

THE MID-WEST MORRIS ALE, 1988

A Squire's Perspective

Introduction

Ann Arbor Morris and Sword was also host to the 1983 Mid-West Morris Ale which was, apparently, a much different beast than the Ale as we now know it. I am told (I was not there) that the Ale was smaller (closer to 100 than 200) and the accommodations were very basic (a field for tents). Food was provided (roast pig) but local transportation was not (no buses). The two things people seem to remember most about that Ale are the successful Sunday morning church tours and the miserable shower arrangements. I have no idea what memories of the 1988 Mid-West Ale will survive the longest, but I shall try to note some here that may be useful to future hosts.

The Organization

The Ale was headed by Co-Czars, czar being a term originally used to describe the office of the person responsible for ordering pizza at dinner! Two people equally in charge is not an easy thing to manage, but for me and I think the Ale, it worked out well (not always easy but worth the effort). You must be willing to lose the arguments about matters that are most important to you and persevere on matters most important to the Ale. Of course the hard part is to know the difference; I suggest you rely on your friends to help you tell the difference.

The Ale organization was a collection of committees each with an itemized agenda of tasks as outlined by the Ale Czars. The tasks were as vague as "plan tours" or "plan workshops" and they were grouped into committees in a manner that made sense (at least to the Czars!). The committees were:

- Entertainment and Workshops
- Food and Camp
- Publicity
- Registration and Finance
- Tours

Some people volunteered for only a specific task within a committee which was not quite the spirit that I had envisioned, but you cannot legislate participation or interest. The Ale Committee met about once a month starting in August 1987. These meetings were not always productive, but they were useful as prods to keep the committees thinking and meeting on their own (which some did). Most of work of the Ale occurred in the committees.

The Outline

What does an Ale need to have in order to happen? Recall to your mind every Ale you have been to and strip from them all the extras until you are left with the essence of Ale-ness. What follows is what I found to remain.

There must be a central gathering point for any Ale, even those that billet in peoples' homes. For the Mid-West Ale this has traditionally been the campsite and its associated facilities. The campsite determines much of what your Ale can and can't be.

Food easily comes to mind as important and your options here can be limited by the facilities at the campsite.

Food and lodging make it a weekend, by adding tours you make it a Morris Ale. Touring requires local transportation which is the third crucial element and will either be a logistical nightmare (cars) or expensive (buses).

Get these three components (campsite, food, and local transportation) nailed down and your Ale will happen and you will know what most of your mandatory costs will be.

The Budget

My first piece of advice on the budget is to learn to think with two columns of numbers: cost per person and total cost. I find it very hard to estimate things like the cost of feeding 200 people for the weekend. However, I can guess that it is reasonable to pay about \$20 for food for a weekend; with seven meals that would average \$3 per meal. With 200 people, then, your target food budget would be \$4000. That leaves the campsite and the local transportation as your major expenses, plus a guesstimate of all the minor expenses. These are the pieces of the puzzle. From the other end, they must fit into a reasonable Ale fee; unlikely to be less than \$40, but hopefully less than \$50. For a sample budget, you might take \$45, with \$20 for food, \$5 for miscellaneous, and \$20 to split between campsite and transportation. This gives you a budget that looks something like this:

	per person	per Ale
Food	\$20	\$4000
Campsite	\$10	\$2000
Buses	\$10	\$2000
Other	\$5	\$1000
Total	\$45	\$9000

"Other" covers a multitude of sins including, but not limited to, beer, band, sound system, stamps, phone calls, signs, etc. T-shirts were a self-contained enterprise; we charged what they cost and printed only as many as were ordered ahead of time plus ten extras (see section on T-shirts).

The above numbers are just one example of the many budgets that we examined during the early stages of planning. In many cases we took the cost we thought reasonable and went to find out if we could do it for that (or less). Budgets from past Ales and estimates from potential suppliers provided us with guidelines. Every time we visited a campsite, talked with a cook or called a bus company we would redo the numbers. Understanding the dollars early in the game saved us, and you, a lot of money. We saved \$1000 on the camp just by telling them we could not afford the price they quoted. The Ale came in sufficiently under budget that we will not only increase the seed money to \$500, but will also return approximately \$5 per person to the participating teams. This makes the final basic registration fee \$41 (\$4 dollars more than 1987).

The Campsite

We started our search for a campsite in the fall of 1986, soon after we had volunteered to host the Ale. A very useful resource was a publication titled "Children's Camp Directory" printed by the Department of Social Services. It was a very powerful tool in locating potential campsites and surveying the variety of facilities available. A second and equally useful resource was our link with the University of Michigan. After an exhaustive search the field narrowed to an affordable but "lean" camp north of Ann Arbor and an expensive but "nice" camp west of Ann Arbor, Camp Fresh Air owned by the University of Michigan. When confronted with our budget and the cost of the other camp the University simply agreed to meet the price of the cheaper camp. We had our campsite selected by August 1987.

When visiting campsites always send more than one person, take notes and/or prepare a check list, and take an instant camera if you can. A detailed list of the contents of the kitchen was valuable when talking to the cooks. Camp Fresh Air had many advantages including premium housing in the Redwoods. How these cabins were to be utilized was the center of a rather heated debate. On the one hand it was argued that since we were being charged a flat rate for the campsite, all housing

should be available to everyone on a first-come, first-serve basis. On the other hand why not exploit the willingness of others to pay extra for comfortable housing and use the profit as insurance against cost over-runs? The latter procedure, which also avoided placing the hosts in an position of advantage, was adopted in the end. Thus everyone was charged exactly what we thought the Ale would cost (the base rate of \$46), while those staying in the Redwoods provided additional income and, hopefully, everyone got their money's worth.

Cost and location probably will be enough to determine which campsite you select. However, it might be useful to know that 40% of the 1988 attendees were willing to pay extra for premium accomodations, 10% preferred to sleep in tents, and the rest seemed content with the one-room cabins. The variety of housing at our camp was a useful feature. Warning, count beds yourself before signing a contract; our camp actually had 10% fewer beds than we were led to believe (178 total).

The location of the campsite provided some difficulty in planning the Ale, specifically the tours. Since the campsite was west of Ann Arbor and far from population centers other than Ann Arbor, initial plans called for skipping the mass dancing on Saturday morning and long bus rides during the day followed by optional tours/workshops on Sunday. These features have appeared in previous Ales and I think they should be avoided. Mass dancing starts the Ale for many dancers and cannot be left out of Saturday morning without creating a great vacuum within the hearts of those dancers. Long bus rides are universally hated; after thirty minutes people start to wonder when they are going to get there; after forty-five minutes they think they are never going to get there; and after an hour they are not going to think the ride was worth it. Choose less "attractive" sites that are closer to the camp; only you will know what they missed (which is, of course, the problem!). Simultaneous tours and workshops spreads the enthusiasm too thin, is divisive, and in my opinion does not work.

The schedule that we used attempted to make use of the advantages of the campsite by keeping people in camp as much as possible. This allowed us to serve lunch in camp which saved us the chore of packing lunches and the cost of renting buses during the lunch hour. We had an hour of workshops and two full hours of mass dancing in camp Saturday morning. On Sunday we filled the morning with three and a half hours of workshops. During the entire weekend people were only away from camp for about 11 hours. This approach worked because the campsite was so pleasant and thus may not be appropriate with a less attractive campsite.

The Food

We chose professional cooks/caterers because we felt that quality food and timely service were vital to a successful Ale. Someone on the team knew the caterers and their cooking, and we were very lucky because these people were great! The Czars and the Food Committee interviewed them in the winter of 1987, made sure they agreed with our plans and budget, and hired them. (We should have followed the meeting up with a letter outlining the agreement as it would have helped avoid minor misunderstandings which occurred later.) We gave them a sample menu for the Ale, including all snacks, which they amended and returned to us. Then there was a final meeting with the Food Committee to agree on the changes and other questions. We stressed that food must be on time, and that Morris dancers eat a lot! In addition to the two cooks, we hired two kitchen helpers. There were about six people with restricted diets and 20-25% of the registrants requested vegetarian food.

The Buses

Buses were the toughest nut to crack of all the big ticket items. The cost estimates were all over the place from \$26 to \$45 per hour. Some companies charged from when buses left the garage and others did not charge until they reached the campsite. Minimum rentals ranged from zero to six hours. The next to last bus company we dealt with tried to

spring a "15% tip" for the drivers on us just weeks before the Ale. Once again our University of Michigan link worked for us, as we discovered we could charter directly from the University and be well within our budget. This was the hardest budget item to nail down and keep nailed down.

Registration and Mailings

Our letters went out only slightly later than we planned. The first mailing gave us a preliminary head count (about 140) and an idea of workshop/mass dance preferences. I have already suggested to Colorado that future Ales require a deposit to be returned with the first acknowledgment. The deposit would function as additional seed money and force teams to think seriously about the Ale, particularly one far away. The idea of a late fee (which we used) was suggested by Oak Apple (1987) and they were right, it kept the number of late registrations very manageable (about 15 people). Asking the teams to total their own numbers and dollars did help. Mail early!!! And give deadlines.

There were different views of what registration should be like at the campsite on Friday. One view saw registration as a small reception/party area with people getting out of their cars and checking-in. They would have been given their T-shirts, buttons, maps, cabin/parking directions and generally welcomed. The plan we went with had check-in set up like a drive-through window. As you drove in, we checked your name off a list and sent you off to your cabin with a map. I preferred the plan we used because it reduced bottlenecks and got you settled the fastest, and the dining hall was a good place to hand out T-shirts and buttons and start partying!

We had at least a dozen people who wanted to participate for only a fraction of the weekend, from one day to only the dance Saturday night. We improvised a schedule of suggested fees/donations to allow these people to pay their share.

T-shirts

Ordering T-shirts unseen is something of a burden on the buyer, but it does make life simpler for the supplier. We did provide a copy of the design with the registration materials which we hope helped people to decide. We sold the T-shirts for about what they cost, rounding up to the nearest whole dollar. The small profit on the pre-ordered T-shirts was used to lower the cost of T-shirts ordered at the Ale, which cost about \$2 more than we charged.

BEFORE THE ALE

Total people preregistering 187

Number of T-shirts ordered 144

Number of T-shirts printed 154

AT THE ALE

Number of T-shirts ordered 10

Number of T-shirts printed 10

Tours

This may not be the most important job of the Ale but is quite likely the biggest job and, in our case, the most difficult. Because of the location of Camp Fresh Air, there were few really good potential tour stops except in Ann Arbor, and, possibly, some surrounding small towns and parks. School (U of M) was finished and many people would be going away Memorial Day Weekend, so attracting crowds might well be more of a problem than usual. Bus time had to be kept to a minimum because it was so expensive, and many schedules were proposed and abandoned before the final compromise. Tours were the weak spot of this Ale; we knew it and finally just had to live with it.

To this day I can't tell you where the tours went as I only concerned myself with the number of hours the buses were to be rented and the amount of time dancers spent on the buses. What I want from a tour is: short bus rides, good dance surfaces, and (find or create) a crowd; then just let me dance.

Publicity

We listed the Ale with the American Morris Newsletter and the Country Dance and Song Society (CDSS). Locally we put up flyers and were listed in the papers. This was a committee full of people with specific interests; maps-only, logo and T-shirts-only, signs-only, etc., and most of the actual publicity ended up being done by one person.

Entertainment

A band was hired for Saturday night costing about \$100 and callers were solicited from the attendees. The sound system was supplied by Ann Arbor Council for Traditional Music and Dance (AACTMAD) without charge (every little bit helps). The Sunday night entertainment was an all-volunteer effort. Some teams have been coming to the Ale for years and can be counted on to step forward on Sunday night; however, I found it useful to approach the smaller or newer teams one-on-one to encourage them to offer a skit or whatever. The newer teams have a lot of talent and need just a little personal encouragement to get up.

Camp Directions

A lot of work went into our camp directions. We felt that they would be your first impression of the Ale and could strongly influence the reception you would give us upon arrival. The routes were driven and recorded by one group, and the directions were tested by volunteers (there were mistakes). Large, visible (day and night) rain-resistant signs are a must along the routes.

Beer

The 1987 Mid-West Ale was a cold weekend and they consumed three ^{+ 1/2} kegs of beer (and said they could have used a fourth). The 1988 Mid-West Ale was a hot weekend and we consumed six kegs. Both Ales had about the same numbers attending (about 190).

Workshops

The first mailing identified the level of interest in the different areas. Look for previously untapped talent when choosing your leaders as this can be a great opportunity for budding teachers. We did not take attendance but here is the summary of the sign-up sheet that was posted in the dining hall. Obviously the final numbers were different, but we don't know what they were!

Workshop	Leader	# Signed-up
Pre-WWI Bamptom	Andy Bullen	20
English Country-Beg	Fae Fuerst	12
English Country-Exp	Fae Fuerst	12
English Solo Clog-Beg	John Cavanaugh	9
English Solo Clog-Exp	John Cavanaugh	3
Border Morris	Carol Henderson	17
Mumming	Rudd Bayfield	20
Fooling	John Gillett	26
Rapper	Karen Dotson	17

Assignment of the workshop areas was based on the teachers' estimates of numbers and needs. If it had rained we would have been in trouble, since we didn't have enough large indoor dance spaces.

The Squire's Meeting

For the record I thought I might summarize the Sunday meeting of the Squires. The teams in attendance were:

Ann Arbor Morris and Sword

Bells of the North

Bloomington

Capering Roisters

Grand Rapids

Great River

Greenwood

Hole in the Bog

Lake Effect

Maroon Bells

Merry Heymakers

MTM

Oak Apple

Rocky Mountain Morris

Sourwood/Tenpenny

It was decided that the Colorado teams would be responsible for the 1989 Mid-West Morris Ale (replacing Bloomington, Indiana) and that the Minnesota teams would be responsible for the 1990 Mid-West Morris Ale.

It was also suggested that an effort be made to increase the seed money from the present \$300, which Ann Arbor will do. Some squires thought the Ale should stay centrally located, while others felt that by hosting the Ale at the edge of the Mid-West we would attract new teams. This squire thinks that holding the final squire's meeting 30 minutes before dinner was a good idea as it seemed to keep the discussion productive and brief.

Conclusion

KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) works. The people who gather for this event are creative, motivated and intelligent people. They are going to have a great time as long as things do not get in their way. I would suggest that you view your job as creating the opportunity for great things to happen rather than making great things happen.

One last piece of advice: write the Ale report immediately after the Ale, while everyone is still talking about how it went. Momentum is lost incredibly quickly after it's over, and soon you won't want to think about it any more! There is, after all, more to the life of a Morris team than putting on an Ale.

Good Luck.



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Squire and Ale Co-Czar

Ann Arbor Morris and Sword