

Carlton Haney

# CAMP SPRINGS TODAY Will There Be A Tomorrow?

By Art Menius

**B**arnum-like music promoter and artist manager Carlton Haney produced the first three-day bluegrass music festival with camping on Labor Day weekend 1965 on Cantrell's Horse Farm near Fincastle, Va. Haney combined his and Bill Clifton's idea of a big show featuring the top bluegrass artists with the concept taken from the Newport Folk Festival of a curated, multi-day festival offering some kind of narrative. After a second year in Fincastle, the Blue Grass Festival moved to Watermelon Park in Berryville, Va., for another two years.

On Labor Day weekend 1969, the original festival arrived southeast of Haney's hometown of Reidsville, N.C. He was tipped off by a chance encounter with a lady at a gas station to the availability of land beside Pat and Hazel Smith, just south of Cherry Grove Road near Camp Springs Church in the southwestern corner of Caswell County, N.C. Carlton built Blue Grass Park, the prototype for bluegrass festival venues for many years. Carlton's brother, Charles, purchased the 43-acre tract at 540 Boone Road and still owns it today, according to county records.

The Saturday of Labor Day Weekend 2014, my wife, Becky Johnson, decided we should head up to Camp Springs for its 45th anniversary and see if we could still find Blue Grass Park. That proved harder than I imagined, having made the drive a dozen times or more. I made the mistake of turning left on to Camp Springs Road and driving fruitlessly up its two miles—thrice. Finally, Becky (who had only been there once) and I felt drawn to turn right off Cherry Grove on to Boone Road. After a couple of passes looking for the "Blue Grass Park" sign that was still hanging in the early 1990s, we pulled up to a lonely gate with several "No Trespassing" signs.



Camp Springs stage 2014



Carlton Haney's office

It seemed to be the only decent possibility.

We followed the remains of the entrance road, passing a pine thicket where the band vehicles used to park between Boone Road and the stage area. Turning the corner, feeling like seekers of lost Mayan temples in the jungle, we faced heavy woods and thick underbrush. To the

right of an area where trash had been burned and cans and bottles dumped, stood the festival bathhouse. Numerous "No Trespassing" and one "Dead Man Walking If I Catch You Here" messages decorated its cinderblock walls. Becky saw a sign warning of "Boobee Traps." We later learned that a friend of Charles Haney had created the crude warnings.

Becky Johnson

Becky Johnson





**Bathrooms still intact**



**Kathleen's kitchen**

Photos by Becky Johnson



**Ladies bath house**



**Back side of stage**



**45 rpm produced by Carlton found inside the men's bathhouse in amazing condition**

Although the site's current condition is poor, it was there Carlton enjoyed his glory years promoting bluegrass and gospel and also at multiple locations as far as Rhode Island, publishing *Muleskinner News*, and using the youthful energy of Fred Bartenstein. The Alfred Ide theatrical documentary *Bluegrass, Country Soul*, captured the 1971 festival, the third at Blue Grass Park.

"*Bluegrass Country Soul* was fun. I was technical advisor and helped select the songs. The chance to work with a movie crew was really fun. The level of energy when the Osborne Brothers were on stage was memorable. The Country Gentlemen ruled," recalled Bartenstein.

The summer of 1969, when Blue Grass Park was created, came between high school and college for Bartenstein. Asked by Haney during the July 4th Berryville festival to come to work for him, he spent each summer through 1974 thus employed. He continued to emcee for another couple of years thereafter. He lived in a small house on the property, while Haney brought in a house trailer. Over those six years, he helped Carlton promote, edited *Muleskinner News*

magazine, produced special program issues for other festivals, and also helped Mac Wiseman, the Country Gentlemen, and Jim Clark promote their events.

From the 1965 start, Carlton capped off the Labor Day festival with the "Story Of Blue Grass" on Sunday afternoon, creating a narrative arc for the community that brought the string band tribe together. This was folklore being constructed on the ground, as Ron Roach explored in a 2014 article in the *Journal Of Appalachian Studies*. Haney constructed what Roach called a "redemption drama" with Bill Monroe as the tragic hero. Only he and Carlton remained on stage throughout the story, a polysyllabic word in Carlton's distinctive pronunciation. "What Bill

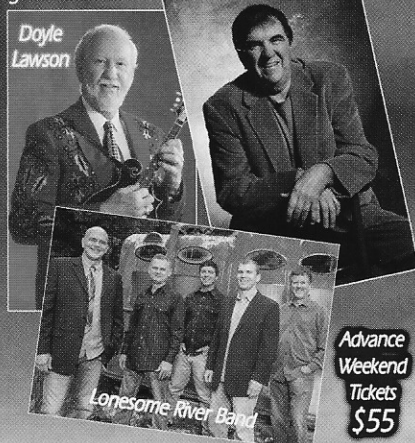
Monroe plays is bluegrass, and what everybody else plays is just a copy," he informed the audience. In Haney's telling, Monroe became the victim of Flatt & Scruggs' far greater commercial success, which was convenient since they were far too successful to play Carlton's festival.

The younger folks constructed their own tradition, according to Bartenstein. "The young people would do the alternative story of bluegrass at midnight on Saturday night. Leroy Savage would play Bill Monroe and I would play Clyde Moody. Ebo Walker and Sam Bush would come out. The day-trippers would be gone, and this would be for the campers. The midnight show was funny and hugely fun."

Bob White, still widely known as "Quail," experienced Camp Springs in the early days as bass player of the New Deal String Band. In *Bluegrass, Country Soul*, the members of New Deal can be seen jamming in the parking lot and on stage, covering "Love Potion Number 9" with Kenny Kosek on fiddle. "For my part, looking back forty-plus years," Quail recalled, "I had just enough talent and a modicum of sense to understand that I had

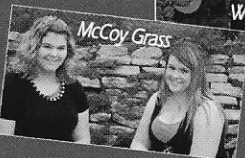


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the amazing luck to land among legends who were still in the midst of what we now recognize as the unfolding of the bluegrass origin *story* or *myth*. I did not recognize it as myth at that point, but I was breathless at the multiple opportunities to sit in with many of the central players at that point of discovery in my young life. Having Carlton and a host of others call me by name and include the New Deal String Band was humbling.

"Carlton had heard Buck Peacock and Fiddlin' Al McCanless and the rest of them play at the first festival. They backed up Kenny Baker at a fiddle workshop. We just fell into it. They did it again at the first Reidsville [festival]. There we were, and Carlton put us on stage with everyone. We didn't know the movie was going down until we arrived."

Veteran bluegrass musician and radio host Tommy Edwards played the 1968 Berryville festival with the Green Valley Ramblers and several Camp Springs events with the Bluegrass Experience, the band Tom "Snuffy" Smith founded with which Tommy is most associated. "The early ones were great fun. Those first festivals were so much more relaxed and loose, if those are the proper terms," Edwards said. "What I mean about 'loose' is it's hard to imagine some of the pros today grabbing some amateurs to practice about twenty minutes and do a set at a major festival. I know, one year, a band was running late at Camp Springs, and Tony Williamson and I came out of the crowd to play on stage with Fred Bartenstein until the scheduled band was ready."

Camp Springs bridges the time between a few festivals gathering the tribe to a profusion of festivals. It captured that time, providing a certain kind of safe space, a commons for different kinds of people, before the family style, sometimes overtly Christian-oriented festivals emerged during the late 1970s. The move to Camp Springs, according to Bartenstein, allowed them to tap into and cultivate the Carolina audience for bluegrass. The Monroe Brothers had been some of the biggest radio stars of the 1930s there.

Berryville, on the other hand, depended on the support of new fans from the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic. "The coolest thing at Camp Springs was millworkers, farmers, students, and hippies all making music together. At that time, where else in America could you

find that? At Camp Springs, we finally hit upon an indigenous audience that would come out. Wilmington to Asheville and parts in between; we were pulling from the whole state. These were the glory days still for the textile industry and tobacco growing and they had some money in their pockets. Tickets were reasonably priced and so was the food. We had day-trippers and campers. A lot of people were beginning to have RVs and pop-up campers. If Carlton had stayed at the top of his game, Camp Springs would be an iconic site today like Bean Blossom," Bartenstein asserted. That would not be the case, however. By the late 1970s, bluegrass festival competition had grown fierce, while Carlton's physical, mental, and financial health declined.

As the years went by, Haney's payments for artists grew ever more erratic. Eddie Adcock's theory seems to ring true. He opined that once Carlton no longer had significant country music income from producing country music package shows and managing such artists as Merle Haggard and Conway Twitty, following Reno & Smiley (1956-1965) and Bill Monroe (1953-1955), Haney no longer had the cash flow to support his bluegrass work. Although New Deal also got paid, Quail reported, "In the big pile of stuff down there were all the 'Carlton, when are you going to pay me?' letters."

Edwards recalled, "The pay was low for us, and Carlton often failed to pay the regional bands. I suggested that I might take him to court and he said, 'I'll tell you in court I ain't got the money, and I'll tell you tonight I ain't got the money.' I still loved him, but after a few times of not getting paid, we quit doing his festivals." In a sad irony, much of the damage to the Blue Grass Park house and its contents came from thieves looking for Carlton's rumored money.

Mike Wilson and John Maness of the Bass Mountain Boys and their eponymous festivals helped promote three or four very presentable Labor Day weekend festivals during the middle 1980s, before the pair started an event at Maness' park 25 miles to the south. A Foggy Mountain Boys reunion show featuring Curly Seckler, Marty Stuart, Josh Graves, Jody Rainwater, Kenny Ingram, Hylo Brown, Jake Tullock, Pete Corum, Willis Spears, Johnny Warren, Eanes, and others, provided the last great event at Camp Springs.



At one of those latter day events, Carlton took me up to the house, still mostly standing, which already looked vandalized in 1986. Every file cabinet drawer had been opened and dumped on the floor. Painstakingly, while he was supposed to be stage managing, Carlton located each issue—in order from Volume 1, Number 1—in the chaos. He seemed to have retained every check book he had ever owned, including from banks long out of business. Meanwhile, Maness and the Bass Mountain Boys had been on stage for 75 minutes with no stage manager to wake up the emcee, Bill Hill. When Carlton returned to a livid Maness, Haney responded, “Art, show John what I gave you! The whole history of bluegrass music.”

Carlton attempted a couple of more events, one of which offered only recorded music from earlier festivals. “It’s on tape during the Blue Grass Story where Carlton says he was going to pass the torch on to me,” Bartenstein says. “But I was twenty, didn’t live in the area, and it wasn’t the path I wanted to follow with my life. Carlton didn’t have a management level of trainees and understudies. He wasn’t running it in a businesslike way.”

Although a drinking culture existed, trouble did not darken Camp Springs. Fred says, “What happened at Camp Springs stayed in Camp Springs. We never heard any negatives from the law. The constable worked at American Tobacco in Reidsville. Caswell County at the time was the poorest county in North Carolina. There weren’t authorities and neighbors and newspapers to get their noses out of joint.” Carlton’s infamous wrestling match with Jimmy Martin, over where Jimmy could park his bus, may have been the worst violence there.

Forty years later, Becky and I pushed through widespread poison ivy and briars to what was once the seating area. Finally, the remains of the stage—one that so many festivals copied—stood before us in tatters. Fred pointed out that legendary bluegrass musicians Jim Eanes and John Palmer worked on the crew which constructed the stage, following a rough sketch by Carlton. Where thousands saw New Grass Revival for the first time, where Tony Rice jumped ship from Bluegrass Alliance to J.D. Crowe, where Carlton told the Blue Grass Story, where Bill Vernon and Bartenstein emceed, looked like a burned-out mobile home.

The artfully natural framing from the audience perspective of stage, pond, ridge, and house no longer can be enjoyed. The open expanse behind the stage that brought the pond into view has become a definitive pine thicket. Anyone wishing to experience the full meaning of that term can do so there or between the stage and the house where once a sloping path existed.

Similarly, the artist bus parking area that paralleled Boone Road is now completely overgrown. A small wooded area once covered the slope between it and the stage and seating area. *Bluegrass, Country Soul* captures the Country Gentlemen (Charlie Waller, Doyle Lawson, Bill Yates, and Bill Emerson) warming up by the bus, then carrying their instruments down the hillside to the stage. This passage of artists in view of the fans built anticipation for the next set.

One dark night, I encountered Carlton on that path. “It’s dangerous walking through here in the dark,” Carlton observed.

“You ought to invest in a pole light up here,” I suggested.

Confronted with the idea of spending money, Haney quickly rejoined, “Art, light and dark are the same. It’s just a matter of perception.”

Starting when so few festivals existed that each was a national event, Camp Springs produced far more than its share of bluegrass history. Edwards states, “I think it was in ’69 that Dan Crary shook the bluegrass guitar world with his performance there with the Bluegrass Alliance. Don Reno and Bill Harrell came running from the campground when they heard his powerful lead guitar over the sound system. I was jamming with some guys from Knoxville, and we couldn’t figure out who we were hearing, so we put our instruments in the cases and got over to the stage as fast as we could. I met him, found out what sort of pick he was using, and proceeded to see about every set he played the rest of the weekend. The next year, he decided to move on, and that was when my young friend Tony Rice from Pelham [North Carolina, about 14 miles due north] got the job with The Alliance. They saw him playing my guitar (which he sometimes borrowed because he really liked it) in the area far above the stage (near the bathrooms). Bob Hoban their mandolin player asked me who he was, if he could sing, and if he played with

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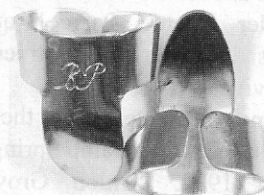


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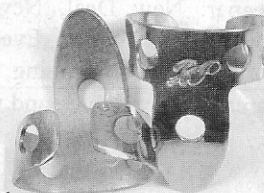
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anyone. When I answered the questions (Tony Rice, yes, and no), he went away and came back with a couple of the other bandmembers and, shortly after, they offered Tony the gig.

"The next year [1971, documented in the movie], Tony returned with The Alliance and played with them and J.D. Crowe & the New South as he was moving to that band after the festival. The Experience, most of the Alliance and several of the New Deal boys, got together at He's Not Here [a bar still operating in Chapel Hill, N.C.] the night before the festival and had a big jam. They hired their buddy from Kentucky, Curtis Burch. It wasn't too much longer after that when almost the whole band [except for fiddler Lonnie Pearce] quit the Bluegrass Alliance and formed New Grass Revival."

Bartenstein related how the spring New Grass festival at Camp Springs came about in 1972. "Union Grove was attracting college kids and young people. We noticed a huge following for certain groups. They attracted large crowds, but were cheaper: New Deal, New Grass Revival, Breakfast Special. Even while Union Grove was still going, it was getting jammed. It was nice and warm in North Carolina at Easter, so people would come down from the north. That was a very advanced notion at that time to see newgrass as a phenomenon that would have its own following. It made it financially viable to have a festival without headliners that had a proven drawing power. It was a baby Telluride and a forerunner." Haney also added a string band championship the weekend prior to Labor Day for a couple of years.

Other ideas from Carlton's fertile mind, including a gospel music festival, didn't work so well in practice. "At Camp Springs, I played in an experimental Bluegrass Orchestra that Carlton Haney assembled," Edwards recalls. "He had two different groups that he put together that year. Ours had Jimmy Martin as our lead singer and various members of the New Deal String Band, the Bluegrass Experience, and I think J.D. Crowe's band. There were four of each instrument. Carlton would hold up a colored posterboard to signal each group of instrumentalists to take a solo. Yes, *group*...not individuals. *Greensboro Daily News* columnist Ed Davis commented that it sounded 'like a train wreck.' And Carlton could not be

quiet. When he would hold up his card, he would shout 'banjo!' or the name of the instrument he wanted to hear. So much for that experiment."

At the end of August 2014, we could just spy the tin roof of "Kathaleen's Kitchen" through the verdant bush. More adventurous than I and possessing two good knees, Becky took off through the underbrush and pine trees. She found a rough road that took her to the old house and the pond behind the stage. Returning on the last day of November with a much improved walk ability and better views, we found the kitchen far better preserved than any of the other structures. The room on the north side appears ready to serve Brunswick stew and barbecue sandwiches. The house is another matter. The kitchen to the rear has collapsed almost entirely, with chimney bricks scattered about. Exposed plywood flooring leads to the stairs. The four structures altogether contribute just \$4,500 to the \$127,000 tax value of the tract.

Fortunately, Charles Haney and Carlton's daughter Bonnie arranged for Carlton's papers to be removed earlier during the summer of 2014 and be deposited in the Appalachian Collection in the library archives of Appalachian State University (ASU) in Boone, N.C. Quail (now retired from teaching Chinese History at ASU) truly got the vital project in motion after Gene Knight, who played banjo with the New Deal String Band, attended Carlton's funeral in March 2011. Gene told Quail, "It was a shame that everything was going to hell-in-a-handbasket at the park. Somebody needs to get all the stuff together that Carlton left."

"We jumped up and down with the notion of preserving all that," said Quail, who had a chance encounter in Maggie Valley, N.C., with Charles Haney's neighbor. That fellow gave him Charles' phone number. Quail called Charles and got the ball rolling, and the most important thing that developed was Charles' view. "Charles came around to the view that having [the collection] at ASU as part of the Eury Appalachian Special Collection was an idea he liked and supported."

Assistance in going to Camp Springs and literally digging through the remains of the former office in the collapsing house came from Appalachian Collection's Fred Hay and Jordan Laney.

Hay is himself an extraordinary blues collector and scholar. Jordan Laney, a young bluegrass musician and scholar, is currently a PhD student at Virginia Tech where she studies Carlton Haney, Hazel Dickens, and neo-liberalism in bluegrass music.

Laney explained her work: "Carlton Haney's business cards found scattered on the floor of his office read: *Carlton Haney: 'Nuff Said*. But, there is so much to this man and what those initial festivals mean to listeners and fans today. The Carlton Haney project is a natural step from my thesis looking at the festival community in bluegrass. I wanted to keep working with festivals and bluegrass in a cultural theory program. Then Fred Hay and Quail called that they had this cool new collection and that it would be a great dissertation project. They are still accessioning the collection. I was there for the initial digging. Quail and I went in first, and then we went back with a crew. We filled 21 archival boxes with papers. It was like an archeological dig. The building was dilapidated, falling down, with plenty of mold, silverfish, and yellow jackets. We found a lot of *Muleskinner News*, personal correspondence, unpaid bills, a letter from Louise Scruggs, also a lot of fan mail. One letter was from a lady really upset about John Hartford and what she said was a move toward rock-and-roll at Camp Springs. Going with Quail was really special to me since I had watched him perform in *Bluegrass, Country Soul* so many times. To be with him there was really special; it was kind of surreal. Quail was pivotal in getting that collection to Boone by connecting people."

Quail felt the same about going there with Laney. "Being in her company was really a privilege. Jordan went through the Appalachian Studies program when Pat Beaver [White's spouse] was director. She was of a bluegrass family and married into a bluegrass family. She might be one of the best students Pat ever had. I am excited about her future. Going with her to Reidsville was like a bluegrass pilgrimage. I went down there once with Jordan, once with Fred, and then with a big bunch. Fred recruited five librarians. We are going down again, now that the bees have died, and dig deeper. There's more stuff there. It's God awful work. The first thing they do is quick-freeze the materials down to 250 degrees below zero to kill the mold and everything else."



Laney plans to augment the papers by interviewing those involved with and touched by the festivals at Camp Springs. "I was struck by the connection of people to Camp Springs, the resilience of those memories like Camp Springs was yesterday. Fincastle has a similar place in a lot of people's minds. I think it was a perfect combination of a special vision of Charles and Carlton Haney, great timing, and an organic community. Charles had a much bigger role than people realize. Charles was a songwriter as well, but he handled the financial matters. He actually purchased the land for Camp Springs."

Quail agreed about Charles Haney. "Jordan has interviewed him twice. Charles financed the whole thing. What financial order was there, Charles maintained. His role in all that needs to be emphasized. Charles fed and housed Carlton for twenty years."

On Labor Day 2014, while driving on to Milton, one of North Carolina's best preserved nineteenth century towns and home of the Virginia International Raceway (VIR), Becky and I talked about Caswell County's need for more tourist attractions. Caswell remains one of the state's poorer (61st) and least populated

(79th) counties despite being contiguous with some of the most affluent. VIR, a former Indy Car track reborn as a country club for racing, forms one of the few economic engines there. Blue Grass Park reminded us of how overgrown and abandoned the historic early NASCAR Occaneechi Speedway looked in Hillsborough, N.C., before citizens took action together to restore it as an historic site.

As many bluegrass music devotees exist, cannot Carlton's Blue Grass Park be saved in cooperation with Caswell County economic and tourism development interests to create a living historical site? Cannot such a site tell the bluegrass festival story while presenting concerts and festivals to draw folks there, much like the revived Watermelon Park near Berryville? Achieving this will require a durable public-private partnership that is in it for the long term. The work could include acquisition of the property, basic bush hogging and otherwise clearing the site, stabilizing and eventually repairing or reconstructing the buildings, developing and executing an historical interpretations plan, and planning and preparing for the production of events at Blue Grass Park.

Unlike many similar efforts, this will demand the worldwide collaboration on the private side among bluegrass supporters. Becky has thus formed a committee to explore doing so. "We started at World of Bluegrass 2014 with numerous people willing to get on board and help," Becky said. "I have reached out to Wayne Martin of the N.C. Arts Council and found him enthusiastic about the idea. We plan to reach out to the family, through Jordan, to gauge their interest, which is essential." If that effort does not succeed, another part of bluegrass history could fade away and Caswell County would lose an opportunity to bolster its economy through tourism.



*Art Menius was the first Executive Director of IBMA and has written for Bluegrass Unlimited since 1983. He currently works as an arts and fundraising consultant, and hosts a show on WCOM-FM 103.5 in Carrboro, N.C.*

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