

# My Own Recipe for Organizing a Banjo Festival



by Annie Pike

The idea to hold a banjo event, particularly a four-string banjo event, has been stirring within the cobwebs of my mind probably since the second or third banjo festival I attended.

My first banjo event experience was in 1998 as an attendee for the Bayside Banjo Aggregation's St. Valentine's Day Massacre and Banjofest held at the Allenberry Inn and Resort in Boiling Springs PA. I had absolutely no idea what the heck I was in for that first year I attended as I had only been playing tenor banjo for about eight months and only six of them with the Water Gap Banjo Band. The original band when I joined consisted of Chuck Kuehn, Mike Kuehn, Roger Tice, Joe McColgan, and the late Ron Matteson, Bobby Spadoni and Paul Schmidt.

The headliner that year was Paul Erickson, whose playing just astonished me. I had never seen anyone play like Paul. But it was not only the fantastic show that was offered, but the late nights of jamming, the friendships forged, the new songs learned and OK, the beer! By that first Friday night, I knew I'd be a repeat offender.

And the years went on. Every February, around St. Valentine's day, the BBA organization would hold the banjo fest with top-notch headliners, luthiers, and great friends. Allenberry was what you might call my home field advantage, though I had great fun attending some of the Springfield, Dearborn and ALL FRETS festivals, the BBA weekends in mid-winter was always a close-knit banjo event that took over the whole location.



Those were great times, but slowly, the attendance withered, the Inn struggled financially and then the year came when our weekend festival had to be canceled due to the selling of the Inn and a massive renovation. I remember that first year of not having the BBA banjo festival, and how I missed playing and jamming and the socializing with friends, many of whom I only saw once a year. Then the *Mid-Winter Banjorama* in Springfield closed its door. ALL FRETS was an option at times, and the occasional trip to the New England festivals, though all enjoyable, really made me miss the February BBA organization. When 2017 came around, I knew I couldn't miss out on my mid-winter festival again, so I put the wheels in motion.

Around late August of 2017, I began searching out venues. I hit many obstacles along the way that encompassed financial drawbacks, space, and noise ordinances. Each venue location had its good and bad points, but nothing that would come close to acceptance for a decent banjo festival. I must mention that as I struggled with all sorts of places and dates and contracts, I am extremely grateful to BBA member, friend, and banjoist Brad Boone. Brad and I corresponded over email and phone discussing possibilities and in and out of running the show. Brad was more than helpful with questions I might forget to ask or helped clarify contract details.



Soon December rolled around and the year was coming to a close. I knew that if I did not get something booked before then, another year would pass without an area banjo fest. Nudging me mostly was the thought of not seeing my friends from the banjo community again. Emails and phone calls are great, but it's not like sitting down with a banjo and a beer, learning new tunes, seeing new instruments and jamming. I needed to bring us all together again.

It is important, very important to keep the musical talent going, keeping the love of the instrument and songs flowing from the hearts and especially minds of us all. We can sit in front of a computer and play along with electronic backing tracks, but in my opinion, there is nothing like sharing in a community that shares a love of the instrument and music.



I continued to try and bring something together and kept searching for that right combination. Then finally, Aha! I hit on something I had misjudged right in my own backyard. Wolf Hollow Lodge at the Water Gap Country Club right in the little town of Delaware Water Gap, Pennsylvania. Quickly I sent out an email inquiry and in two days receive a positive reply. Day three, I went to check out the accommodations and by day four had a contract to review and sign. Done. It was official...the Keystone Banjo Bash 2018 was set for March 8-10. Wow, and only ten minutes from home! Why did it prove to be the best we could find at that time?

The Inn, set on a golf course, was closed to events for the winter months. This enabled us to not have interference with other events. Also, the closed season made it easy for us to book every room without having other guests disturbed. Wolf Hollow provided a nice rustic setting with a cathedral ceiling banquet room for the show, jamming, and workshops. Catering was available for meals and the grounds and setting are beautiful. My reservations were for low number of sleeping rooms, and only one big usable room for jamming, shows, and workshops (which meant a need for good scheduling). But, it had the right feel, good food, a friendly staff and most of all we could jam to all hours of the morning. With the booking of the guest rooms, there would be no additional fee for use of the banquet room. This spot would enable us to

get our feet wet or get drenched in discouragement. I was willing to take this chance. So on December 21 of 2017, I sent a group email out to anyone I had on my contact list announcing the new Keystone Banjo Bash for 2018.

At first, I feared that all the rooms would not get filled, but soon, people were booking rooms at other hotels because the lodge rooms sold out. Musicians volunteered to run workshops, play on stage or just come to jam. What a glorious feeling!

Until, of course, March of 2018 actually arrived and with it, three of the worst snowstorms to hit the east coast in years. I really couldn't believe what Mother Nature was up to, and worse, people who registered were starting to cancel. I felt horrible...I was feeling a loss, a loss to see good friends and a loss at my attempt to bring us all together. All the months working on this event that might not occur. Wednesday morning arrived, two days before the kick-off date of the Keystone Banjo Bash and I am still busy on the phone with the lodge and calling registrants. Because of the weather, some folks could not make it, so rooms within the lodge opened up. I spent the day getting folks on a waiting list into a room. So many were still packed and planning to show, the weather did not deter many from attending. This provided good energy for me to think positive. Soon the sun was shining and all the roads were clear! Boy did I do a jig in the kitchen...Keystone Bash here we come!



At my house, power was still out, schools were still closed, but banjos were ringing! On Thursday we gathered all the necessary instruments and equipment and headed over to the lodge. Several people were already there, and it was a great site to see banjo playing friends again. Of course, we had a jam going, and a gathering at the bar catching up on our lives and the story behind Keystone Bash.

In the main banquet room we grabbed chairs and sat in circles, four-string banjos, six-string banjos, ukulele's and tenor guitars and the big bass banjo keeping the beat. All different levels of talent sharing new songs and old standards. Outside on the great lawn folks marveled at the herd of deer running through the snow and when someone announced they found a great apple pie bakery down the road, apple pies became the hot souvenir of the weekend. The weekend, of course, was over too quickly, but it was a pleasure to get so many banjo players together and continue the tradition of a mid-winter event that we hope to last many years.



So, as much as I was tempted to rebook the original lodge, I wanted to look for a bigger venue that could accommodate more sleeping rooms for guests and a greater number of meeting rooms for workshops and jamming. For 2019, the Keystone Banjo Bash will be held at the Shawnee Inn and Golf Resort in Shawnee -On-The-Delaware PA on March 22-24<sup>th</sup>.

The reservation number is 800.742.9633 and mention, of course, you are staying for the Keystone Banjo Bash. This historic Inn was once owned by Fred Waring and there are many beautiful historic photos lining the walls of the halls. A beautiful location on fabulous grounds, this Inn has over 75 rooms, indoor pool, spa, a brewpub, restaurant, and the best, many areas for jamming and workshop space. Can we jam until 2 am? Sure, if we can still stay up that late. Without sponsors or club dues, I feel we have the best arrangement possible with a beautiful historic Inn where we can continue to promote the four-string banjo, or the tenor guitar, or ukulele or mandolin. We have great talent, yet many of us feel like we are playing with dinosaur instruments so I am hoping to begin to use this festival to encourage new players and keep the seasoned players in good harmony with their skills and participation. The Inn is graciously helping to promote the event to the public and being so close to home, we are in constant communication. If you live local to the area and prefer not to stay at the Inn, we are charging \$35 fee for the whole weekend. I feel this is only fair as part of the hospitality of the Inn to offer us so many of the rooms for our use, is having the guest rooms occupied.

I am looking forward to another great event and continually striving to bring new and exciting ideas to keep the four-string banjo alive and gaining interest for new players. In 2019 we will have a contest for a best original song composed for banjo. Anyone can enter for five dollars, winner takes the pot. I hope to incorporate more ukulele and tenor guitar, and workshops on how to transition the four-string banjo for use in other musical styles besides jazz. I am always open to suggestions and help if anyone would like to volunteer their time and talent. For early bird arrivals on Thursday night, I am in discussions with the Shawnee Brew Pub that offers an open mike night. If agreed, early birds can get some dinner and then we can jam at the pub for visibility. Reach out to me through email ([banjoplayer98@gmail.com](mailto:banjoplayer98@gmail.com)) if you have questions or visit our Facebook page which is [www.facebook.com/keystonebanjobash](http://www.facebook.com/keystonebanjobash) for updated information.



My quest for the perfectly priced, location, and weather spot is ongoing. Our member numbers keep falling, the interest in the four-string banjo is dwindling and life just seems to get in the way. But we need to take the time, make the time, to have some fun and play some good music. I cannot satisfy everyone but I can try and make a good attempt at bringing fellow banjo, uke, mandolin players together. Heck, my event is even soft on horn players! So come on out, or down or up, to Shawnee Inn. We can talk there about different avenues to travel to keep the Bash and the four-string banjo alive. Perhaps you have some ideas of your own. For many years, I talked to many different folks about strategies to run an event, and maybe I didn't follow all the rules to get this Bash going, but it's on the table, waiting for you to get your pick and strum. It's a beautiful place, let's make some beautiful music and have some fun!

## **SNOWBIRDS REMINDER:**

**Please notify the ALL FRETS office each time your address changes at the time you move (even if it's twice per year).**

**[allfrets@aol.com](mailto:allfrets@aol.com) - 405-819-3883**

**THANK YOU!**