm. ‘Let’s not ruin a good thing with unnecessary rowdiness,’ seemed to be the consensus being communicated by gesture, expression, and appeal. We had a notion from the beginning of the ‘Winfield spirit’—helping out where possible, leaving the campgrounds in good condition, cooperating with fellow campers and staff, accepting some responsibility of our own to make the festival run smoothly. It seemed to work—many of the uninitiated became converts and adjusted their partying actions instantaneously.⁵³

A bluegrass festival hosted by a small town fit naturally within the new kind of nostalgia around family, community, patriotism, and work that emerged in the 1970s. This nostalgic orientation helped the country—and the Winfield campers—navigate a new conservatism that emerged even as mainstream culture grew coarser. At the same time, the newsworthiness of rock music festivals such as Woodstock in New York and Pittsburg Peace in southeast Kansas may have also made Winfield residents worry about such an event. Sensing that community support was critical, Walnut Valley Festival organizers presented a festival firmly rooted in the folk

52. Yahoo Groups, “Winfield-I,” comment posted on September 16, 2006, accessed November 27, 2014, <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/winfield-l/info>; John Hartford, posted by user catthinkofInottaken, “John Hartford – ‘I Thought You Were Holding’ – The Walnut Valley Spring Thing 1976,” YouTube video, posted March 4, 2014, accessed October 29, 2014, <http://youtu.be/R11IvL1FqOY>.

53. Yahoo Groups, “Winfield-I,” comment posted on September 28, 2000, accessed November 27, 2014, <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/winfield-l/conversations/messages/1674>.

tradition, featuring high quality musicianship. In advertising and by featuring crafts and traditional demonstrations, the festival organizers attempted to appeal to all ages and even to connect to the emerging nostalgia culture. Perhaps most importantly, the festival's attention to operations and security, including a consistent message that alcohol and drugs were not welcome, created a safe and family-friendly environment at least around the grandstand. The "Winfield spirit" helped extend that environment into the less rigorously controlled campground when participants began to celebrate in a rowdier fashion.

The Walnut Valley Festival survived the 1970s and has continued annually ever since. It still bills itself as family-friendly, though what that means to people in 2018 has almost certainly shifted. It is hard to pinpoint if or when the festival was fully accepted by the community, but by the late 1980s, the *Winfield Courier* was running advertisements from Winfield businesses that hoped to benefit from the visitors. "Bluegrass Fans and Participants," one such ad read, "For Your Convenience, Sonic will stay open until 1 a.m. or later Friday and Saturday." If "America's favorite drive-in" was excited to see bluegrass fans, then the Walnut Valley Festival must have been a fine place to take the whole family.⁵⁴

54. Advertisement, *Winfield Courier*, September 14, 1989.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BOBBY REDFORD'S WINFIELD BAND

In 2001, the Walnut Valley Association expected a banner year for the festival, the first of a new millenium. The soundtrack to the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* was wildly popular, topping both the Billboard 200 and the Billboard Country charts with bluegrass and related traditional music. When the terrorist attacks took place on September 11, 2001, the campground was full, and festival-related activities in the town of Winfield were in full swing.

As the United States navigated its first week of shock, grief, and solidarity, the festival faithful did the same—with the amplifying symbolism of literally being people from all walks of life and many parts of the globe living and singing in close proximity. Some participants and some entertainers were unable to attend because of spiritual hurt and travel logistics, and others stepped in to supply camping equipment that did not arrive and fill stage slots that were empty. Many who were there, or who came anyway, recounted the 2001 year as deeply meaningful and viewed it at the time as a necessity. An editorial in the *Wichita Eagle* read

If it's true that in times like these Americans need to continue with as much 'normalcy' as they can muster, then events like the Walnut Valley Festival play an important part. Kansans will give no ground to those who would rob us of our traditional pleasures, leaving in their place only grief, outrage and pain. Maybe some of us will strum a little slower, seek out the occasional news update and smile a little less quickly while we're there, but we love our festival in Winfield. Now more than ever.¹

In a story he has retold over the years, John McCutcheon was supposed to be on the first flight from Charleston, North Carolina, to Wichita, Kansas. When it was cancelled, he only briefly

1. "Comfort Like an Old Friend, Along Comes Winfield," *Wichita Eagle*, September 14, 2001, accessed February 19, 2018, Newsbank database.

considered staying home. “If we can’t fly, we’ll drive. Winfield needs us,” he told his road manager, Tommy Slothower—who would be responsible for most of the actual driving on a 24-hour trip. “No, John,” said Slothower, knowing what he was in for. “We need Winfield.”²

As the Walnut Valley Festival (WVF) emerged in a new century, it developed a community of people who planned their calendars around it and discussed it with some seriousness as a crucial part of their mental health care, not to mention their musical yearnings. In some ways, the first years of the 21st century were as unsettling to Americans as the 1970s. Whatever unity emerged after the high-profile terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, dissolved into culture wars at home. Certainty and predictability continued to call people home to Winfield each year. For example, before becoming performers who drew crowds at WVF—and later, in a different form, internationally—the members of the Dixie Chicks were typical in their devotion. As Robin Macy said, “Our calendar is like from Winfield to Winfield. So many great musicians come out of the woodwork, people who aren’t necessarily professional musicians. It’s like nirvana for musicians because of the jamming. . . . By Sunday I can’t even talk. My fingers are raw.”³ Festival enthusiasts sported bumper stickers and shirts that announced to the world, “I can’t. I’m going to Winfield.”

By the mid-1980s, the Walnut Valley Association (WVA) had time-tested systems, relationships, and work teams. When the weather presented problems, such as heavy rains at festival time in 1985 and 1986, everyone knew what to do. Though hiring was a chore every year, particularly for gate workers and security personnel, a high percentage of workers returned annually to anchor the crews. The WVA turned its attention to fine-tuning what was offered on

2. Bob Hamrick and Shannon Littlejohn, ed., *September’s Song: 45 Years of Winfield’s Walnut Valley Festival* (Wichita, Kansas: SqueezePlay Productions, 2016), 2, 10-11.

3. Susan Rife, “Dixie Chicks Are Back, Yodelin’, Pickin’, and Having a Grand Time,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 13, 1990, accessed February 19, 2018, Newsbank database.

the stages and augmenting the entertainment with familiar rituals and novel twists. Especially after the festival reached the quarter-century mark, the WVA increasingly turned its attention to its own future. Though various formulas for succession were explored, at the time of Bob Redford's death in 2016, the Walnut Valley Association remained primarily a family-owned business with longtime crew chiefs responsible for various operational aspects.

Stuart Mossman did not return to a prominent role in the organization, but he was often recognized when he attended and occasionally took a turn on stage—sometimes to the frustration of festival organizers. As one account put it, “Mossman squatted right down in the entrance to Stage III and smoked. One time he went out on stage and decided it wasn't his turn. I couldn't believe it was Stu until McCutcheon said ‘And now we will call out Preacher Mossman.’ He joined in ‘Will the Circle Be Unbroken’ and sang the second verse when no one else could remember the words.”⁴

In its early years, the Walnut Valley Festival had helped launch future stars Mark O'Connor and Alison Krauss. As the festival reached its teens and twenties it again assisted in starmaking. Around 1990, popular music featured a new recognition of the folk-style women singer-songwriters as represented by such artists as Tracy Chapman and Indigo Girls. This trend did not have much impact on the booked performers at the WVF. A group of women who went in for stylized western wear and hot instrumental playing did.

In 1989, an all-female group in Winfield “was drawing crowds like flies to the grandstand with their covers of Patty Loveless, Linda Ronstadt, and Emmylou Harris tunes.” The band's fiddle player, Martie Erwin, had notched second and third place finishes in the contest. The WVA “Black Book,” which recorded meeting notes, evaluations, and correspondence for the

4. Logsdon, “1989 Festival” in Walnut Valley Association, “Black Book,” 1989.

year, noted “Dixie Chicks very popular—open stage group.” Open stage groups were acts that were willing to be “on call” to fill in when, for instance, an instrumental contest did not take its full allotted time. They were bands that the WVA was considering for future booking, bands that were generating a lot of buzz, or bands that agents or other artists suggested the WVA check out. The Dixie Chicks seem to have been all three. In 1990, they were back for the first of three years in the festival lineup. “They were hired this year based on their performance last year,” Redford said. “The festival this year is going to make the breaks for them.” Over the years, the Dixie Chicks shed some of their twang (and a couple of their members), but before the 1990s were over, they had achieved a commercial distinction, earning diamond certifications for more than 10 million albums sold—for two different albums.⁵

The Walnut Valley Festival was also a launchpad for Nickel Creek. After Chris Thile’s Walnut Valley Mandolin Contest win at age 12, he and his bandmates returned four years in a row, literally growing up in front of the Winfield audience. By the time Nickel Creek came back for the last time as performers in 2000, they had been named one of “Five Music Innovators of the New Millennium” by *Time Magazine*. In 2012, Thile received a MacArthur Foundation grant, known as the “Genius Grant.” In 2017, he succeeded Garrison Keillor as host of “A Prairie Home Companion,” a public radio show that routinely featured folk and bluegrass music. In 2018, the show was rebranded as “Live From Here.”

The artist most associated with the Walnut Valley Festival has joked that he is a multi-time Grammy loser; he has not received a statue after six nominations. John McCutcheon has, however, performed as a solo artist at every festival from 1983 to 2017 and is in the ads for

5. Susan Rife, “Guitarists Get Flat Picky at Walnut Valley Festival,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 17, 1989; WVA, “Black Book,” 1989; Rife, “Dixie Chicks Are Back,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 13, 1990; Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: New Press, 2005), 21.

2018; a newspaper article from the 1990s called him “Mr. Winfield.”⁶ He is a prime example of a phenomenon noticed by performer and radio personality Chris Jones: “The festival . . . has some regular performers who have achieved Walnut Valley ‘superstar’ status through the years, though they are far from being household names outside the festival.”⁷

Rather than a household name, what McCutcheon offered was something for almost everyone. McCutcheon was a premier hammered dulcimer player who played his own multi-movement compositions and made technical refinements to the instrument that influenced a new generation of players. But he was also an accomplished oldtime fiddle and banjo player who had researched, visited, and played with the hidden masters of the instrument. In addition, McCutcheon played guitar, autoharp, keyboard, and “hambone”—percussion sounds achieved by beating on his own body—on stage. In a few hours a year at WVF, McCutcheon would play and sing fiddle tunes, union anthems, outrageously silly songs for children, story songs with punchlines for adults, and songs from his own voluminous output. He also drew on the work of Pete Seeger, whose “Well May the World Go,” was often McCutcheon’s opening song, and Woody Guthrie, whose “This Land Is Your Land” often closed shows. McCutcheon’s challenge, he said, was “to find out how to stitch that crazy quilt together,” which he often did with stories, some stretching longer than his songs. “I make a real conscious effort to be accessible to all kinds of people, even to people who don’t like bluegrass, to children, and especially to families.” Redford called McCutcheon one of the top two or three performers at the festival. “Most certainly his following has gotten bigger. Versatility is the key. He can play just about any

6. The title “Mr. Winfield” is contested. Kendra Redford gave that name to Dan Crary for the encouragement he gave Bob and Kendra Redford to keep the WVF going. Bart Redford, email to author, April 25, 2018.

7. Chris Jones, email to author, April 12, 2018.

instrument, including his body. He's a phenomenal songwriter, and he's adaptable to about any situation."⁸

Five years after McCutcheon began attending as a solo act, Tom Chapin was booked at WVF for the first of more than 20 years. First known for his collaborations with his late brother, Harry, Chapin shared McCutcheon's all-ages appeal and gentle commitment to social causes.

Uncharacteristically for the festival, Chapin was not an instrumental wizard, though he was a fine guitar, banjo, and autoharp player. Many years Chapin made up for any limitations he had by traveling with Jon Cobert, a keyboard player with a bass voice, and Michael Mark, a bass player and multi-instrumentalist who sang tenor. Both composers of music for television and performers in their own right, Mark and Cobert created for Chapin the versatility that Redford appreciated in McCutcheon—and that kept the performances fresh for returning festival audiences.

By the mid-1980s, a significant part of folk music's audience was especially interested in what some sources call "Celtic folk."⁹ Starting with Clanjamfrey in 1979, the WVA mixed this style into its booking choices. Among the Irish, Irish-inspired, and other Celtic bands performers who played Winfield were De Dannan, Eileen Ivers, The House Band, Cherish the Ladies (which included Ivers), Colcannon, David Munnely, Socks in the Frying Pan, The Outside Track, and Tannahill Weavers.¹⁰

McCutcheon, Munnely, and a few other acts could fill the grandstand. For many who returned to the festival year after year, however, the stage acts were a small part of the attraction.

8. Susan Rife, "Real Music For Real People," *Wichita Eagle*, October 12, 1990, accessed February 19, 2018, Newsbank database.

9. Big Picture Research Group, Google, "Music Timeline," accessed April 8, 2018, <https://music-timeline.appspot.com/#FOLK>.

10. For a searchable database of WVF entertainers over the years, see www.wvfest.com.

Instead, camp life was the central activity. Families and friends traveled from disparate locations to converge at the Winfield Fairground for ten days of communal living. Some camps bonded and even merged over shared interests, musical styles, or a pragmatic need to share camp chores. Given the founders' efforts to make it a musicians' festival, many campground denizens decided the quality and variety of music around them was sufficient. "I don't even go to the stages anymore" became the Winfield equivalent of "I don't even own a television," a way to signal a certain independence of taste and to express some mild derision for those who settle for whatever entertainment is put before them. For example, a camp hosted by sisters Nita Grier, Doris Swift, and Ina May Fakhoury in 1992 included hammered dulcimer and autoharp players who gathered in a camp decorated as a luau. Sara Grier said, "We don't ever really come here to hear any of the stage performers." "We're pretty selective about what we'll go over to see," Nita Grier agreed. "After 17 years, we've heard it all." The Grier-Swift-Fakhoury group did make an exception, however, for performances by Chapin.¹¹

Even if some of the campground diehards were missing them, festival performances in the mid-1980s and 1990s increasingly featured elements that were ancillary to the music. These trends appeared to emerge organically from the personalities involved, though it is reasonable to assume they were also a conscious effort to keep the festival fresh for audiences and performers alike. Although they were not exclusive to Winfield, the Colorado-based bluegrass band Hot Rize mirrored its performances with comical sets by its "secret" alter egos, Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers. Mike Cross was better known for his humorous songs and stories than his top-notch fiddle playing and songwriting. Though Bryan Bowers was rightly acknowledged as the foremost autoharp player in the instrument's history, "on his best-known recording . . . he

11. Susan Rife, "Hard Core Bluegrass Fans Show Up Early at Winfield," *Wichita Eagle*, September 16, 1992.

doesn't play any instrument at all! (Dementia is full of little ironies like that.) Like many folksingers, Bryan uses songs such as 'The Scotsman' for comic relief during his shows. The song was actually written for similar purposes by another fine New Folk entertainer, Mike Cross."¹² National act Marley's Ghost debuted at Winfield in 1994 for the first of more than 20 appearances. The Ghost was built around the idea of musical variety, and it employed instruments as varied as pedal steel guitar, bagpipes, bouzouki, and theremin. Its audiences filled the grandstand, clapping along to the band's signature audience participation song, "Iko Iko," and laughing at novelty songs such as "I Can See Your Aura and It's Ugly."

Kansas City-based Spontaneous Combustion played under that name for the first time in 1989 and returned 16 times in 17 years. Anchored by the Eilts brothers, Leo and Roger, the band's zany sense of humor showed through in a protest they staged in 1995—the year they were not hired. As one member put it,

Bob Redford was, for the most part, making all of hiring decisions personally back then. . . . [H]e said he wanted to 'give us a year off.' . . . Unfortunately, we didn't want a year off. . . . Greg Smyer, who basically ran Stage Three . . . had a plan: We'd do a secret show and just not tell Bob about it, thereby keeping our string of appearances unbroken. Over the next few days the word started to spread . . . Larry Krudwig, who ran the campground radio station, started to make cryptic comments like 'Nothing is happening on Stage Three at midnight Friday. So don't show up. And don't be late.' 'Don't tell Bob' buttons were designed and distributed. . . . After the last scheduled show on Friday, Stage Three went completely dark, but people kept showing up. In the darkness, the stage was reset by the crew while Roz Brown talked quietly to the audience. 'Why are you people here? Nothing is happening. There are no shows after midnight. There are some good seats down front.' . . . [T]he lights came up, the fog and bubble machines were cranked up, and we launched into one of our signature tunes, 'Dancing in the Moonlight.' And there was Bob, front row, center, with a shit-eating grin on his face. One of our best shows ever.¹³

Redford and the festival crew sometimes took part in the fun, especially when it concerned McCutcheon or Chapin. Before a set Chapin shared with Bowers and McCutcheon in 1989, Redford told the media to expect something big: "We've got a unique finish, which came from a

12. Dr. Demento, Liner notes, *20th Anniversary Collection: The Greatest Novelty Records of All Time*, 1991, Rhino Records, compact disc.

13. Leo Eilts, Facebook Group, "Walnut Valley Bluegrass Festival," comments posted March 7, 2018, accessed March 21, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=walnut%20valley%20bluegrass%20festival,>

letter Tom Chapin wrote last year after the festival. We'll get them to go up there and just really lay it on the crowd, a real production act." Redford staged a mock funeral for Chapin, in appreciation for the Chapin's request to "bury me at Stage 3," but also in retaliation for Chapin using the same line on a Canadian festival promoter.

The ability to take it and not just dish it out seemed important to the festival president. "I have yet to pull a joke on [McCutcheon] and not have him come right back," said Redford.¹⁴ When crackling onstage feedback struck McCutcheon as an opportunity to play some Jimi Hendrix, the festival t-shirt vendor responded with a shirt that said "Play Purple Haze" in giant letters. McCutcheon and Chapin filled their performances, separately and together, with inside jokes, friendly insults, and songs improvised on stage or hastily scribbled over breakfast the morning of a show. Often these instant songs were about the festival itself, such as the Beatles parody they sang in 1995, "Bobby Redford's Winfield Band."¹⁵

Workshops continued to be a staple of the festival and some continued to focus on the audience of players who wanted to know the nuances of technique and equipment choices firsthand from their musical heroes. Other workshops were designed for non-pickers, often providing opportunities to get involved. A series of Odd Instrument workshops introduced audiences to obscure string instruments such as the bowed psaltery and special percussion instruments including musical bones, Velcro tap shoes, and the limberjack, a wooden doll that "dances" on a bouncing board. One year, Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer taught a workshop on yodeling; Fink also had an instructional recording on the vocal technique, which Bette Midler had used to prepare for a film role. "Yodeling is an exercise for the uninhibited in public," said

14. Rife, *Wichita Eagle*, September 14 and 17, 1989, and October 12, 1990.

15. Susan Rife, "String Fever: Living With Banjo Bias Requires Thick Skins and Fleet Fingers, But Pickin' Pride Gets the Last Laugh in Winfield," *Wichita Eagle*, September 18, 1995.

the instructor, who passed out throat lozenges after the workshop.¹⁶ Workshops by sign language artist Linda Tilton were some of the most popular. For years after, audience members would sign along to songs they had been taught when they were on performed on stage.

Like the yodeling and sign workshops, the festival increasingly included activities that combined true artistry with a bit of novelty. Some of the most notable involved Beppe Gambetta, a flat-picker from Genova, Italy, who was on the bill for the first of 18 times in 1985, including eight straight years starting in 1995. Highlighting the music from his 1997 album of early 20th Century Italian music, “Serenata,” Gambetta played some shows in concert dress. In 1996, Gambetta wrote, “[R]eal Italian food is one of the two things that make it worthwhile to live a long time in this life. The other, of course, is guitar music.”¹⁷ Living out this theory, Gambetta held a cook-along workshop, in which dozens of people helped make his signature bruschetta, following the recipe in his new cookbook.

There was little artistry but plenty of novelty to the festival’s attempts to set a certified record for the world’s largest acoustic string band. Organizers invited all guitar players to gather on a hillside to attempt the record for Biggest Guitar Band on September 13, 1990. “If you didn’t get your guitar packed, please borrow one from someone else (with permission),” suggested an article in the festival program. That resulted in 566 guitars playing together. The following year, 572 guitars played, and when other acoustic instruments—including a musical saw—were added in, the total was 770. The effort did not qualify for the Guinness Book of World Records, which previously documented an 800-member band, but it did unite hundreds of pickers on the songs “I Saw the Light” and “Will the Circle Be Unbroken.”¹⁸

16. Susan Rife, “How to (Croak) Practice Your Yodel,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 16, 1989.

17. Beppe Gambetta, *Beppe Cooks! Recipes From the Homeland* (Houston, Texas: Herringbone Press, 1996), 5.

18. Walnut Valley Association, “What’s New at Walnut Valley?” *Walnut Valley Occasional*, September 13, 1990; Susan L. Rife, “576 Guitars Strum Together at Festival,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 20, 1991.

In this era, the WVA also experimented with ways to augment the music that was played on its stages. One experiment that turned into a festival fixture was the presence of Linda Tilton, appearing at selected sets to provide sign language interpretation. In addition to her command of American Sign Language, Tilton brought elements of dance, including clogging, to her performances. Her signature song was “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” which she signed over an instrumental, hammered dulcimer rendition of the song by McCutcheon. Tilton first performed at Winfield as a guest of McCutcheon in 1986; she became a WVF act in 1988 and has appeared every year since.

Another Walnut Valley Festival experiment in augmenting music filled the main stage with orchestral instruments. In 1994, the Winfield Regional Symphony played a Sunday afternoon concert featuring McCutcheon and Chapin. The orchestra, based at Southwestern College, included college students and amateur musicians from the area.

The show itself showed the perils of little rehearsal time. On ‘Cousins,’ Chapin started with the second verse instead of the first, and had to wave the orchestra to a stop. And on a medley of O’Carolan tunes, McCutcheon’s hammered dulcimer was severely out of tune from sitting out in the hot sun.

Nevertheless, symphony members, the featured audience members, and the audience all praised the experience.¹⁹ A similar symphony orchestra concert took place two years later.

“As Long as You All Want to Come to the Party, You Can Come”

Only a handful of annual events comparable to the Walnut Valley Festival have lasted as long. Some of them underwent significant structural changes in order to survive. The Kerrville Folk Festival in Texas in some ways is the closest parallel to the WVF. It began at the same time, specialized in one signature aspect of the music world, original acoustic singer-songwriters, and

19. Susan L. Rife, “Festival Finishes on High Note; Symphony Adds Flourish to Finale,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 19, 1994.

had an associated contest, the New Folk competition. Though each edition lasted longer and featured bigger names than the WVF, Kerrville was never financially stable through the 1970s and 1980s. It relied on benefit concerts to keep it afloat, including a series of “Folk Aid” concerts inspired by the Willie Nelson “Farm Aid” events. In 1990, Kerrville’s producer and majority owner, Rod Kennedy, entered Chapter 11 bankruptcy. The restructuring that resulted moved the organization toward a succession plan; Vaughn Hafner and other investors began the process of purchasing the operation in 1999 with Kennedy remaining as producer for three years. The transition brought additional challenges to light, shareholders demanded a broader ownership group, and Hafner was forced out. In 2008, a nonprofit organization that was formed to take over the organization completed the purchase, and Kerrville continued with Kennedy’s former staff member Dalis Allen as producer.²⁰

The Colorado Bluegrass Music Association was another contemporary of the WVF that weathered periods of uncertainty. Its first festival in 1972 was a co-production with Bill Monroe. After four years of diminishing audiences and a prickly relationship with Monroe’s business manager, the CBMA struck out on its own. Over the course of 11 years, its Rocky Mountain Bluegrass Festival established stability and a wildly popular host band, Hot Rize. It moved locations in 1988 and then was forced to move again in 1992.²¹

Meanwhile, the Telluride Bluegrass Festival in Colorado started in 1974 after a group of local bluegrass fans made the trip to Winfield for the second Walnut Valley festival in 1973. Initially primitive and amateur, Telluride was drawing 7,500 people by 1978. In the 1980s, it

20. Erinn R. Barefield, “The Kerrville Folk Festival: The Path to Kerr-Version,” master’s thesis, Texas State University—San Marcos, 88-95, 103.

21. Mike Dow, “The Rocky Mountain Bluegrass Festival and C.B.M.S.—The Monroe Festivals,” Planet Bluegrass website, accessed March 25, 2018, <https://www.bluegrass.com/rockygrass/archive/Article-CBMSMonroeFestivals.html>; Mike Dow and David Little, “40 Years of RockyGrass,” Planet Bluegrass website, accessed March 25, 2018, <https://www.bluegrass.com/rockygrass/archive/Article-RGFortyYears.html>.

added workshops, contests, a hands-on musicians' academy, and a tent for families and children. When the CBMA approached the Telluride organizers for assistance in 1992, the partnership established a new site for the Rocky Mountain Bluegrass Festival—and a \$7,000 loss. The Telluride organization, known as Planet Bluegrass, agreed to continue assisting, but not in a volunteer capacity. Planet Bluegrass acquired the Rocky Mountain Bluegrass Festival for \$10,000. It was rebranded as RockyGrass; as of 2018, Planet Bluegrass continues to operate both festivals along with the Rocky Mountain Folks Festival and a concert series.²²

As the Walnut Valley Association approached its own third decade, organizers, attendees, and the Winfield community began to consider if and how it could continue. Around the time of the 25th festival, the Redfords closed their insurance company, which made festival income critical to their livelihoods.

It got to the point where it was very hard. Like I say, the festival grew to where it was year-round work, and Bob's insurance business took a lot of time. . . . I started suggesting to Bob that maybe it was the time that we need to make a choice, and that was a little bit scary because the insurance company had been our bread and butter the years that we had lost we could go back and work harder in the insurance field. And so that was a big step to take because we were saying, 'OK, we're going to do this full-time but we are dependent on the income from the festival that's once a year.' . . . It was a big step to take. . . . One time somebody was trying to talk to us about investing our money and I said, 'Well, we already have two ventures, farming and the festival that are kind of [risky.] I said, 'I don't think I want to add a third one. I'm going to stay conservative.'²³

The City of Winfield declared September 22, 1991, as Bob and Kendra Redford Day in recognition of the twentieth Walnut Valley Festival. This signal of support may also have been a response to rumors that the festival could close or move. While celebrating the 20th anniversary, Bob Redford publicly acknowledged that he had contemplated ending the event that year. "We did not think there was much more we could do creatively, innovatively," he said.

22. Charlotte Bell, "Thirty Years of Bluegrass, Telluride-Style," Planet Bluegrass website, accessed March 25, 2018, <https://www.bluegrass.com/rockygrass/archive/Article-RGFortyYears.html>.

23. Kendra Redford (Walnut Valley Association co-owner and wife of Bob Redford), interview with the author, February 3, 2018.

In 1994, Kendra Redford took charge while her husband recovered from surgery. That difficult year led to the Redfords publicly saying they were looking for ways to become “true consultants rather than . . . directors.” Bob Redford told a reporter, “We are looking at a change in role as far as leadership or directorship of the festival. The festival will go on with somebody, but I’ve pretty much made a solid pledge to Kendra. . . . We have a lot of key people in place and may be able to sell it internally.”^{24 25}

Though they only shared the information with those close to them, the Redfords were coping with more than Bob’s health concerns. They were supporting their son, Brian, as he received treatment for bipolar depression. Given the complexity of behavioral health concerns, this meant searching for the right combination of interventions. “It was partly finding the right medication and . . . therapy for him,” Kendra remembered. This was difficult work and a distraction from the festival as well as an energy drain. A doctor told her once that Brian had a mild case. If so, she replied, she would not want to see a bad one.²⁶

By the festival’s silver anniversary year, Bob Redford was talking openly to the media about its likely departure. His musings about selling it in the past had been a staple bit of drama. By 1996, however, Redford appeared to be “wrestling with the decision. One minute he talks like it’s just a matter of to whom he will sell the festival; the next he’s enthusiastically showing his mother and two of his children property near the fairgrounds where more campsites could be

24. Susan Rife, “Festival Director Finds the Big Crowds Pleasing,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 23, 1991, accessed February 19, 2018, Newsbank database; Susan Rife, “Bluegrass Festival is About Family,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 15, 1991, accessed February 19, 2018, Newsbank database; Susan Rife, “Pickin’ Up the Pieces at Winfield,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 10, 1995, accessed February 19, 2018, Newsbank database.

25. Festival staff and crew chiefs in 1994 included Paulette and Alan Rush, Shirley Booe, Rex Flottman, Ed and Jeannine Foster, Sandy and Cecil Shore, Janie Brooks, Gordon Dippel, Phyllis Silvis, Sheryl Pilkington, Ron Deal, Rick Meyer, Terry and Kathi Burley, Mary Dennett, Gary Utt, Frances Baucom, Liz Frazier, Rae Lynn Baker, Jerry Jacobs, Nina Williams, Mike Ledy, Brian Redford, Russell Whorley, Don Hyle, Steve Hyle, Fred Hyle, David Hyle, and Steve and Jane Roberts. Walnut Valley Association, “Walnut Valley Staff Meeting,” August 3, 1994, in “Black Book,” 1994.

26. Kendra Redford interview, March 2018.

created—if not this year, then someday.” No local offers to purchase the festival had materialized at the time, however, and the serious offers Redford was considering would move the festival away from Winfield.²⁷

By 1996, the Redfords were on the path to selling. Brian Redford seemed to be improving, meaning he might have the capacity to provide leadership. Bob Redford had taken a peaceful trip with time to reflect and returned with a sincere commitment to making a change. “Bob went to Colorado that year . . . and came back and said he was swilling to sell. We were waiting until we got the festival through that year and we were going to try to go through with that.” Before the festival weekend concluded, however, the path changed. “As was quite frequent, Bob changed his mind,” she said. “That was quite common with Bob. . . . It was kind of hard to keep track as far as which direction we were going.”²⁸

Saturday night of the silver anniversary festival, festival staff honored the Redfords with souvenir jackets and led them onto the main stage to a huge ovation. According to a newspaper account, they conferred between themselves as the audience looked on. “When the applause stopped, [Bob Redford] walked up and said, ‘Should I tell them, Kendra?’ And she said, ‘Bob, you tell them.’ He said there would be a ’97 festival, and the crowd just lost it again.” According to the festival’s media release, the decision was made in that moment. The Redfords said they would embark on a slow handoff to their seasoned crew to ensure the festival continued.²⁹

A difficult loss after the festival in 1997 cemented the decision to delegate but also introduced an air of uncertainty. The Redfords’ son, Brian, had served as grounds crew chief and director of operations and was in the process of taking over as festival director when he died of

27. Stan Finger, “For the Last Pickin’ Time?” *Wichita Eagle*, September 12, 1996.

28. Kendra Redford, March 2018.

29. Bud Norman, “Walnut Valley Festival Sticking With Winfield,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 23, 1996.

suicide, a victim of his bipolar depression. “The Redfords kept the crucial responsibility of booking the entertainers for the festival . . . and working with the luthiers who’ve donated so many instruments to the festival’s contest winners over the years.” The rest of the responsibilities now rested on crew members.³⁰ At the same time, Redford left the possibility of a festival sale open. “We’ve had some offers we’re seriously considering. We don’t feel the pressure to sell immediately, but we are definitely working towards it.”³¹

In response to Brian Redford’s death, the Redford family received a tangible sign of support. Tilton took on the task of producing a recording, “Coming Home: A Winfield Celebration,” gathering recordings from 17 favorite entertainers to provide an education fund for Brian’s children, Kevin and Kayla. The liner notes said “Thank you to the Redford family: Bob, Kendra, Keira, Krystal, and Bart for all your hard work to make the festival happen all these years, and giving us a second home. You have touched the world.”³²

After Brian Redford’s death, Bob Redford began seeing a therapist and received a similar diagnosis—bipolar depression. Depression is hereditary. A low point came in 1998, and Bob Redford was hospitalized. This crisis point provided the helpful but difficult insight that Redford’s illness was activated in response to significant losses, though it is impossible to predict all of the ways that depression manifests. With the understanding that came with a diagnosis, the Redfords thought that continuing to operate the festival would give Bob a focal point and a reason to work on his mental health, all the while leaning heavily on coordinators and

30. Festival workers named by Redford in 1998 included Rex Flottman, Rick Meyer, Paulette Rush, Marilyn Alberding, Ron Deal, Tim Sidebottom, Janie Brooks, Frances Baucom, Mary Dennett, Barbara Shively, Lou Ann Schmidt, Martha Cole, Russell Whorley, Don Hyle, Fred Hyle, Steve Hyle, and David Hyle.

31. Susan Rife, “Festival Future? Yes, There Is One,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 13, 1998.

32. Linda Tilton, Liner notes, *Coming Home: A Winfield Celebration*, 1998, ILY Records, compact disc.

key staff. In Kendra's assessment, the approach helped. "We kind of tried for the next 14 years while Bob was seeing a therapist. . . . He did all right."³³

In 2004 in Cincinnati, Ohio, Bob had another major episode, probably in connection with the deaths of Kendra's mother and the Redfords' daughter, Keira. Bob was hospitalized, and his medical team adjusted his medication. Some of the people who were close to the family knew about Bob's diagnosis starting in 1998, but in response to the episode in 2004, Kendra confided in all the WVA staff. "Even though there has been a lot of progress in mental health, there is a lot of stigma there," said Kendra. Deciding what to say about his health, and to whom, and when, was complicated. They tried to balance "what the festival needed and what Bob needed. . . . It's been kind of a difficult balancing act, yes."³⁴

"It's More a State of Mind Than Just a Bluegrass Festival."

Meanwhile, the Walnut Valley Festival achieved official international recognition. The International Bluegrass Music Association nominated WVF for "Bluegrass Event of the Year," along with the California Bluegrass Society's Grass Valley Bluegrass Festival and a festival started by the father of bluegrass himself, the Bill Monroe Memorial Bluegrass Festival, sometimes known as "Bean Blossom" for its location in Bean Blossom, Indiana. Bob Redford traveled to the IBMA convention to give a presentation about marketing bluegrass festivals and attend the awards ceremony; to his surprise, the envelope revealed that WVF was the winner. Though the Winfield festival rarely presented the top echelon of touring bluegrass acts, it was recognized for its commitment to booking up-and-coming players. Not surprisingly, the IBMA selection committee also was influenced by the festival's organization and by the sense of

33. Kendra Redford, March 2018.

34. Ibid.

community and level of musicianship among its campground and parking lot pickers. “It’s more a state of mind than just a bluegrass festival,” said an IBMA spokesperson.³⁵

This celebration was tempered with Redford’s ongoing health issues and the loss of one of the festival founders. Though his association with the Walnut Valley Festival was only one of Stuart Mossman’s adventures, the “dreamer, guitar maker, dreamer, and entrepreneur” was remembered as one of the small handful of people who got it rolling.³⁶ In 2010, recognizing Mossman as a pivotal figure in the evolution of guitar building, director Barry Brown released the documentary *Stuart Mossman: A Modern Stradivari*, which depicted Mossman’s long relationship with the Carradine brothers, David, Keith, and Bobby.

The community of Winfield continued to demonstrate how closely its identity was tied to the Walnut Valley festival. The Winfield Main Street organization received grant funds from the Kansas Arts Commission for a series of limestone statues. Local artist Dave Chapman created four figures, each playing an instrument: guitar, mandolin, bass, and autoharp.³⁷ Placed at the north entrance to Winfield, the statues were dedicated September 17, 2002. Five years later, CornerBank of Winfield honored Redford with its CornerStone Citizen Award, a recognition of community service selected by a committee of residents. The award presentation was timed so that people arriving from out of town on “Land Rush” day—the day the campground officially opened for the week leading up to the festival—could attend.³⁸ In 2012, he was honored by *Ingram’s* magazine as one of the “50 Kansans You Should Know.” Redford’s legacy as an

35. Bud Norman, “Walnut Valley Festival Honored,” *Wichita Eagle*, October 23, 1999, accessed February 18, 2018, Newsbank database.

36. Diane Samms Rush, “Guitar Builder Dies at 56,” *Wichita Eagle*, March 3, 1999.

37. The autoharp player was a nod to Winfield native Karen Mueller, who won the International Autoharp Contest in 1986.

38. “In Dedication to Winfield’s Musical Heritage,” *WVA Voice*, 2002; Becky Conway, “Walnut Valley Association Coordinators Meeting,” May 23, 2007, in “Black Book,” 2007.

entrepreneur was recognized in 2012 by Southwestern College with its Business Builder Award.³⁹

These moments of recognition honored the Redfords for their long-term vision and tenacity, and they had an air of marking a transition. Indeed, the owners continued to praise, empower, and depend on their crew chiefs and key staff members.⁴⁰ The transition was neither complete nor always smooth, however. One staff member described frustration with the arrangement in an evaluation document:

I realize this is your festival, but you are only human. You cannot do everything. You are great dealing with the entertainers and people like that. You are great at talking to the customers (campers) and doing the PR work. Several years ago, you and Kendra established the coordinators to run the logistics of the festival and let you enjoy the fruits of your labors and let you enjoy the festival. I feel that the coordinators have worked for you for many years and have a plan that will make the festival continue for years to come. But, Bob, for that to happen, I feel that you need to TRUST the coordinators enough to do their jobs.⁴¹

The Redfords addressed ways to reduce dependence and pressure on Bob Redford during a meeting of crew coordinators in 2007. He stated that in the event he was not available because of a health problem, “Kendra will be his representative, and she will speak for him.” Kendra discussed the history of the coordinators’ positions and the need to adapt them with changing times and needs. “Sometimes it is healthier to ‘get back to basics’ to keep productivity and energy up,” she said.⁴²

39. “Bob L. Redford—1936-2016,” Obituary, Miles Funeral Service, accessed March 4, 2018, <http://www.milesfuneralservice.com/obituary/4042580>.

40. Festival staff and crew chiefs in 2002 included ticket trailer, Janie Brooks, Gary Utt, Mary Dennett, Sandy Shore, Phyllis Silvis, Rae Ann Dennett, Beverly Jenkins; re-entry, Pat Rochat, Martha Cole, Rae Lynn Baker, Sarah Emrick, Ronda Moore, Elaine Rankin, Lee Kelly; information booth, Nina Williams; crafts, Alan and Paulette Rush, John Hadsall; contests, Ed and Jeannine Foster, Karen Deal; auditing, Dean Bradbury; hospitality, Jane Laughlin; site office, Helen Holdeman; transportation, Rex Flottman; grounds, Rock Meyer, Jerry O’Neil, Larry Hittle, Jerry Jacob, Terry Burley; stage and grounds, Ron Deal, Tim Sidebottom; accounting, Mary Hittle; downtown office, Bob Redford, Marilyn Alberding, Paulette Rush, Lisa Fouch, Carolyn Voss; security, Russell Whorley, David Hyle, Don Hyle, Fred Hyle, Steve Hyle, Steve Roberts, Gordon Dippel. WVA, “Walnut Valley Staff & Key Personnel,” in “Black Book,” 2002.

41. WVA, “2002 Walnut Valley Festival Report,” “Black Book,” 2002.

42. Conway, “Walnut Valley Association Coordinators Meeting,” in “Black Book,” 2007. Coordinators who participated in this meeting included Janie Brooks, Ron Deal, Rex Flottman, Mary Hittle, Rick Meyer, Paulette Rush, Alan Rush, Tim Sidebottom, Robyn Voss, Russell Whorley.

Having an experienced and nimble crew proved critical in 2008. Many previous years had been rainy or muddy, and in 1973 the festival had narrowly missed being flooded out. Other years, festival workers pitched in with City of Winfield personnel to clean up and rebuild after weather emergencies during other parts of the year. In 2008, after most of the year's set up work had been completed, the Walnut River rose over the campground. The stage shows and crafts went on more or less as usual, but a community of thousands of campers was displaced. "We've never been flooded out completely. We've had the buildings to use, but we had to relocate people to the city lake campgrounds." As Bob Hamrick wrote, "A fleet of tractors showed up with log chains, pulling everything from VW buses to castle-sized RVs out of the rising tide." Most campground traditions continued, and some new ones were launched, but the year was hard on festival revenue. A similar situation occurred eight years later. While experience and communication technology made the second flood experience smoother, it still required crews to effectively set up and tear down for the event twice. Again, it affected revenues. "In 2016, we really had what we call a 'Flood Year,'" Kendra Redford said. "It used to take about a couple years to come back from what we call a 'Lost Year,' and that was true in 2008. In 2016, I guess we got big enough . . . [that] it takes about three years—the year of the flood and then last year and this year we are still carrying a loss."⁴³

If technology was a help during the 2016 flood, it has been a mixed blessing for the WVA in the second half of the festival's existence. The proliferation of the World Wide Web and email listservs in the 1990s and early 2000s made it easier to compile and share information from the staff to the rest of the world, and it helped campground communities cement their identities and plan for their festival experiences. Carp Camp, a gathering spot for high-level musicians, used

43. Kendra Redford interview, 2018; Hamrick, *September's Song*, 64-67.

the website of some its members to distribute annual homework, the tunes that those who wished to join in would be expected to know. A Yahoo-based listserv created its own meetups, events, and t-shirts. Don Shorock, an obsessive music enthusiast from Great Bend, Kansas, created elaborate online documentation of the festival. The speed of communication, however, also meant that rumors, complaints, and misunderstandings were shared widely among WVF fans, sometimes to the consternation of staff. For example, a user of the Mudcat site for fans of traditional music commented critically on the perpetual rumors of the festival's sale:

The ol' guy Redford has complained about how much hassle it is . . . The 'Association' should be well able to run a festival by now, even (especially?) without him (unless Rick [Meyer] quits working for the County); but there are some marketable names and trademarks and such that Redford could probably threaten them with—or demand outrageous license fees for—if they tried. The main problem with the Association, or anyone else local, taking over for Redford is the definite and obvious absence of anyone capable of making a decision and sticking to it.⁴⁴

Festival staff always arranged stages with an eye to the way photographs would look.⁴⁵ As technology changed and nearly every festivalgoer had a phone with a camera, this awareness grew more acute. Video recording was more problematic. While staff made little effort over the years to control audio recording of concerts, video recording was prohibited, and stage crews were expected to monitor the audience for evidence of video recording. This grew harder as technology improved.⁴⁶ Starting around 2016, the WVA barred drones from the festival out of concern for crowd safety should a drone fall into a crowd or strike a power line or stage rigging.

In general, the festival was a more complex organization in its fourth decade. According to Kendra Redford, the complexity, matched with a strong commitment to audience safety, made it

44. JohninKansas, "Re: Winfield (35th Annual) 2006 WVA Festival," mudcat.org discussion group, posted August 14, 2006, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=93600>.

45. Over the years, the WVA had relationships with a number of fine photographers. In the early days Maurine Hogue and Billie Wells were responsible for some of the festival's defining images. Later, Rex Flottman and Gary Hanna anchored the in-house documentation crew, which also included Ron Shufflebarger, Debbie McNinch, Millie Winchester, Kevin Dean, Bob Pangle, Dan Cribbs, Sheridon Flottman, Sierra Flottman, Jeromie Stephens, and Bill Stephens.

46. Rex Flottman in "Black Book," 2008.

hard to change on the fly. “Anymore, you run into so many things that you can’t do. It’s gotten more complicated because we’ve gotten bigger as well— and that’s a good thing. . . . We start to do something, and it was easier or simpler in the early years, and now it’s a little more difficult. It takes more time, I guess I should say.”⁴⁷

With the 50th anniversary of the festival in sight, new efforts to document the Walnut Valley Festival began. The Cowley County Historical Museum established an exhibit about the festival. Assisted by art director Bryan Masters, writer Bob Hamrick produced *September’s Song*, a coffee table book that collected various elements of the Winfield experience through stories, quotes, and innumerable photographs. In his introduction, Hamrick recalled the story of the blind men describing the elephant as a way of acknowledging the diversity of experience within the Walnut Valley Festival: “Winfield is like that. Only instead of a handful of dedicated describers, this story has some 15,000 of them.” Naturally, Hamrick and Masters were themselves musicians.⁴⁸ When a neighboring store closed, the WVA office on Winfield’s Main Street took over the space and began the process of making it a retail space and place to display festival artifacts.

For the first time, though, the WVF was proceeding without guidance from one of the three festival founders. Bob Redford died December 17, 2016. News of his passing was shared in bluegrass publications and websites, on Wichita television news, and on KFDI radio, among other media. At the festival in 2017, stage crews enlarged a poignant cartoon expressing appreciation for Redford and set it by the main stage. Richard Crowson, a banjo player and contributor to the *Wichita Eagle* and KMUW radio, created the drawing.

47. Kendra Redford interview, 2018.

48. Hamrick, *September’s Song*, 3.

Commitment to the Walnut Valley experience appeared strong, at least among the current festival fans, even after Redford's passing. The certainty of the festival each year, with its traditions and reassuring sameness, provides solace in an uncertain age. As Bill Graham, a writer for the *Kansas City Star* and the website Mandolin Café put it, "Loyal festival goers swear that they'll show up at the Cowley County Fairgrounds in Winfield on the third weekend in September whether there's an organized festival or not. . . . The campground mantra is '40 more years.'"⁴⁹

49. Bill Graham, "Bean Blossom and Winfield: Pitching Tents on the Old Campground," Mandolin Café website, December 20, 2011, accessed March 4, 2018, https://www.mandolincafe.com/news/publish/printer_1429.shtml.

CONCLUSION

“WINFIELD—THE WAY LIFE SHOULD BE ALL THE TIME”

With each decade, American popular music grew further away from the confluence of sounds and trends that resulted in the *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* project and the prevalence of bluegrass sounds in radio hits. The 1980s ushered in a glammy take on heavy metal and from then on the audience for guitar-driven rock music grew older. From the 1990s on, teen pop and hip hop took over the Top 40 charts and radio stations. The music was highly produced, relying on samples and constructed beats. It was not music meant to call a simpler past to mind.

Meanwhile, country music overcame any previous perceptions that it belonged to one region. As it had been in the 1970s, country was the music of choice for those who sought certainty. Country music reflected the continuing trend of the 1970s—a culture that simultaneously grew more conservative and more permissive. In some ways, country music remained the music of nostalgia—although country songs namechecked Johnny Cash as a stand-in for the past instead of continuing Cash’s practice of singing Carter Family songs.

To be sure, rootsier elements emerged from time to time. In 2009 and 2010, artists such as Mumford and Sons, Avett Brothers, and the Lumineers brought acoustic instruments into a contemporary pop setting. Still, these bearded, banjo-playing band members were bucking a trend. The kind of music consumers who were trying to find sounds that they perceived as authentic were most likely to use the Internet to dig into increasingly specialized subgenres rather than wait for a radio hit or guidance from a rock critic.

In the 1970s, Baby Boomers and their parents attended a folk and bluegrass festival in Winfield, Kansas, together. The intergenerational setting allowed for a mix of preserving the past—the hillbilly and bluegrass music of the late 1940s and 1950s—and celebrating something new—the virtuosity of bluegrass musicians. In the years leading up to 2020, Baby Boomers and their grandchildren attended the same festival together. The intergenerational setting allowed for a mix of preserving the past—the festival culture of the 1970s—and celebrating something new—the high-energy slamgrass performed on upstart stages in the campground. The nostalgic urge remained. The era it recalled had shifted.

After two folk festivals associated with Southwestern College provided some proof of concept, three men—and their spouses, employees, civic club associates and friends—launched the event that became known officially as the Walnut Valley Festival in 1972. (As is frequently mentioned in profiles of the festival, the official name is not regularly used in conversation. Winfield locals are more likely to call it “Bluegrass” or simply “The Festival.” Out-of-town visitors refer to it as “Winfield.”) In the years that followed, the Walnut Valley Association (WVA) hosted 46 editions of the Walnut Valley Festival (WVF) at the Winfield Fairgrounds in Winfield, Kansas. Although initially set for the last weekend in September, for most of its history it took place the third weekend of September. What started as a three-day festival with camping became a five-day event plus a week of camping beforehand—not to mention a month or more of pre-festival camping by the diehards even before that. Attendance is typically in the neighborhood of 12,000, about the population of Winfield itself. More than 1,400 people work on some aspect of the festival operation each year¹, not counting the service clubs and sororities

1. Gerald Wiens, “Home at Winfield,” *Kansas!* 52 no 3 (1996), 14.

who operate food booths on site. The year-round office of the WVA is a storefront on Winfield's Main Street.

It is a cliché, but it in this case a true one, that the festival's longevity is a credit to the hundreds of people who have worked on it, some for decades. Kendra Redford remembered that the WVA "used a lot people from community organizations that Bob and I had worked with. Bob and I had belonged to a lot of organizations; he was a member of Jaycees, and we had drawn people from our church, in fact our church had a concession stand the first year or so. We drew from a lot of people that we knew from organizations, [such as] Paulette and Alan Rush. Paulette was our secretary for 35 years . . . A lot of those people are still with us that have worked from the early years."² "The strength of the festival, as so many patrons and entertainers who have come to Winfield over the years have noted, is the exceptional WVA staff and crew."³

The personnel have helped make WVF a unique institution with its own character, culture, and traditions. Trent Wagler graduated from high school in Kansas and now performs at festivals, including WVF, with his band, The Steel Wheels.⁴ He also helps run the band's own festival, Red Wing Roots, in Virginia. Wagler said fondly that the WVF "feels like a festival created by people who had never been to one. One of the refreshing things about Winfield is that it's very successful at just doing what it does and being who it is."⁵

The WVF clearly emerged and grew within the context of the festival tradition of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1972, an increasingly skeptical and conservative America sought popular culture

2. Kendra Redford (Walnut Valley Association co-owner and wife of Bob Redford), interview with the author, February 3, 2018.

3. Walnut Valley Association, "Redford Family to Continue to Manage Walnut Valley Festival," Walnut Valley Festival website, posted March 28, 2018, accessed March 30, 2018, <https://wvfest.com/news/redford-family-continue-manage-walnut-valley-festival-bart-redford-appointed-walnut-valley>.

4. "Roots Musician Returns to Some Family Roots in South Central Kansas," Bethel College website, posted September 24, 2007, accessed April 2, 2018, <https://www.bethelks.edu/news-events/news/post/3827/>.

5. Bob Hamrick and Shannon Littlejohn, ed., *September's Song: 45 Years of Winfield's Walnut Valley Festival* (Wichita, Kansas: SqueezePlay Productions, 2016), interior back cover.

that reclaimed identities that seemed to be lost. This popular culture was then married with what was commercially appealing. One result was the rise of bluegrass, particularly bluegrass consumed in a festival setting. Those settings were interactive in a way that encouraged personal fulfillment through supportive communities and a consumer culture that undergirded self-reliance. The experience of loss sent some people looking for certainty. In addition to finding solace in family or religion, the Winfield faithful found it in the consistency of the WVF each September. Within that space, they navigated the seeming dichotomy of a conservative expectation of family friendliness that coexisted with activities associated with the counterculture.

Some festivals that sprang up, including the Southwestern Folk Festival that predated WVF, were most concerned with preserving and sharing traditional folkways. The Kansas Historical Society's Kansas Folklife Festival typified this type of festival. Others were more focused on the remunerative potential for events and the buying power of the families they attracted; Silver Dollar City in Branson, Missouri, created a cottage industry and helped to anchor an entire town devoted to country and folk music tourism. Some festivals focused on a particular subgenre, such as the Bluegrass America Festival, which was associated with the Society for the Preservation of Bluegrass Music in America.

Most of the festivals birthed in this time period, however, navigated the same tensions as the Walnut Valley Festival. They tried to make a place for authentic and traditional elements, even though those were vague and contested ideas; the Newport Folk Festival and University of Chicago festival even included discussions and symposiums on the topics. At the same time, the festivals created space for contemporary expressions of folk music and folklife. Festival programming was an act of continual compromise.

In fact, the ability to compromise—and, when necessary, choose—among competing values was critical to the survival of the Walnut Valley Festival. Sometimes it was easy. Conservative families seeking out activities that reflected the new nostalgia were interested in traditional crafts, primitive technologies, and pioneer ways. So were left-leaning, back-to-the-land young people. Perhaps the Waltons set was more likely to wear boots and the Foxfire set was more likely to wear sandals or moccasins, but they both had reasons to attend soap-making demonstrations and shop for build-your-own dulcimer kits.

Other tensions required more finesse from the WVA. There was a widely held view that a music festival was either geared to musicians or geared toward entertainment. The WVF was a musician's festival. It was built around the National Flat-Picking Championship which was soon joined by a number of national and, eventually, international instrument contests. The festival populated its stages with musicians who pushed the boundaries of their instruments and styles, combining the artists in once-in-a-lifetime jam sessions. The festival schedule included workshops, inviting participants to pay attention to and emulate the finer points of instrumental technique. Perhaps most importantly, the WVF from the beginning emphasized the legitimacy of the amateur music in its campgrounds, which meant that everyone was part of the show.

The one time that balance tipped to the entertainment side, rather than the musician side, of the equation was the Spring Thing in 1976. The crowd for that event was rowdier, and spent less money, than the typical WVF attendees. Still, not everyone who came through the gate over the course of four decades was a picker. The WVA staff and participants together created an atmosphere that welcomed people who did not bring instruments. More than a hundred vendors created a visual distraction. Almost every day of the festival included an event, whether official or loosely organized, to participate in or gawk at. Golf cart drive-in movies, ukulele parades, and

line-ups for limited release souvenir pottery passed the hours. The town of Winfield also provided entertainment in the form of downtown music crawls, tours of factories and museums, innumerable yard sales, and access to services such as hot showers and wi-fi. Massages were available on the grounds, and to festival veterans such as Kelly Werts, even breakfast could become entertainment. “We love . . . getting up and going to the 4-H food booth and having breakfast. It’s usually a cool morning, and when you get that hot coffee and eggs, there’s nothing quite like the experience.”⁶

A key to the festival’s longevity was its ability to skillfully remain family friendly and also fun for people who refused to act with decorum. The commitment to family friendliness was real. It was a commitment on the part of organizers to their local community, particularly the community members who were uneasy because they remembered bikers on Main Street or saw muddy hippies on television. It was a commitment designed to ward off regulation. And it was a commitment that represented the deeply held values of Bob Redford, the festival’s owner and driving force. The WVA’s commitment to a safe, family atmosphere was evidenced in its advertising, its security procedures, and in the peer pressure created by longtime participants. People who attended saw a fundamental link between security and the family atmosphere: “The attendance of all age levels is heartwarming and assures the continuance of bluegrass and indicates the quality of your festival. Your attempts at security have allowed this to happen. Thanks!”⁷

At the same time, the WVA adopted a live-and-let-live attitude that gave participants freedom to let loose and participate in the counter culture. Within the midway and stage areas, long hair, progressive politics, and (after the early years) dancing were allowed. More flagrant

6. Bud Norman, “Greetings From Guitar Town,” *Wichita Eagle*, September 15, 1996.

7. Bootsie Lauridsen, survey response, in Walnut Valley Association, “Black Book,” 1989.

rule breaking and norm challenging in the form of alcohol and nudity were tolerated as long as they took place in individual campsites. Furthermore, a permeable culture was established. In the tradition of country and blues music, the same camper who participated in a tipsy, profane jam circle on Saturday night might well join in a gospel sing on Sunday morning.

The Walnut Valley Festival was always multigenerational, and co-founder Stuart Mossman told the community from the beginning that such events attracted people older than 50. Still, this permeable culture—indulgent at night and family-friendly during the day—seemed indicative of the recreational preferences of the baby boomers who helped populate the festivals that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. It remains to be seen if succeeding generations require the same mix and will still ask for the family friendliness to remain sequestered from the activities that are more counter cultural.

Unlike its contemporaries such as the Newport Folk Festival, the Kerrville Folk Festival, and RockyGrass, the Walnut Valley Festival survived its first 46 years without a significant break, bankruptcy, reorganization, or acquisition. In large part, this was due to Bob Redford's style of keeping a hand in everything and maintaining control. That approach came from Redford's acumen and was made possible in the early years through the patience of his banker. It also likely foreshadowed the symptoms of Redford's mental illness, which was most activated when he faced grief and caused him to hold tighter to the things he loved; even if Redford saw strategic value or profit in selling a controlling interest in the WVA, he could not bring himself to do so. Redford's death in 2016 raised a question: is the Walnut Valley Festival timebound to one generation? Or to one set of individuals?

The WVA and the Redford family are testing that question. A handoff that had been haltingly attempted in past years began in earnest in early 2018. Festival owner Kendra Redford

announced that her son, Bart, would assume the role of executive director and take responsibility for organizing the festival. “I feel very lucky to be able to come home to WVA, and to work in an organization that for me feels more like a family than a business. That’s understandable, given that every member of my family has worked at WVA at some point,” said Bart Redford.⁸

Whether, and in what form, the Walnut Valley Festival continues remains to be seen. In its first 46 years, though, the Winfield experience deeply affected people who attended, as shown in these survey comments:

“I attend WVF because it is ingrained in my brain.

“It’s like we never left once we’re here.

“Winfield spirit is kept alive by everyone.

“Don’t stop! It’s part of my life!

“Winfield—the way life should be all the time!”⁹

8. WVA, “Redford Family to Continue to Manage Walnut Valley Festival,” March 28, 2018.

9. WVA, survey results, “Black Book,” 2002.

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