



George Sweat 2014 Grand Marshal

I sat down with this year's Middletown Days Grand Marshal George Sweat to ask him about his part in making the Central Park Arena a reality. On hand was his ex-wife Meriel Medrano, daughter Kari Donley, and her husband Jim Donley. They were all there getting the house ready for Middletown Days the following weekend and a coinciding family gathering.

It soon became apparent that while he was only too happy to speak with me and tell me his part in the story of how the arena came to be, he is a very self effacing gentleman. He wanted to make sure the selflessness of his peers was included in the story telling.

I learned that 8 couples originally financed the arena (including Bill Stimpson, Rudy Yudnich, Jim Kenyon, Norm Evans and himself). And, it was built so that the kids would have a place to ride. They "pulled it off on a shoe string budget and everyone donated something." He told me how Jim topped off the trees and Bill and Norm who worked as linemen for PG&E at the time donated their skills, as well.

"Bob Donley took up donations so kids who otherwise couldn't have afforded it could ride for free."

Sweat said, "I never was a cowboy. I raised horses for something to do." That "something to do" included giving horses and even saddles to kids who otherwise could not have afforded one.

Not only did everyone pitch in to get the arena going, they all pitched in to keep it open. Bill Cook would bar-b-que all night long the day before the parade. The Corner Store (as Hardester's was called back then) lent them their freezer truck for the beer they sold to pay for the insurance and expenses. Sweat "just drove it down to Central Park and plugged it in." And, Cook's located where the Mount St. Helena Brewery stands today, sold them the beer at cost.

"You know, Frank Parriot built the BBQ and Bob Weatherwax donated the alcohol."

But, not everyone has gotten the credit Sweat feels they deserve. He told me Levi Scaggs of Bar X ranch donated a lot of money and never wanted any notoriety. "He once sent his chauffer into the barbershop purposely with cash instead of a check."

We talked about Sweat's stint as town barber. He was here hunting with a friend, who was also a machinist, and went in for a haircut from then barber Vince Taylor. Taylor had heard that he had gone to barber school and asked if he wanted to buy the place when he (Taylor) retired. Sweat said he did and they came to an oral agreement. He recalled the first bit of advice Taylor gave him, "Be careful who you talk about, they're all related."

A few years later when Taylor passed, Sweat moved up to Middletown and became the town barber.

During this time he served as a Cub Scout master and met Medrano and her three young children. (Along with Cub Scouts, Sweat managed to find time for the Masons, Guenoc Grange, Middletown Fire Department, Central Park, and Demolay an educational organization for young men).

Time passed, and as the long hair fad drove men from barber shops to hair salons, Sweat found that while he could support one person cutting hair, supporting a family of 5 was another story.

So, Sweat and Medrano bought the '76 Station in Middletown in 1976. Sweat's daughter worked across the street at The Stage Coach Inn (where the Cow Poke now stands). They told me how the women would drop off their kids at school and then head on over to their own table at the Stage Coach Inn for coffee.

Sweat also reminisced about the gymkhana community. "Phil and Betty Bickford used to come to our events and we went to theirs." He told me that Rudy Yudnich originated the Hide Ride, and then he smiled, "I never rode. I wasn't that stupid." He also proclaimed that "Bill Stimpson's wife was a better cowboy than the rest."

Sweat remembers when it cost \$6 to have a horse shod; when only 5 people lived in all of Hidden Valley Lake; and when we had our own Judge in Middletown. He also remembers how that same judge, Judge John Erwin, was also the mailman and part owner of the Corner Store.

Another thing he remembers, all too well, is when the park and the surrounding neighborhood were filled with brush and deer. And, how they had to pull out all that brush to make way for the arena. After the pulling came the digging with the back hoe and shovel spoon.

His longtime friend, Bob Donley, had this to say about him, "George has always been a willing helper at Central Park. He helped build the (old) Senior Center, helped with the BBQ & stand, and the dance floor. When George, Hil Comstock, Jon Gay and I laid out the arena we were short at one end. George didn't hesitate. He said, "Just take 15' off of my property." He donated trophies for the kids' gymkhanas and helped the Junior Riding group. He was always kind and willing to help."

The parcel he donated was 15 feet wide and 40 feet long and that donation helped ensure our arena is regulation sized.

Thank you George for helping to create something that means so much to our community!