



The All-New Burgoo Review

Photos and text by Molly Clark Daniel © 2026

An account of the 1998 Burgoo in Arenzville, Illinois, which celebrates an annual festival which produces 1,800 gallons of soup and sells it all during a two-day celebration with friends and neighbors.

Though I have attended the Arenzville Burgoo dozens of times so far in my life, only recently did I realize how little I know about the traditions surrounding this event in my own hometown.

As a child, I saw the Burgoo as the last chance for some summer fun with my friends, and I could hardly wait for the school day to end so we could race uptown to the carnival rides.

As a young adult, I was only mildly intrigued with the festival and its traditions, content to have my one bowl of soup a year and marvel at the endurance of the men in the long white aprons as they stood for hours stirring the boiling kettles. Somehow I managed to escape being drafted for duty on one of the many Burgoo committees, and I always steered clear of the all-night soup preparations because Ron Fricke had me convinced that, during the wee hours, the cooks tossed in various unappetizing ingredients, such as toads, stray cats and other critters.

Like countless other sons and daughters of the community, I grew up and moved away after high school. My job and the many miles to Arenzville kept me from returning for the Burgoo. Despite the distance, each year at Burgoo time I would wonder how it was all going -- was the soup good this year? Did they have a large crowd? Does Coach Kemp still work in the hamburger tent? Does anyone still bring homemade gooseberry pie to sell? Does Gerald Beard still invent just enough categories for the Pet Parade so that every kid manages to win a prize?

Now that my husband and I live in Illinois again, I've had the chance to attend the Burgoo for the last couple years, and I am seeing it through fresh eyes. Or maybe I just never really knew that much about it in the first place. For instance, I had never even seen how burgoo was made, and if you had asked me, I couldn't even tell you the first step. So this year, I decided I would go to Arenzville a day early and pay attention to all that is done to make the Burgoo happen.

Part I - Cleaning and Chopping

Armed with my trusty 35 mm camera and several rolls of film, I set out on Thursday morning across central Illinois, driving through the flat prairie. I'm surprised to see that the cornfields are turning golden brown and losing the last streaks of green in their stalks. A few miles further

west and I encounter the first cornpicker in the fields, spewing dust and chaff from the back and gobbling up corn rows in the front. It occurs to me that the Burgoo will mean double duty for many farmers who are eager to get their crops in but have obligated themselves to chores in town, too.

By mid-afternoon, I am gliding down Beeley Hill and rolling into town. Mom is waiting for me at home, and after we refresh ourselves with a glass of iced tea, she gathers up her potato peeler and a couple of paring knives, and we drive to the town park. The vegetable preparation committee is already hard at work cleaning, peeling and chopping vegetables for 1,800 gallons of burgoo.



A Tank of Onions sits in the foreground as about 25 people work steadily at peeling and chopping vegetables for the next two days of burgoo cooking

This is something I have never seen before, and I am astounded at the quantity of vegetables which must be prepared for the two nights of soup cooking. About twenty-five people are busy working on the piles of fresh vegetables. They are seated on folding chairs under the park's picnic shelter, arranged in two circles with buckets of raw vegetables at their feet. The finished product goes into dishpans which are emptied into large horse tanks, one for each ingredient.

Three or four people are gathered around a big washtub, scrubbing celery

and trimming off the ends. Off to the side, a group of men are working with an industrial-sized vegetable chopper, feeding in handfuls of carrots and catching the slices in a dishpan. They feed in the vegetables as fast as the other group can clean or peel them.

It's the onion-peelers I feel sorry for, and I ask them how long their job will take. "We've been at it since about 2:00 p.m.," says Kate Lovekamp, "and we usually finish up around 6:00 or 7:00." They peel and quarter the onions as long as they can stand it, and sometimes they switch to carrots or celery just for a change of pace. The group works steadily on their task, but a festive atmosphere seems to make the job easier. They are mostly the parents of my high school friends, and there are a few younger members in the group. They visit while they work, but the work never slows.



Food Processors -- John Crawford, Dave Carls and Dean Stock feed peeled carrots into a vegetable chopper. (Ray Stocker in the background.)

They are all working on the carrots, celery and onions. The potatoes have already been cleaned and roughly peeled by a potato-peeling machine the town purchased a few years ago. Later, they will also clean and chop several pounds of cabbage. When they are finished, they will have cleaned, peeled and chopped enough fresh vegetables for both nights' cooking crews.

They work as diligently as if the vegetables were going in a soup in their own kitchens, and even on the last bucket of celery they are particular about scrubbing away dried leaves and trimming off dry ends.



Marci Burus cleans
celery



Doris Jane Lovekamp
peels carrots



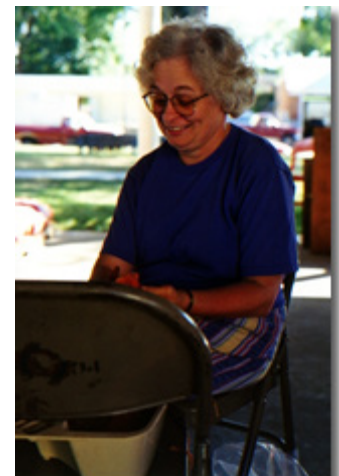
Cele Burrus peels
carrots



Kate Lovekamp chops
onions



Maxine Crawford chops
onions



Ellen Stocker peels
carrots



Maxine Beard cleans celery



Jeane Clark chops onions



Roberta Clark and **Merle Lovekamp** chop onions



Millie Beard, **Marci Burrus**
and **Maxine Beard**



Dave Carls and the
finished carrots.



The finished potatoes, iced
down and ready to use.



Tony Thomas, **Althea Carls**
and the finished celery.

Part II - It's a Stirring Experience ...



Cleaning stirrers -- Roger Witte, Bill Privia and Bill Stock scrub each stirring paddle to a shiny clean.

In the alleyway behind the old town hall, a long row of kettles stands under a makeshift shelter. Each kettle rests in its own housing, under which a bed of sand has been prepared for the firebox where the kindling will be placed later. The kettles have been cleaned, and a crew of men is hard at work scrubbing the parts for the stirring mechanism which goes into each one.

Most of the kettles used at the Arenzville Burgoo are owned by the village, but a couple of kettles are borrowed each year from private individuals. They are old

kettles which have seen a lot of use. "Most of them probably came from people who at one time did their own butchering," says Bill Privia, co-chair of the Kettle and Automatic Stirrers Preparation Committee.



Jiggs Ginder's kettle

"They've been around a few years, and they're just as brittle as glass. If you drop one, you'll probably get a good crack in it." He says some have been mended with a welding torch, and the town is always on the lookout for suitable replacements. "It's not like you can just go to the Burgoo Catalog and order a new one," says Bill. "Once in a while, we will see one on an estate auction, and we might go see what kind of condition it is in."



Scrubbing - Bill Stock works on cleaning a stirring paddle.



Motors to stir burgoo – Motors recycled from an earlier use in a workshop or washing machine, these motors now drive the paddles in burgoo kettles.



Clean stirring paddles

The village owns 12 kettles and borrows three others for use during the annual Burgoo. One of those comes from Jiggs Ginder, who each year lends the kettle to the town. His brother, Clyde, remembers that he was just a small child when their father, John Ginder, bought the kettle at an auction. "It must have been about 1926," says Clyde. "I remember when he got it."

The automatic stirrers are evidence of the ingenuity of earlier burgoomeisters. The boiling soup requires constant stirring during the 14 hours of cooking time, and until just a couple decades ago, the job was done with long-handled wooden paddles that the men kept moving all night long. If they neglected to scrape the sides and bottom of the kettle, the soup would scorch and the burgoo was ruined. It was a hot and tiresome job which required attention through the night. And if the wind was blowing in the wrong direction, the job was made even more miserable by inescapable smoke.

In the early 1960's, some inventive fellows (most people credit Herb and Ed Tegeder) devised a motorized stirring mechanism with a two-piece paddle driven by an old washing machine motor. The motor was mounted on a steel beam secured across the rim of the kettle, and the lower stirring paddle was custom-made to fit the bottom of each kettle.



Critical secret code book to match the right stirrer with the right kettle.

Most stirrers use a D-shaped paddle to scrape the bottom of the kettle, but the design of the second paddle stirring the middle level of the soup varies, depending on the ingenuity of the builder. To further complicate matters, the bottom of each kettle has a distinctive shape, which requires that only the stirrer designed for that kettle be used. Each year, the kettle preparation crew must carefully match the stirrers and kettles. The parts are marked with scrawled numbers engraved on the metal, but don't expect any logic to this system. "Stirrer number 5 goes with kettle number 10," says Bill as he consults his master list. "If we get the wrong stirring machine on the wrong kettle, then it's potential disaster."

Some old-timers were reluctant to switch from the old wooden paddles to the motor-driven version. "Aw, you'll ruin the soup," they said. But it required two dozen men to stir the soup by

hand all night long, and if they worked in two shifts, then even more were needed. When the electric motor stirrers proved effective, a similar contraption was made for each kettle. "They weren't all made the same year," says Bill. But over a period of about ten years a complete transition was made. The wooden paddles are still necessary for certain stages of the cooking, as I learned later.

Part III - Setting the Stage

Throughout the town park, members of other committees are busy setting up the grounds for the next day's events. Milton and Jean Carls are busy in what will soon be the hamburger stand. A hamburger grill, deep fryer, refrigerator, water heater and tables are arranged in their approximate annual locations under a small shelter. As Jean washes down each surface, Milt and Delbert Mueller assemble all the necessary connections to the water, electricity and gas. They are searching for a missing piece of gas tubing.



Milton Carls

Milt checks over the equipment already in place to see if the tubing isn't somewhere among it. He points overhead to strategically placed bits of baling wire, each with a specific purpose for suspending hoses, signs, or other critical pieces. He and Delbert both remember the approximate length and shape of the tubing, and Delbert goes off to a nearby shed in search of it.

"It's great to have volunteers move all this stuff out here for us," Milt says. "They did a lot of the heavy work, and we just need to finish the job and make sure all the pieces are here."

Jean is waiting for the arrival of some shelves so she can start cleaning them, but she knows that the man delivering them needs to finish his day's farm work before he makes another trip to town. She explains the annual routine of a committee chair. "Being the chairman of a committee doesn't mean you have to do all of the work," she says. "But you're the one responsible for organizing the schedule for others to work. I start calling around several weeks ahead of time and try to get people lined up to work specific times." Getting the hamburger stand organized means setting it up, organizing the cooking, serving and the dismantling of it all when the Burgoo is over. "The hamburger sales are unpredictable, except when they run out of soup early in the evening," Jean says. "Then we know that we'll be really busy."

Delbert returns with the right piece of tubing, and he and Milt finish making all the utility connections for the equipment in the stand.

A few yards away, several men have pulled up with a truckload of sawhorses and lumber, and they start unloading everything and arranging the rows of seating for tomorrow's crowd. Over in the bingo tent, Joe Stinson, Bingo Chairman, is arranging the tables. In another part of the park, vendors are setting up their tents for arts and crafts sales, and the food concession trailers are setting up along the side streets. Main Street is still open to traffic, but in a few more hours it will be transformed into the site for the carnival rides. As the afternoon sun starts to fade, the park takes on the familiar look of the Burgoo grounds.

I wander back to the group cleaning vegetables, and, lucky for me, they are just about to finish the job. It's nearly 7:00 p.m. by the time they have emptied all the washtubs and rinsed away the last scrap of celery. Mom gathers up her knives, and we follow a few of the others over to AJ's Tap for a couple of Troy Alexander's delicious catfish dinners, a regular Thursday night special at the restaurant and tavern.



Water's on -- Delbert Mueller turns on the water supply to the hamburger stand.



Preparing for a crowd -- Left to right: Mike Schnitker, Dean McMillen, and Ron Schone straighten the boards which will serve as seating for audience to the Burgoo's scheduled entertainment.



Fried catfish



Joe Stinson arranges the tables for the bingo tent.

Part IV - "We're makin' soup!"



It's Thursday evening, and Mom is ready to call it a night. As she crawls into bed, I am tempted to just forget my plan to see how the soup is made. It's only nine-thirty, but I'm a little tired after the mid-afternoon drive to get to Arenzville, and sleeping sounds like a lot more fun than watching boiling kettles. But curiosity about the soup-making still lingers, and I grab up the camera bag and tell Mom that I'll be back after a couple hours.

The town park is a different scene than the one I left. A yellow glow bathes the area around the shelters, and there is a small cluster of men gathered around a table near the kettles. Steam rises from the line of boiling pots, and a light breeze carries the smoke away from them. The soup cooking crew has traditionally included only men, and I'm a little nervous that my intruding camera and I won't be welcome.

But Russ Lutkehus gives me a warm greeting as I walk up, and he and I reminisce briefly about the summers we spent detasseling corn at Burrus Seed Farms. Don Wessler helps by asking if I know everyone there and starts introducing before I have time to admit that I can't come up with all of their names. Mingling around the kettles are Gary Blum, John Barrett, Myron Beard, Tony Thomas, Craig Gregory, Joe Lovekamp, the Huey brothers -- David (Hondo) and Ken (Joe), and Don's college friend Harry Bentsen (who lives in Springfield but for the last six years has come to help make burgoo).



Waiting for the right moment to start adding vegetables, the soup cooking crew starts their work around 9:00 pm. From left: Tony Thomas (partially obscured by smoke), Ken "Joe" Huey, Myron Beard, Craig Gregory, Rus Lutkehus, Gary Blum, John Barrett, and Mike Beck (far right, in the background)



Checking for doneness -- Tony Thomas examines a chunk of beef from the boiling kettle.

As the night wears on (and I stay longer than the couple of hours I had planned), some of the men go home and others join the group: Mike Schone, Lee Burrus, Tim LeFebvre, Mike Beck, Gale Kleinschmidt, Steve Stocker, Marc Carls, Gary Beard, and Tony Clark.

The beef chunks have already been added to the kettles, and they are all cooking at a rolling boil. While they wait for the signal to add the first of the vegetables, the group moves a work table into place and stacks wood for the fires.

Whole potatoes are the first to go in when the broth is ready, and one of the men uses a forklift to bring the tank full of potatoes slowly into position next to the work table.

Several buckets are washed and prepared for use to dispense the vegetables, and some scales are brought out to weigh each bucket. Hondo seems to have the recipe memorized, and he calculates in his head how many pounds of potatoes must go

into each kettle. "Sixty-three," he announces, and then the group decides to measure out the spuds in twenty-one pound increments.



Potatoes for the soup are drawn from the tank by Hondo Huey as Joe Lovekamp watches.



Part V - "Get Your Fire Pants On!"

After the potatoes are added, the group watches warily to see that all the electric motors on the stirring machines keep running. "It's not unusual to have problems with the stirrers right now," explains Don Wessler. "What often happens is that a potato gets stuck under one of the paddles, and it stops turning."

Just as he predicted, one of the machines stops turning, and they move in for a closer inspection. Steve Stocker grabs a wooden stirring paddle, and Joe Huey stands next to the kettle and pokes at the motor. First they try to push the stirrer along with the end of the wooden paddle, but when that doesn't work Joe decides it's a problem with the belt on the motor. "It's too big," he says. "We're going to have to replace it."



Avoiding the heat from the fire, Tony Thomas leans over to push some vegetables off the top of the stirring paddle and into the soup. Just a minute or two beside the kettle gets too warm.



Russ Lutkehus lifts a bucket of potatoes from the tank to weigh them.

None of them wants to remove the stirrer from the kettle because it would be impossible to put back into place, and it would mean stirring that kettle by hand the rest of the night. But the broth is at a full boil, and it must be stirred so the potatoes won't scorch.

Putting a new belt on the motor means working right next to the heat of the fire, which none of the men can stand for more than a minute or two. "I made the mistake of wearing polyester pants one time," Lee Burrus tells me. "I stood close to the kettles for just a minute, and that fabric really got hot."



Joe Huey (center) smiles at a remark from Gary Blum (left) as he reaches to snatch a carrot slice. Craig Gregory is far right, and in the background are Joe Lovekamp, Myron Beard and Don Wessler.

Joe continues to work on the stopped motor, and Don yells to him half-jokingly, "Go over to the fire house and get your fire pants on!"

He finally calls for a pair of gloves, and works until he gets the oversized belt off the wheel. "I don't see how he can stand the heat," says Don.

Meanwhile, Gary Blum and Mike Schone sort through a pile of belts to find one with a better fit, and Craig Gregory reaches in the kettle with a paddle to stir the soup. Another man walks down the line of kettles to make sure all the other stirrers are still moving. I wonder aloud why more of them aren't having problems.

"Don't say that!" exclaims Steve. "We had real problems one year when three of the stirrers stopped at once. We were really busy trying to get 'em all going again."



Mike Schone adds a bucket of carrot slices to a boiling kettle.



Joe Lovekamp, Marc Carls, Hondo Huey, Mike Schone and Tim LeFebvre judge the amount of onions that should go into each kettle. Ice blocks piled at the end of the tank are used to keep the remainder of onions fresh for the next night.

By this time, Joe is hovering over the kettle and making quick strikes at the motor as he works the new belt into place. Once it's on, he connects the motor to electrical power, and it takes off again. Success!

As the last of the potatoes goes in, a couple of men debate the relative merits of cutting up the potatoes before adding them to the boiling kettles, and Don adds that he tried it with a private batch. "It seemed to really change the taste," he said, "and you wouldn't think that something as minor as that would really make a big difference."

After the potatoes have cooked a while, other fresh vegetables follow in quick succession. Each time, Hondo Huey figures how many pounds goes into each kettle, and they measure out twelve separate batches.

Sufficient amounts of each ingredient are reserved to start three additional kettles of soup around 7:00 a.m. That way, Don explains, there are three fresh kettles of soup ready for Friday evening's soup line.

Tim LeFebvre scoops up a bucketful of chopped celery.



The kettles are kept at a full boil the whole time, and occasionally some water is added when the broth cooks down too far. After a couple of hours, the soup takes on the consistency of ordinary vegetable soup, with chunks of vegetables churning in a brown stew. The crew is waiting until just a few hours before daylight to add the cabbage and the canned ingredients.

It is already past midnight, and some of the men have finished their shift and gone home. A night chill has set in, and I pull a chair closer to the kettles to keep warm. It occurs to me that it is long past the couple of hours I said I would be here, but now I feel almost as if I need to stay to see how it all ends...

Part VI - The Soup Never Stops Boiling

Besides adding fresh vegetables to the soup, the night cooking crew has been busy with other chores, such as repairing temperamental machinery, stoking the fires under each kettle, and retrieving more wood and stacking it neatly in a line beside the shelter.

The wood supply this year comes in the form of broken up pallets (with the nails still in them) stacked in large cardboard cartons, each holding about half a cord of wood. In the few hours I have been here, the crew has already used seven or eight containers of wood, and more are brought up to the cooking area with a forklift and unloaded by hand.



David (Hondo) Huey studies the scales as he weighs a basket of chopped cabbage before adding it to the burgoo. Gary Beard looks on.



Arenzville philosophers from four different decades share their versions of truth while they wait for the soup to cook. Joe Huey, Rus Lutkehus, Tony Clark and Gary Beard are engaged conversation behind a cloud of steam from the kettles.

Just as soon as the fires under the kettles burn down to red embers, more fresh wood is shoved underneath, and the soup never stops boiling.

The men are serious about the soup-making--even to the point of dividing a single bucket of an excess ingredient evenly among the twelve kettles. Each man here pitches in and works when the soup demands it, but after most of the fresh vegetables have been added, the pace slows while they wait for the stew to cook. Some choose this moment to go home and get some sleep so they can do a repeat performance the next night, and others pull up chairs and relax. It gives them a chance for a break while they wait for the right moment to add the canned vegetables.

It's about 3:00 a.m., and the town is quiet except for the sound of the electric motors driving the stirrers, the conversation from the men, and the occasional sound of the carnival workers setting up the rides on Main Street. A couple of the men go off to cook some hamburgers for the rest of the crew, and I find a warm place to sit near the kettles.

Don Wessler and Harry Bentsen pull up a couple of chairs near the fire and mull over the next step in the cooking. They are the senior members of the remaining crew, and each of them has seen several years of duty at the kettles. Harry is a college friend of Don's from their years together at Culver-Stockton College, and he has worked at the Arenzville Burgoo for the past six years. He grew up in Chicago and now lives in Springfield, but each year he works with the all-night cooking crew, making soup for the first day of the Burgoo. He returns on Saturday to enjoy the rest of the festival. When he's not making burgoo, he dabbles in other civic duties, such as serving as president of the board of the Illinois Symphony Orchestra.



Harry Bentsen sits by a stack of wooden stirring paddles ready for use. He's one of a handful of out-of-towners who return each year to work at the Burgoo.

Hondo Huey seems to have as much to say about the soup-making as anyone. His father, the late Tim Huey, had overseen the cooking of the soup for many years, and Hondo and his brother, Ken (Joe), have apparently learned the art from their dad. Seeing them work their way through the hundreds of pounds of ingredients, dividing them neatly and watching the soup like a fussy chefs, I am reassured that the recipe is still in good hands.



Hondo enjoys a joke during a pause in the work.



Don Wessler and Harry, college friends now cooking burgoo together.



Tony Clark reacts to Russ Lutkehus's humor.



Gary Beard laughs at Russ's description of him as one of Arenzville's "upper-crust elderly."

One of the men returns with a tray full of hot hamburgers, and I join in with the others as we enjoy an early morning snack. Even with just ketchup on it, it's amazing how good a hamburger tastes in the middle of the night. The food seems to revive the group, and when someone says, "Let's do it," they swing back into action and prepare to add the canned ingredients.

Part VII - "This is a lot like work!"



During the first stage of soup cooking when all the raw vegetables were added, the men worked at a constant pace in the repeated routine of weighing the ingredients, dispensing the vegetables in a bucket-brigade, stoking the fires and stacking more wood. Now it is time to add the canned ingredients -- tomatoes, chicken, chicken broth, and corn. It is important to wait for

Lending a hand with the work, Harry Bentsen opens a can of tomatoes for use in the soup.

the last hours of cooking to add these ingredients, especially the corn, because they cook very fast and often stick to the bottom of the kettles.



Joe Huey adds some tomatoes to the soup.

Two heavy-duty can openers are mounted on the old wooden work table, and one of the men drives forward with a forklift to deliver a pallet of several dozen cans of tomatoes to the work area. Hondo Huey knows how many cans must go into each kettle, and the men gather around to start opening cans. "Now this," says Rus Lutkehus, referring to the can-opening job, "is a lot like work."

They work in assembly-line fashion, unpacking the cans from cartons, opening each can, and passing it forward down the line for another man to dispense into a bucket for delivery to the kettles.

Using canned ingredients in the soup is a relatively recent innovation. Just over twenty years ago, the soup-makers solicited fresh ingredients from the community. One of the jobs in the weeks before the festival was to make the rounds among the residents in Arenzville and the surrounding area, requesting support in the form of cash or donated produce for the soup. One family might be able to provide several bushels of fresh tomatoes, another a half a dozen dressed chickens, and others would give up some of the sweet corn from their freezers or home-

canned supply. Fresh produce is still provided for use at the Burgoo; for example, the sliced tomatoes at the hamburger stand this year all came from a local grower. But instead of relying on the community to supply all the ingredients for the soup, the Burgoo Committee now orders the fresh and canned goods from suppliers. (The cash donations are still very much welcomed.)





When the early burgoo-makers used freshly dressed hens in the soup, they of course put the whole carcass into the stew and removed the bones later. A cooking utensil similar to a large slotted spoon was used to retrieve the larger bones, but it was impossible to remove all the small pieces. When one ate burgoo in those days, he was well advised to examine each spoonful for chicken bones. These small culinary intrusions were unappetizing for some people but considered by others to be evidence of true home cooking, adding to the mystique of the soup.

Today, however, the cooks use boneless canned chicken and fat-free chicken broth. The beef which makes the initial stock comes from Jones Meat Locker, which delivers the meat cut and ready to go into the kettles. "They provide good quality meat, too" says Don Wessler. "We don't get the 'throw away' beef chunks, and I'm convinced that it's one of the reasons the Arenzville soup is so good."

Once the tomatoes have been added, the forklift moves forward again, this time with a pallet full of canned chicken and chicken broth. Hondo stops to figure for a moment, then prescribes four cans of chicken and two cans of broth for each kettle. After counting out the number of cans which must be reserved for the three kettles to be started later that morning, the crew sets to work opening the canned chicken. As fast as the cans are opened, they are dumped in a bucket to distribute down the line.



Craig Gregory empties the last bit of chicken into a kettle.

When the last kettle gets the measured amount of chicken, the crew finds that they have opened two extra cans. This causes momentary confusion while they sort out the reason for the surplus. While two excess cans of chicken might not seem like a catastrophe, this group is also concerned about the amount of chicken needed for the kettles yet to be started. They don't want to leave the next crew without the exact amount needed, and they are extremely serious about the consistency of preparation from one kettle to the next. Once it is determined that the remaining supply of unopened cans is sufficient, the decision is made to divide the excess amount of chicken evenly among the twelve kettles at hand. It amounts to about two-thirds cup to be added to each seventy-five-gallon kettle, and Craig Gregory dutifully doles it out.



Gale Kleinschmidt



Marc Carls and Russ Lutkehus

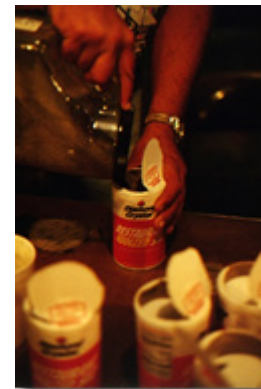


Steve Stocker

The next ingredient to be added is the chicken broth, and without realizing that he is opening the first can of broth, Rus reacts with surprise when he empties a can into a bucket. He was expecting boned chicken to plop into the bucket, but when the liquid pours out, he yells, "Hey! There's nothing in here but water!!" The whole group bursts out laughing and then jumps to stop him before he empties the bucket onto the ground. "No! It's broth!" they tell him. He enjoys the joke on himself and sends off another round of laughter when he says he thought they had gotten cheated on a can of chicken.

Around 4:30 in the morning, the last canned ingredient is added when the corn goes into the soup. In just three short hours, says Don, people will start showing up for kettle service. "We usually try to start kettle service around 8:00 in the morning," he says, "but we have had people show up as early as 6:30, wanting to get some soup." Most of the soup prepared tonight will be sold through the kettle service, which means that the soup is sold in quantities of a quart or more and carried off in containers. Kettle service is provided on both days of the Arenzville Burgoo, but the demand is much greater on the first day.

On a table near the kettles, Hondo and Joe Lovekamp are preparing to add salt and pepper to each kettle. Each kettle gets a full container of salt (think about that before you grab the salt shaker to add to your bowl), and the amount of pepper is equivalent to whatever space is available in the top of the opened salt container, or about five or six tablespoons.



Adding pepper to a salt container. One canister of these combined ingredients goes into each kettle.

The group has thinned out considerably now, and already some of the morning crew has started to show up. It's nearly 5:00 a.m., and Hondo is getting ready to add the last ingredient -- paprika. Knowing that I still have a full day ahead of me, I decide that this is a good time to go home. The house is quiet when I finally crawl into bed. Outside my window it is still dark, but it won't be long before dawn breaks and the 1998 Arenzville Burgoo begins.

Part VIII - The World's Best Burgoo



Empty gallon jars are ready for use by the kettle service crew. Each kettle holds approximately 75 gallons of soup, enough to fill the jars on this table.

Friday morning arrives too quickly, and it is 8:30 before I am out of bed. The schedule of events doesn't really start until mid-day on Friday, but the first day of burgoo sales always brings a steady stream of people for the kettle service. Just as Don Wessler predicted, people are already lined up to get some soup to take home.

Some people come early because they are picking up a gallon of soup before they head to work that day. People with job duties at the Burgoo want to take home some hot soup and let it cool down so they can refrigerate it and return in time to help serve

the afternoon and evening crowds. (It takes several hours for a single gallon to cool, and it works better if it's divided into smaller amounts.)

Others may be buying soup to send home with out-of-towners, and some people are simply eager to get their burgoo. Perhaps they are devoted fans or maybe they were some of the people disappointed last year when the soup was sold out before they got their take-home containers filled.

Tony Thomas explains to me how the burgoo sales are managed throughout the day.

"When we open up the kettle service," he says, "we sell the soup until there are only three kettles remaining. We know we have to reserve that amount of soup for the dinner crowd in the evening."

Depending on how the sales are going, the kettle service might be suspended in early afternoon or perhaps not at all. The



Dave Carls and Don Wessler



Cele Burrus and Marie Paul

burgoomeisters keep a close eye on the amount of soup on hand, and if they have plenty of soup at 6:30 p.m., they may open the kettle service line once again. The goal is to run out of soup around 7:30.

Why? Because on Friday night, the entire cooking process starts again, and those kettles must be empty. On the second night of the Burgoo, it's even more critical that the kettles be emptied because everything has to be cleaned up, returned to its owner or put into storage for next year.

"We hate to see people go away disappointed because we stopped the kettle service," Tony says, "but on the other hand, we don't want any leftover soup. We do our best to make sure there's enough on hand for the evening meal. It's always hard to predict how long the soup is going to last."

As the morning wears on, the park starts to fill with people. The entertainment starts in mid-afternoon with some musical groups on the stage, and air is filled with the smell of wood smoke, cooking soup and frying hamburgers. The buzz of conversation between friends and neighbors starts to drown out the sound of the carnival rides.

The Burgoo attracts people from all across the region, and some out-of-towners make it an annual tradition to stop in for one of their meals. For the last 15 years or so, the employees from the Illinois College Admissions Office have stood in line for a bowl of soup at the Arenzville Burgoo, and this year there is a rumor that a group of people from Peoria have chartered a bus for a day-trip to Arenzville on Saturday.

By 6:00 p.m., the park is nearly full of people, and all the volunteers in the food stands are busy. The hamburger tent is selling burgers as fast as Jack Burrus and Richard Ahrens can grill them, and Tom Burrus works steadily to scoop ice cream for the pie ala mode. When he pauses for a photo, three pieces of pie are suddenly thrust under his nose, waiting for him to catch up. The burgoo sales are going steady, and people seem to agree that the cooks did a good job. "Best soup in twenty-five years!" I hear someone shout to the men hauling the steaming buckets to the serving line.



Jack Burrus & Richard Ahrens



Bud Nelson and Tony Clark



Rev. John Rothfusz



Tom Burrus

By 8:00 p.m., the soup line is closed, though the other food booths keep going strong, and already the kettles are being filled with water to prepare the beef stock for the next batch. As the sounds of country music fill the park, I decide it's time to go home for a good night's sleep. When I step off into the shadows and the sounds fade behind me, I recall that melancholy feeling I had as a kid when a day at the Burgoo came to an end. Others are heading home too, carrying their jugs of soup and towing pleading children. As I walk down the sidewalk past the old firehouse, Hondo Huey steps out of his truck and heads for the kettles.

"Goin' to do it all again, Hondo?" I ask him.

"Yep. Got another long night," he says. And he smiles.



Janelle Stock



Jim Prough

Part IX - It's History



The Burgoo wasn't always held on a Friday and Saturday. About twenty-years ago, the Burgoo Committee decided to move the event from Wednesday and Thursday to a Friday and Saturday. Naturally, this wasn't without some controversy because, after all, it is risky to change anything about an event so steeped in tradition.

But by moving the second day of the Burgoo to a Saturday, the Committee argued, it might encourage more people to attend the second day because it would be on a weekend and there could be more events for the kids. The kids' games were expanded to include other events besides just the foot races and the parade, and an antique tractor show and tractor pull were added. In some years, there were other special events, such as cow-chip bingo or a 5-k run. (I once made the foolish challenge to my brother in Colorado that if he came home to run in the Burgoo 5-k,

then I would run it, too. He didn't require much preparation since he has been running several miles every day since he was in sixth grade, but I thought I was safe because he is ten years older and lived so far away. I prepared by eating more chocolate chip cookies, so when he showed up at the Burgoo that year, I ate crow instead and ended up crossing the finish line dead last while he won the race.)

Putting the second day of the Burgoo on a Saturday probably has allowed more former residents to make it back home for the festival. There was an especially large crowd in 1989, when the town celebrated the 150th anniversary of its beginning. For the entertainment that year, the community organized and produced a play to dramatize the history of its founding, and Albert Wessler, one of the few remaining German-speaking residents, played a leading role in depicting the town's earliest inhabitants.

Throughout the years, the Burgoo has hosted all forms of musical entertainment, from local talent to well known names out of Nashville. This year's acts, Highway 101 and Hank Thompson, are names any county music fan would recognize, and in the past, the performers have included such personalities as John Conlee, Jeanie C. Riley, Dave and Sugar, and Hank Williams III.



Sometimes the entertainment comes in unexpected forms, though, like the time when the act which had been booked never showed up and two of the town's citizens took to the stage instead. As Gerald Beard tells it, back in those days, the town usually booked the entertainment without going through a booking agency, and he would always worry whether or not the performer would actually show up. One year, his worst fears came true, and the professional never made it to town. Gerald realized he had a problem on his hand when show time came and still no one had appeared. He called on his brother Myron for help.

"Myron and I had done this little skit for the Arentzville Woman's Club where we dressed up in drag and sang some comical routine," he said. "And when it became clear that the entertainer I had booked wasn't going to show, Myron said, 'well, let's do it.'" So the two of them went and got their costumes and stepped out on stage in front of the Burgoo crowd.

Performing for the Burgoo is probably worse than playing to a county fair audience because most people are more intent on visiting with their friends or getting a bowl of soup than watching the act on the stage. People are generally milling about the whole time the performer is trying to engage the crowd, and entire groups of people might get up and leave in the middle of a performance. It must be awfully hard on the ego of someone who is more accustomed to an attentive audience.



However, the Gerald and Myron Show was an instant hit. "Not only did the crowd think it was hilarious," Gerald said, "but we got invited to perform at local festivals in four other towns around here, and an agent from St. Louis heard about us and wanted to sign us up!"

I asked Gerald if he could recall the worst disasters that had happened at the Burgoo. "Besides that one?" he asked with a laugh. And he went on to recall a few events that added some trying times to the celebration. Just last year, for instance, there was a moment of excitement when the trailer serving Bruiser's Curly Fries caught fire, and flames shot through the opening by the exhaust fan. The Arenzville firemen were on the scene immediately, and the fire was quickly extinguished.

"Fortunately, no one has ever been seriously hurt in any of the mishaps," he said, as he described the time the electricity went off one evening in the middle of the night's musical performance. The entire block was cast into darkness. "I mean, there was not a light anywhere in the park! The whole place was pitch black." It took a few minutes to find the problem and fix it, and then things resumed as before.

In 1989, the theatrical performance of the town's history had to be suspended for a fire at the Burrus Seed Farm facility outside town. Most of the actors in the production were also volunteer firemen, so the play was stopped and the fire trucks roared out of town. When the fire was out, everyone returned to the park and the show was continued.

But the worst disaster, according to Gerald, "was the year we had forty gallons of burgoo left over." Most of it was frozen and sold later at the Side Door Grocery, but it was an awful hassle to find containers to transport it all so the clean-up crew could put the kettles away.

For a town that claims to make the World's Best Burgoo, having that much soup left over at the end of a day would rank among one of the low points in the history of the event. But fortunately, there have been many more years -- like this year -- when the demand for the soup has emptied the kettles according to plan.

Part X - The Secret Ingredient

There are many theories about the recipe for the Arenzville Burgoo--its history, the actual contents of the soup, the existence of a secret ingredient.... And after having witnessed the soup-makers at work, I can say with some certainty that there really is a secret ingredient.



I don't recall when I have ever tasted such good soup as what I ate at the 1998 Arenzville Burgoo. The blend of flavors from all those hand-chopped vegetables, savory beef, and tender chicken was in perfect balance, and each bowl was better than the one before. Naturally, you know by now that I am no unbiased critic of this stew, but on the other hand, I have always been one for whom one bowl of burgoo was a sufficient dose for a year or more. However, this year, the soup tasted so good that I ate two bowls at the festival and asked Mom to get another half-gallon from the kettle service so I could take some home. She picked up a full gallon, since my sister in Utica, IL, also wanted some for her freezer.



(By the way, my half-gallon didn't make it all the way to my house. I stopped to meet my sister in Springfield and remembered that I had forgotten to bring along her half-gallon, which was still sitting in Mother's freezer. I gave Martha my half-gallon instead, knowing I could still claim the other one. In a poetic little twist, I also unknowingly handed over the cash that Mom had stuffed in the box beside the jar of soup (this was Mom's attempt to keep me from paying for the soup.) When my sister reached Utica with both the burgoo and the money, a friend asked her, "Hey, what's the deal? Did Molly have to pay you to take that burgoo off her hands?")

Despite its popularity, burgoo is still a much maligned oddity of the region, with all sorts of indelicate descriptions and notorious claims made on its behalf. It's not hard to find someone who just can't stand the appearance -- let alone the taste -- of the soup, and even true fans of the stew will delight in introducing an uninitiated out-of-towner to the sight of the bubbling kettles, often making the offhand remark that the recipe includes anything that didn't make it across the road the night before.

Maybe burgoo is an acquired taste. This year's soup tasted especially good to me, but maybe it was because watching the soup preparation had only whetted my appetite. I think it was probably the secret ingredient...

It was always drummed into my head that the Arenzville soup is made from a closely guarded recipe, and if you ask the cooks, you will never get a straight answer on the authenticity of that claim. When I was a child, I remember that the town honored a man named Elza Perry, who lived in Meredosia and was said to be the author of the recipe used by the town. According to Gerald Beard, Mr. Perry's recipe achieved such acclaim that one of the American presidents (Gerald wasn't sure, but he thought he recalled that it was Franklin Roosevelt) asked to have the chef at the White House prepare a bowl of burgoo according to Mr. Perry's specifications. "So, in a way," Gerald says, "Arenzville burgoo has a reputation that goes all the way to the White House."

Elza Perry's recipe has appeared in various publications, but like most burgoo recipes, it is intended to make a crowd-sized quantity of soup -- at least fifty gallons. And there's nothing in Mr. Perry's recipe that is conspicuously listed as the "secret ingredient," so possession of his formula still does not solve this mystery. Even though I watched them add nearly every ingredient to the kettles, I realized later that I had not really seen the whole process, since I

arrived after they had already started and left before the final ingredient was added.

Some have said that paprika is the secret ingredient, and others claim that there is another substance added to each kettle and that its identity is known only by a single person in charge of making the soup. Ken Bradbury once told me that he witnessed the adding of the secret ingredient when Tim Huey was in



charge of cooking the soup. "He put something in each kettle, and I never did see what it was," Ken told me. "He said it had something to do with assuring that the first bowl of soup would taste as good as the last one."

Others would argue that it is the technique of cooking the soup that gives the Arenzville burgoo its unique flavor. As someone who has seen his share of Burgoops over the years, Clyde Ginder points out that knowing when to add the water to the kettles and how long to let the stock cook down is an art that can make or break a good kettle of soup. Don Wessler believes in starting with good cuts of beef, and in earlier days, Charley McLain insisted on making sure a proper amount of suet, or beef fat, was in each batch.



Though I cannot disprove the existence of an unlisted ingredient in the contents of the soup, I think that the success of the Arenzville recipe has as much to do with the people who make the soup as it does with what they throw in the kettle. After all, putting on a festival of this magnitude is enormous work for a little town. The planning, the preparation, the set-up and the plain and simple work involve a couple hundred people. That's at least half of the population of Arenzville. Year after year, you may see the same person doing the job he or she has been doing for the last three or four decades, and you notice when someone else has taken over the job. Sometimes familiar faces are replaced by a family member in the next generation, almost as if the assigned job has become a matter of inheritance.



And then there are those unique people such as Harry Bentsen and Barbara Fowler, who drive from a distance to work at the Arenzville Burgoo just because they like being involved with the community spirit in the town. Barbara, who grew up in Chicago but now lives in Ohio, simply likes the neighborly atmosphere and fun that comes from being involved with the Burgoo. She showed up two days early this year, just so she could lend a hand with cleaning and chopping the vegetables.

Besides learning more about the complexities of the soup-making at this year's Burgoo, I gained a better appreciation for the amount of work that goes on behind the scenes at each year's festival. For instance, the members of the grounds crew and sanitation committee each take on a less-than-glamorous job that must be done after the crowd leaves and when they are already exhausted. Henry Huppe said he volunteered for the job on the sanitation committee, and when I asked him why, he simply said, "Well, it was a job that needed to be done." While picking up the trash is not the most popular job on the list, the town takes pride in its neat appearance, and thanks to efforts of Henry and his committee members, such as Paul Manuel (left), the park is as neat as a pin each morning after the crowd has departed from the day before.

When the last bowl of soup is gone and just before the final entertainment act takes to the stage, there are always a few announcements made over the public address system. Frequently there are results of a drawing or raffle to broadcast to the crowd, and sometimes there is a reminder that the hamburger stand still has a few sandwiches available. And every year that I can remember, Gerald Beard takes the microphone for just a few moments to



thank everyone who contributed to the success of that year's festival. This time when I heard him say those words of thanks, I remembered how when I was a kid I used to wonder whom he was talking about in such glowing terms. In my eyes, the Burgoo was just a case of neighbors working together on a job they all wanted to do. I suppose I believed that the Burgoo had as much purpose as a potluck picnic -- everyone is supposed to get some good food to eat, the kids are entertained, the adults talk endlessly about things youngsters don't understand. No one really assigns credit for the success of a potluck, but everyone always goes home tired but happy.

But now that I have looked a little closer, I realize that the Burgoo is a gift that each person in the town gives to the community. There are no wages paid for the long hours worked cleaning the kettles, dishing up soup, setting up plank seating, running the bingo tent, frying the hamburgers, and on and on. The town pays for the supplies and hires what entertainment they can afford, but none of it would come together if it weren't for all the people who suspend their schedules in early September to go to the town park and help out. Some people use vacation days from their jobs, some farmers just don't get as much done in the fields, and some people just work a 24-hour day. Besides the satisfaction of a job well done, the words of thanks from their neighbors and friends are the only pay they get.

What the town manages to make from the Burgoo each year is divided among three community organizations -- the American Legion, the Community Club and the ATA (Anti-Thief Association). Each one of these groups, in turn, uses the funds to develop community causes. Over the years, they have built and equipped the town's recreational facilities in Sam Batis Park, built a shelter (or two) in the town park, erected a granite monument to honor the veterans, bought uniforms for the kids' baseball teams or the high school band, paid for Arenzville kids to attend swimming lessons in Jacksonville, sponsored students in state conferences, and probably a dozen other causes that went unnoticed.

There are undoubtedly easier ways to raise money than to spend two days cooking soup you have to convince some people it is safe to eat, but the Burgoo has always been Arenzville's town project. It brings together a wonderful mix of ingredients, and the flavor of the event is improved by the people who make it happen.



Thanks for reading. I hope to see you at the Burgoo next year.