

Thoughts on Hosting a Morris Ale

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper is meant to share some of my thoughts and experiences with regard to the Midwest Morris Ale, 1983 edition. Its intended audience is the Bloomington Quarry Morris team, which has responsibility for the 1984 ale.

2.0 ORGANIZATION

The ale was organized by (what else?) an Ale Committee. The committee was open to any who wanted to come to the meetings. I was chairman of the committee, and my biggest job was keeping the subject of the meetings from straying into fashion and morris politics.

We didn't have formal sub-committees, but assigned responsibility for each facet of the ale to one person, who could get whomever he liked to help him. I tried to keep good track of the progress of each of these "department heads", with the result that I pretty much knew what was going on at any given time.

The departments we had were:

- Location
- Schedule
- Tours
- Evening Dinner and Dance
- Correspondence
- Publicity
- Beer
- Food
- Bag and Books
- Security
- Workshops
- Campsite Management
- Lost and Found

2.1 LOCATION

We were fortunate to locate a good campground, but this is a major hurdle. Since you already have a place, I won't say more about this.

2.2 SCHEDULE

In making the schedule, remember that it takes a long time to get 200 morris dancers moving. Our schedule worked out well for the most part, but it could have been more leisurely without hurting anything.

The two biggest problems were getting people off for the Saturday tours (each tour lost one tour stop due to the late starting time), and getting back to dinner after the tours (I think dinner got started about an hour and a half late).

2.3 TOURS

Aside from the late start, the only real problem we had with the tours was that not enough time was spent at the RHP (Ritual Half Pint) stops. When you actually take the tours out, be prepared to be flexible, as morris dancers are liable to stop and dance at the drop of a hat, and you may be forced by popular acclaim to change the location of one or more of the stops.

2.4 EVENING DANCE

The department head here was responsible for getting a place and a band. The dinner was in the same hall as the dance, and people were very co-operative about helping set up and tear down. Try to find a place where you can stay pretty late--we had to leave at 11:30, and it was far too early.

Our cost for the dance was about \$2.00/person.

2.5 CORRESPONDENCE

This department included writing and sending all the letters related to the ale, and gathering and tallying the replies.

Be sure that your letters are mailed as early as possible (I recommend getting the first round out right after New Year's). Also, be sure that they are written in clear, straightforward prose. Our correspondence chairman got a bit cute in the letters, with the result that a lot of information was lost. I suggest you have the letters reviewed before they are sent out, because what's obvious to the writer is not always obvious to the reader. Remember also that the letters will be read by only one person on each team, so most of the people who show up at the ale will have no idea what you said in them.

We based our cost on estimates gathered from the first set of replies, and they turned out to be close to actual attendance. Most teams, though, didn't bring as many people as they first estimated. We made up the difference by picking up a couple of extra teams at the last minute.

Try not to worry too hard if things aren't as firm as you would like even a couple of weeks before the ale. Trust your judgement and your estimates.

2.6 PUBLICITY

About all we did here was to place announcements in the local newspapers and friendly radio stations, and we had good success. We were told, and experience bears out, that putting up posters is a waste of time, energy, and money.

2.7 BEER

We had three kegs of beer at the campground for Saturday night, and three more at the dance Sunday. It was all drunk, and in fact we could have used more at the dance. You could probably get by without providing beer at the camp, because it is convenient enough for people to have their own coolers, but be sure to have plenty at the dance.

2.8 FOOD

We hired a former member of the team to cook for us. We paid him \$150 for his weekend's work, and he certainly earned his money.

I still don't know what the solution is to dinner on Saturday night. It would be best to serve it, but that's expensive. Certainly the idea of having a potluck doesn't work well--people from out-of-town have a lot of trouble contributing (and some don't realize that dinner is supposed to be potluck), and you get around to eating dreadfully late. It is worth noting that Toronto manages to provide food for the whole weekend, but they always have a crew slaving in the kitchen.

Sunday dinner was prepared ahead of time, with the team helping the cook prepare at two "food workshops" the week before the ale. The turkeys were taken home and roasted by team members, and returned to the campground where the cook cut them up. We had a few volunteers from ale attendees to help with final preparations, and the SCA (see security) helped with serving.

Our cost for the Sunday dinner was about \$4.00/person, which was half of the lowest price any caterer quoted.

Have your cook prepare twice as many vegetables as he thinks necessary--they will get eaten.

2.9 BAG AND BOOKS

Our bagman took in money from the attendees and distributed it to the department heads when they needed it. We budgeted on 150 people coming to the ale, and came out pretty well when 183 actually showed up. Budgeting is scary, though. The difference between breaking even and losing several hundred dollars is not very big.

2.10 SECURITY

We enlisted the local chapter of SCA to spend the weekend at the campground to look after things while we were on tour. In return for this, we let them attend ale activities for free. Those who helped serve at Sunday dinner were paid \$10 each.

You may also have some security problems in the form of protecting the neighbors from the morris dancers. Try to be sure that everyone understands the rules of the campground, and it wouldn't hurt to keep an eye out to see that they are being followed. We only had one minor problem in this area, but it made me a little wary.

2.11 WORKSHOPS

People from the midwest really appreciate the workshops. Those from the east coast have more opportunity for attending classes, etc., so they don't care as much.

We tried to find workshop leaders among the attendees, and this has worked pretty well, both for us and for Madison.

2.12 CAMPSITE MANAGEMENT

The little things count here. Try to have things on hand that you know people won't bring--plastic forks, cups, etc. Providing coffee and tea in the morning is greatly appreciated. I think the thing that got us the most favorable comments was the box of Kotex that was left by our campsite manager in the women's restroom. Anything you can do to make people more comfortable is appropriate.

In addition to having maps of the area, the schedule, and emergency information posted, try to post a list of expected teams, their home bases, and expected attendance. The first question almost everyone asks is, "Who's coming?"

2.13 LOST AND FOUND

After the ale, someone has to clean up, and someone has to take care of all the junk that morris dancers leave behind. This is a pretty straightforward job, but nobody seems to have much energy for it after the ale is over. This is a bit like writing thank-you cards--you're best off if you get it taken care of right away.

3.0 OBSERVATIONS AND MISC. RAMBLINGS

A whistle is indispensable for leading tours and generally getting people's attention. The "Acme Thunderer" is a good, loud whistle.

Each ale seems to have some trademark of its own. In Ann Arbor, we like to have a church tour on Sunday morning. In Toronto, there is something called "Tiny Talent Night"--an often amazingly ridiculous talent show--on Sunday night. There really isn't anything like that with the Midwest Morris Ale, although the impromptu dancing Saturday night and the dinner/dance on Sunday come close.

I like to have a little awards ceremony at dinner (something I picked up in Toronto). It's nice to recognize people who have helped with the ale, and to commemorate those who distinguish themselves by outlandish behavior. If you can get somebody with a good imagination who can do a little shopping during the ale, this is a nice touch.

Mark the roads to your campground plainly. There's nothing worse than driving for ten hours and then spending an hour lost within 5 miles of your destination.