

The Pine Barrens Jamboree: Down Home Melodies and Memories

BY LILLIAN HOEY

When Wells Mills County Park opened its doors in 1991, the new staff took notice of its unique Pine Barrens setting.

The fragrance of newly opened flowers, the scent of pine needles, the melodies of birds gathering material for nesting, all surrounded the new nature center and the crowd gathered for its opening day. While the speeches were being made on the shaded deck and grassy lawns, an idea was being formed in the minds of those who could feel a pang of nostalgia. Here they were, in the piney woods again — music in the air. This feeling happened years ago when the Albert Brothers had their Saturday night home place jams in their back woods cabin. They tucked their ideas away and came back to the present festivities. The idea wasn't forgotten.

The Pine Barrens is a wonderfully unique place. The vast unbroken forests of pine, oak and cedar is the largest tract of open space on the mid-Atlantic coast. You can search shady cedar swamps for the rare curly grass fern or hike through a forest of pigmy pine trees no taller than a man.

The pure, slow moving streams are fed by a huge underground aquifer of seventeen trillion gallons and supply the marshes and bays of South Jersey with some of the cleanest water in the world.

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It was over three decades ago, deep in the woods in Waretown every Saturday night that a handful of musicians would gather for rounds of new songs, old songs, and songs of

their own creation. Their place was Joe and George Albert's cabin and they fondly called it the Old Home Place.

One of the true Pine Barrens native sons to frequent the Old Home Place was Merce Ridgway. Merce was born in the tiny hamlet of Bamber. Merce's family was musically talented, thus he grew up appreciating the stories and songs. He also developed the talent for setting his own stories and life experiences to music and played with a group called the Pinehawkers.

When George Albert passed away, it became too much for Joe. The group of pickin' pineys moved to a new location and Merce became the founding president of the Pinelands Cultural Society.

Now about that idea — the idea to have Pine Barrens (Piney) music ringing through the air again. The idea to have original piney crafters and artisans gathered together. The idea to have food, fun, and friends all with one common love, the love of their own Pine Barrens. That idea was made into reality last year when 5,000 people came to Wells Mills to celebrate the Pines and its culture. We had our first Pine Barrens Jamboree: Down Home Melodies and Memories, and we are going to have it again.

*Come and celebrate with us
Saturday, Oct. 12, from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m.
at Wells Mills County Park in Waretown.
For information about this wonderful
celebration, call Wells Mills at 609-971-3085.*



Merce Ridgway at the 1995 Pine Barrens Jamboree.