

Barnestorming: Getting down at the Gardner dump

It is like going back to through a time portal. The other day, I found my Mount Wachusett Community College identification card from the 1974-75 school year.

The next day, I heard from Phil Leger.

Phil isn't some ghost from out of the 1970s. He is relevant in 2012 as health agent in Templeton, but what he contacted me about was something straight from the past.

Back in the early 70s, Phil was, er, how to put this delicately, part of the counterculture. He was one of the people in Gardner who hung out at the wall.

The wall in Gardner was a wall and public restroom building located across from what is now the Gardner Ale House. All the counterculture people spent time on the wall, but also were involved in trying to bring bands to Gardner.

Phil was one of the architects of "Down in the Dumps," a surprisingly successful concert held at the Gardner dump. Phil and I have talked about the concert many times, but this time he was excited because he had just learned that a DVD of a film of the concert's main attraction is available through Amazon.com.

The main attraction at the concert was Mississippi Delta bluesman John Lee Hooker. Gardner has seen several big acts over the years, including the Stone Temple Pilots, the Fools, Tiny Tim and various famous folk musicians, but John Lee Hooker may have been one of the most significant to play in the city.

How he came to play at a dump in a concert organized by a bunch of people who had more experience battling police and City Hall over social changes taking place around the country at the time is a great story.

The DVD is titled "John Lee Hooker: Cook with the Hook."

The story is the same group had organized a concert and held it the year before with some pretty well known local acts.

It was a success and they decided to approach the city's young mayor, the youngest mayor in the state's history, Steve Erickson.

Phil says Mr. Erickson was not thrilled with a big rock concert happening in the city on his watch, but he did offer them one location.

"He said you can hold it at the dump," Phil said.

That should have been the end of it but Phil said they checked out the location, saw it was flat, there was power, had fencing for security purposes and even had easy access to trash disposal. They went to the mayor and said, "Great."

The mayor countered with requiring \$1 million in insurance; they got it. At that point he gave in and said, "Fine."

The organizers had access to major local promoters and one heard that John Lee Hooker was playing at the Speakeasy in Cambridge. When offered, he jumped at the chance to do another gig during the day.

The concert held and John Lee Hooker's set was filmed by a local filmmaker involved with a newly formed local access station. The footage is rough but it is probably the only film of John Lee Hooker or any other major musician playing at a dump. A sidelight was that the port-o-potties used at the concert were used earlier in the weekend for a Richard Nixon event at an Air Force Base.

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