

# Corn Roast Memories

(1956 – 2006)

By Arnold Appel

Ralph (Ripper) Lyon had a dream – A Corn Roast in the summer, where barbershoppers could come and eat fresh corn on the cob, drink a beer or soft drinks and sing with others without having to worry about anything else. Therefore it had to be STAG.

The first Corn Roast was sort of a payoff to one of the guys in the chapter. As I remember, they were having trouble getting someone to take the Presidents position in the chapter, and Ripper told this one fellow, “You take the Presidency and I'll put on a Corn Roast for you to make a hit for your year as President.” (Ripper had attended a roast in Lancaster the summer before and watched how they did it: he knew he had a winner.) This had to be in the mid 50's. If someone knows the date, I would appreciate getting it. We think 1956. The first one, according to Hal Reid was in a park off of Fairgrounds Road east of Hilltop Road, and probably not more than 20 guys were there to enjoy the corn that Ripper boiled for 4 minutes in a rolling boil in his kettle which we still use today.

Several years later, Ripper worked with a fellow, Bob Downey, who had a piece of land off of Cemetery Road off of Rt.380 out of Xenia to the south. There was a long lane, with a 90 degree turn in it, that led back to a grove of trees. Ripper took his mower out there and mowed a space for the Corn Roast. He put together a shelter made out of aluminum pipes with a tarp that was stretched over the frame so there would be shelter from the sun or rain. He and Bud Palmer had that thing engineered and could put it together, lights included, in about an hour. But there was a need for a privy: so Ripper appealed to the chorus one night for 2x4's so he could build a privy. I think it was the first meeting that I had attended after leaving the Dayton Chapter, as Xenia would be closer to Sabina. I told Mr. Lyon I would donate 2x4's: how many did he need. He said at least ten but would prefer twelve. at least eight feet long. I had that many 2x4's in a shed from an oak tree I had cut down and had

sawed up: so I took Ripper the 2x4's. He was living on Stedman Lane at that time. The following week he made the announcement to never ask for 2x4's without looking at them first. These oak 2x4's are so tough, you have to drill a hole first and then dip the nails in Vaseline before you can hammer them in to the wood. Incidentally that Privy Ripper built is still being used today. More about it later.

The spot on Cemetery Road was used for the Corn Roast for many years. The lane needed grading, but we had nothing to grade the lane with. Ripper told me he had a big piece of I-beam he could get out to the woods, but nothing to pull it. Asked if my dump truck could pull it, I said, “Let's try this Saturday”. Ripper attached a chain to that I-beam and hooked it to the back of my dump truck. We made about four passes at that lane, pulling that I-beam, and ended up with a pretty well-graded lane.

Norbert Schlect had been a member of the chapter before moving to Kentucky, but chartered a bus to bring guys from Kentucky to the Corn Roast. That bus had to back up three times to get around that 90 degree turn in that lane, but they made it. Hal Reid also brought his camper trailer to the Corn Roast and he too had trouble with that 90 degree turn with his camper trailer.

The Privy had runners on it that stuck out about two feet in front and back: Ripper had dug a hole to locate the privy over, and he wanted to be sure it didn't fall into the pit he had dug. One year the grass got ahead of Ripper, and he asked me to bring my tractor and mower over to mow the area. I borrowed a trailer and put the tractor and mower on it and pulled it over there with the Jeep pick-up. Son Mike was with me, and I mowed the spot,. There were also several guys from the chapter with sickles and shears, and push mowers trimming around the trees. I can't remember Mr. Graham's first name, but he happened to be in the privy when I ran past it with the tractor, and somehow hooked that one front

runner on the mower and turned that privy 90 degrees, I kept on mowing, but Mr. Graham came out with a dazed look on his face and said "What happened???" On the way home, one of the tires on the trailer went flat. We took the tractor and mower off, and Mike had to drive the tractor home and I pulled the trailer very slowly in back of him. We got the tire fixed and returned it to the neighbor, but never told him we pulled it for several miles with the one tire flat.

Dave Bell used to bring his Stearns Knight Antique car to the Corn Roast . It was his pride and joy, a beautiful car. Dave was also into motion picture photography. One year the lighting of the Corn Roast fire was the main attraction. Dave took movies of someone leaving Xenia with a lighted torch. I think he was on a horse. Then the torch was handed off to a runner who ran for a mile with the torch; then another runner took the torch; and of course each of these runners was dressed appropriately to carry the torch. Down 380 the torch bearer came, another took it at Cemetery Road (It is called Graveyard Road if you enter it from the South) and then there were shots of the runner on the lane. Ron Thornberg took the torch at the 90 degree turn in the lane and proceeded to the grove where the cast iron kettle with water ready to start cooking the corn was in view. Ron was heading toward it when he tripped and fell and the lighted torch went into the water in the kettle. Another great Xenia Corn Roast took place after the fire was finally started and fresh water was put in the kettle.

Ripper also salvaged a water heater from who knows where, and on the back of a small shed in the grove put up a shower head and hooked up the water. It worked: several fellows took showers there. It was the blue print for the present shower in the woods today.

It was difficult to get enough help to put on a Corn Roast with the small Xenia Chapter, but Hal Reid offered his two sons-in-law to take care of the beer. And they *did*. Jim McNamara and Don Emerick were pretty well plastered by the end of the night. Louie Poole and Roy Brandenburg were big helpers to Ripper and Bud in getting the place set up for the Corn

Roast . Bud Palmer, baritone of the Bell Ringers Quartet with Weldon Holycross on lead, Pinky Jarvis on tenor and Chuck Thomas on bass. All worked at NCR. This was a quartet that helped out at the Corn Roasts in every way possible. Bud somehow, through NCR, came up with the stainless steel basket that would hold twelve ears of corn to be boiled for four minutes in the rolling water. We still use the same basket today, although Charlie Mikesell has replaced the handle.

There was one very sad incident connected with the Corn Roast . Hal Reid always said he was trying to direct a bunch of farmers, but our blue ribbon Farmer was Reed Cooper. He always raised the corn for the Corn Roast. . What a chore that was. Several of the guys would go out to his farm and get the corn for the Corn Roast . One year (Hal Reed says it was 1976, Hal's last year in Xenia) they found Reed Cooper had died of a heart attack while gathering corn for the Corn Roast. He was sitting peacefully in his truck but missed the Corn Roast. This was the first time we had had a member pass away. The chorus met at the funeral home in Jamestown for visiting hours for Reed Cooper. We didn't know a funeral song or a hymn, so the pitch was blown, the chorus hummed a B flat chord, and I read the 23rd Psalm. Our tribute to our fallen Chorus Member..

I tried several for years to raise the corn for the Corn Roast , but always missed the date. The corn was either too hard or not filled out. We finally decided to go to Fulton's near Troy where they raise corn commercially. They plant several acres each week and always have great corn . It took us a while to catch on, but the corn has been fantastic since we have been getting it from Fulton's.

Ripper's friend, Bob Downey, who owned the grove of trees back the long lane off of Cemetery Road, decided to build a small house in the grove: a small 900 sq ft building. However, the Zoning Board in Greene County said it had to be at least 1200 sq ft, and in a huff Mr. Downey told them he'd let it grow up into a wildlife sanctuary, thus bringing to an end the use of that location for the Corn Roast . A search team was put together to find a place for the Corn Roast . Carl Kurtz offered

a spot on his farm close to Xenia and near his lake. It was a beautiful spot and the search team considered it well. However, someone said; if one of the barbershoppers gets a bit too much beer and wanders into the lake, we might have a problem !!!! Another site was offered near Sabina. [Ed. Note: Appel's woods] Nah! That was too far to drive: gas is expensive you know. However, that site was chosen if Frank Reno would remove one tree in the spot selected for Ripper to put up his aluminum frame and tarp. The spot for the privy was picked out some distance from the spot where the kettle would set and where the corn would be made available. Frank Reno had retired from DP&L but still had his belt and climbers: so he climbed the tree, cut off all the limbs, cut down the rest of the tree, dug out the roots of the stump and filled in the hole with more dirt. Frank was considered the "Elf". Just mention something that needed to be done in the woods, and a couple of days later it was accomplished. He would bring his lunch and work on the project needed, eat his lunch and lie down on a picnic table to rest, watch the trees bending in the breeze and wake up at 3 PM. Then he would *really* get to work on his project.

With Jeep pick-up and trailer, and Ripper in charge, the trailer was backed up to the privy on Cemetery Road. A chain was thrown around the privy and a puller was attached to the truck and the chain. With pressure exerted with the puller, the privy was held tight to the trailer, while the skids were sawed off of the privy and then the privy was laid down door first on the trailer. As the trailer was pulled down the highway on the way to Sabina, people passing by would look quizzically at that thing on the trailer with the two holes exposed at the back. . . . and that distinctive odor !

By this time, we were expecting larger groups than the aluminum frame could accommodate. We decided to just tie ropes across from tree to tree in the woods and put a tarp across it for shelter. That worked fine for a couple of years. One year it rained so hard, the tarp (don't know where Ripper got these tarps, but there are still several of his tarps in the storage barn that we use if needed) filled with water in pockets, and we had to take push

brooms and push up on the pockets to get the water to drain out over the side. Of course, one guy happened to use the handle end of the broom and poked a hole thru the tarp and the water flowed down. At that moment, Pat Neurrenbroch was directing the guys and we were all singing, when Trask Beery started moving the guys closer to Pat, closer and closer, Pat started backing up, until he was soaked in the stream of water from the hole in the tarp. Another great Corn Roast .

Trask would start by holding a note, rather loud as only Trask could do, and his quartet then would start singing from where ever they were: Kent Vanderkolk on lead, Jay Zinn on bass and Steve Shively on tenor. They would finally gather around Trask to sing a song. Spontaneous outbursts of song was the order of the day at many Corn Roasts.

I'm not sure of the year, it must have been in the early 70's, when the decision was made to construct a structure for the Corn Roast . Charlie Mikesell (Wood Butcher) knew where he could get some trusses, and said he would frame this thing up if we could get some old DP&L poles for the framework. Charlie laid out what he thought would be the best size for this shelter. We had to buy two poles, (they are the square ones) but managed to get that accomplished. Frank Reno had removed the tree several years earlier, and the post hole digger on the tractor dug the holes where Mikesell had stakes driven. The poles were set. Frank Reno (The Elf), with his expertise of setting poles for DP&L, was a great help in getting these poles set and tamped in place. Had to buy the 2x12's for the top to hold the trusses. Mikesell had to build several more trusses to match the ones he had found for a good price. You would have thought that Rube Goldberg was alive and well when the trusses went up. Between Ripper and Mikesell yelling commands, and the rest of us laborers pulling on ropes, the trusses were put in place and nailed down. (sorta like building the Pyramids) A neighbor had said we could have an old crib if we tore it down, The Elf and a crew tore it down and brought the 2x4's to the woods, to be used across the trusses to nail the metal roof on. The metal roofing was scrounged from various locations too. As I remember, during

this tearing down of the crib, our fancy-footed Director Don McAdams stepped on a rusty nail and punctured his food. We were glad to have Doc Falls in the chapter to treat the wound and give him a tetanus shot.

As years moved on, more additions took place. We bought a storage shed in Reesville, but also had to buy two 4-foot tall jacks to be able to move it.. Then with concrete blocks, we jacked up the back end of the shed and put concrete blocks under it. Then we jacked up the front end and put blocks under it. Then we went to the back end and jacked it up higher, more blocks, then to the front end and more blocks under it till it was up high enough to back the trailer under it. Of course the shed sat on the back end of the trailer as the jacks and concrete blocks were removed.

As the truck pulled forward, the trailer tipped up off of the trailer hitch. The trailer had a 2" hitch on it, while the truck had a 1 7/8" ball, enough to let the trailer come loose. Do you think that scared off the Elf. OH NO !!! With a puller, we pulled the trailer back down to the trailer hitch, and the Elf stood on the tongue of the trailer and held on to the tailgate of the Jeep pick up, while we headed for the woods. Crossing the train tracks in Reesville was a real challenge. But when we got to the wood, we got a 2" ball on the tractor and moved the shed to it's location, of course we had to cut the electric line so we could get the shed on the trailer back to it's location. But with the shed, we had a place to store the Corn Roast cast iron kettle as well as the Stew Night kettle, all the tarps that Ripper wanted to get out of his garage, the sign for the Corn Roast , the plastic container for the cooked corn, the hot water heater for the shower that was built on the back of the shed. Memories of the shower on Cemetery Road! Then we set another pole to put a light for the shower, etc. Oh, the labor of love for the Corn Roast !

For many years we pulled the old metal wagon between two trees. Ripper built steps up to the wagon and the chorus and quartets would sing from the wagon. Finally Bob Knisley found two 4" x 16' long pipes somewhere. We planted them and strung a cable between them and pulled a tarp over the cable and across another cable between the

two trees to make a shell so the sound would come out front where the audience was seated on the nine picnic tables at the Corn Roast .

Finally Mikesell said , "One of our greatest need is for a flush toilet: people won't come to the Corn Roast or Stew Night because of that stinking privy". Therefore, wheels started moving toward an improved outhouse. Mikesell said he knew where we could get a septic tank. A friend from Sabina came out with his back hoe and dug the hole for the septic tank and the leach field. He also lowered the septic tank into the hole for us. The old 2 holer was ripped out and the remains cleaned out, (this was an annual job, with lime spread throughout to keep down the odor). No more need for the annual cleaning and the spreading of the lime! The necessary lines were brought in, vents were installed and a ceiling fan and several mirrors. The concrete floor was poured. the commode was bought, the wash basin and the urinal installed, red carpet put down, and we had ourselves a flush toilet in the woods. WOW !!!!

The next project was a permanent shell to get away from the old metal wagon. Mikesell staked off where it was to be located. A concrete pad was poured and the following year the scrounged poles were set. We had to buy the rafters but most everything else was scrounged. We even had Don McAdams on the roof nailing down the metal roofing. An I-beam, needed to span the front of the shell, was going to be the major expense. But Bob Knisley said he saw some I-beams in Xenia and would check. He found we could get two I beams that could be welded together to make the span, so off to Xenia with the trailer again, bought the I-beams and brought them home to the concrete pad in the woods. We knew it was level and straight, so we laid the I-beams out on the concrete pad. With a long extension cord, we hooked up the welder and welded the beams together on the pad. Mikesell with his son Mike installed that beam up in the air. Another neighbor with a manure bucket on the front of his John Deere tractor lifted the beam up to where Mikesell had cut grooves in the two end poles. He had also drilled holes in the pole and with the cutting torch had cut holes in the I-beams. They slipped the I-beam in place

and, with long 5/8" bolts, bolted that I-beam in place. Rafters were put in place, metal sides installed and the roof installed. All ready for five sets of risers to be placed in the *Perseverance Hall*. It was really an act of perseverance to get that facility installed.

The concession stand was added with a couple of refrigerators, etc. At one time we had a Steak Night too, and for that a 275 gallon fuel oil tank was converted to a charcoal burning grill to do steaks for the gang. However, costs were too high and the decision to stop the Steak Night came about. But the Stew night for the wives and family still goes on. Twenty pounds of meat starts the stew in it's own forty gallon stew kettle. Then, everyone that attends brings some sort of veggie to enhance the stew. Ninety-two attended stew night in 2005.

While the Corn Roasts were held on Cemetery Road, the wives and families came back on Sunday to clean up and put the aluminum pipe and tarp shelter away in Rippers garage for another year. There was always some corn left, but the wives brought covered dishes while we cleaned up the grove and thanked Bob Downey for the use of his grove. Home-made ice cream was always a hit on these Sunday afternoon clean up days. With the permanent shelter house, the Sunday clean up still continues, but the wives asked about having another session where they could enjoy the woods and the fellowship of the Barbershoppers too. And thus the Steak and Stew Night came about.

The record attendance for a Corn Roast stands at 138. This was the year that Marquis and Yesteryear, both International gold medal quartets, were here to sing for the gang. That was also the year we had a 3.5 inch rain. We had Ripper's tarps up over the corn kettle, we had another tarp at the east end of the shelter house so the guys could get closer to *Perseverance Hall* to hear the quartets, and no one left. Of course some had to be pulled out of the mud with the tractor. Another great Corn Roast that will long be remembered.

This has truly been a tradition of the Xenia

Hospitality Chorus. Barbershoppers have shown up for the Corn Roast from Cincinnati, Columbus, Middletown, Springfield, Dayton, Indianapolis, Evansville, Xenia and points in between. Dean Kempton, former member of the Xenia Hospitality Chorus living near Washington DC, has been back many years to enjoy the and fellowship associated with the Xenia Corn Roast. There are so many folks that have played major roles in this function over the years that it would be hard to name them all, but Bob Knisley stands out as a major work horse for the Corn Roast and Stew Night. He has been instrumental in cutting down all the dead trees, and cutting them up so we have wood for our fires, cooking corn and cooking stew. Wherever help is needed in the woods, Bob Knisley is there always willing to do more than his share. Ron Reynolds and Dewayne Grooms have really upgraded the sound system for the Corn Roast. They do an amazing job for us every year. Ron is also instrumental in tasting the stew for stew night: he brings his own blend of spices for the stew. He has always helped out both at the Corn Roast and Stew Night. All the Xenia Chapter members have been a great help, Elwin Young and Louie Poole with the beer and soft drinks; Tom Kelsey, Jack Huffman, Elwin Young on cooking the Bob Evans sausage. Everyone gets in on shucking the corn.. Bob Shoemaker gets the cheese and butter, and Janusz does a great job on veggies. Of course Louie brings the beer, soft drinks, chips, ham salad, you name it. Louie should start a catering business. I know I've missed a bunch of guys who have helped with the Corn Roast. They are many; this tradition could not have lasted this long without the help of everyone in the chapter. Chuck Thomas with the sign and the card quartet set up and registration. Charlie Morrison helped with programs and the card quartets before he moved West. Doc Falls always brought tomatoes and veggies before he passed away. We have lost some great people who have contributed to the success of the Corn Roast including Ripper this past year. He will be sorely missed at this 2006 Corn Roast