



N E A R T H E W A T E R

The Lake Petite Swing Crew Sandbar Party

By Gary Kramer

A good time was had by all 8,000 people on 1,200 boats—and almost no problems

Organized floating parties of boats and boaters are not uncommon. Both large and small, they take place on lakes and rivers all over the country every summer. Some are put together to promote a specific purpose and others are held simply to celebrate partying.

They occur with varying degrees of organization, planning and responsibility on the part of the event planners and partygoers. But there is one party that deserves a second look with regard to how its organizers have tried to plan, work with law-enforcement agencies, minimize objections from nearby homeowners and reduce the effects of garbage the party creates. Included in their efforts to accomplish all this is the publication of party rules that they ask folks who attend to follow.

A Brief History

The event has been called many things over the years. Originally it was Rodney's Party. Then it became known as Rodney's Boat Party. Later people called it the Swing Crew Party, or the Sandbar Party. But calling it the Lake Petite Swing Crew Sandbar Party highlights several important aspects.

The Swing Crew is the name of a popular band from the Wisconsin Dells, Wis., area that has played on a boat at the party since 1992. Lake Petite is on the Fox Waterway; it's a combination of the Fox River and Chain O' Lakes area that is north and a little west of Chicago. The Waterway includes some 30 miles of river and 15 inter-connecting lakes, seven of which are navigable. Lake Petite is one of these. It contains a large sandbar where the water is waist deep, making it very popular with boaters.

The party dates back to 1992 when Rodney McManamy decided to put the band on his pontoon boat on Lake Redstone by the Dells and meet some friends on the lake for a party. He recalls that perhaps 10 pontoon boats showed up and the band played without electricity. In contrast, the 2008 version on Lake Petite attracted an estimated 1,200 boats and 8,000 people.

New Rules

It took place for four successive years on Lake Redstone before it skipped a year and then began again in 1997 on Lake Petite. But as time went on, McManamy, who was the driving force and party planner, realized the need for boundaries. So he established some party rules and posted them on the party's Web site.

One rule requested that all partygoers be 21 or older. It was both an effort to curb underage drinking and a reminder as well to parents that the party was an adult event, with children best left at home. Another rule has been No Nudity, because he realized how quickly that issue could bring the event to a halt. One of the rules promoted very vigorously is No Glass. McManamy pledged to not only kick out violators of this rule, but to publicly label them as idiots. Signs were posted encouraging people not to behave like "Glassholes."

Because trash and litter were ongoing issues, he increased his requests every year that partygoers pick up not only their own trash but also pick up anybody else's they saw. He went so far as to request attendees not bring Jell-O shots in plastic containers but instead, make them in pans, cut them up and serve them in squares.

By 2007, the party had grown to the point where about 128 boats spent Friday night on the sandbar and an estimated 1,070 boats showed up for

the Saturday afternoon concert by the Swing Crew. The band played to about 6 p.m. and then the party moved to a waterfront bar.

But the size of the party had made it apparent the large number of boats created potential safety issues in case of an emergency. To improve that situation, safety channels were established and buoyed. The development brought about another party rule: No moving a boat in the channels or putting boats between them. McManamy's message about it was very clear. The party would be shut down if the buoys were moved, boats inside the buoys would be ticketed and towed and the party would be stopped until all the lanes were clear.

Incidentally, 2007 was also the year a couple barges were tied together and filled with about 80,000 pounds of sand so a volleyball tournament could be held.

Passing the Party Torch

After 15 years of organizing the party, McManamy decided it was time for him to retire. Fortunately, one of the volunteers stepped up. Mike Deron had been helping out for several years and as the owner and operator of the popular local Web site, www.funonthefox.com, felt the show should go on. But he also knew its very size and popularity made it necessary that more pro-active planning needed to take place.





Hanging
out

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Mike Deron's own Web site is
www.funonthefox.com
Find a calendar and more information
about Deron's favorite things

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Deron also realized that planning needed to include more input from the law-enforcement agencies in whose jurisdiction the party occurred. He wanted to create a better and safer party by planning, communicating and cooperating with those agencies.

Even though it had been customary for some time for volunteers to walk nearby shorelines picking up litter the day after the event, they realized they needed to improve trash control.

A business in the area specializes in the repair and sale of pre-owned snowmobiles and boats. Occasionally, it gets older boats that employees "part out" by breaking them up for parts. The business donated two stripped-down hulls and those were used as floating garbage cans. They were towed to the party site and marked with signs designating them as trash containers. When the party ended, they were covered with tarps, towed to shore and put on trailers. Eventually they were disposed of at a scrap yard at a cost of about \$100 each.

The basic idea was good, but the boats filled up with more than just cans. So, like a lot of other aspects of the party that were improved on over the years, the situation was fine-tuned. The new plan is that the hulls will have covers on them with holes cut out only large enough to admit cans. Then the cans will be recycled and the money generated can be used to help cover the party's cost.

Working With Law-Enforcement Agencies

Although there have never been any major injuries or incidents, Deron worked with the Illinois Division of Natural Resources, the Lake County Sheriff's Marine Unit, the Lake Villa, Ill., Fire Department, the Lake Villa Rescue Unit and the Fox Waterway Agency to improve several aspects of the party. He even contacted homeowners in the area, distributing his business card and pledging to try to solve any problems



Dennis Reifsteck,
lead singer of
The Swing Crew



Boats
everywhere

within a half hour that arose during the party.

Using an aerial view of the event, a grid was laid out and areas were color coded and numbered. About 100 corresponding buoys were placed at the party so that rescue units could quickly find a boat if an emergency arose. The party was divided down the middle, with a larger safety corridor running out from shore. Rows of boats were spaced far enough apart that jet skis and emergency personnel could easily travel between them.

During the party all the participating agencies, plus Deron and his volunteers, tried to stay in contact with each other. A first-aid tent was set up on shore and members of the Lake Villa Rescue Unit and Lake Villa Fire Department dispatched jet skis to patrol. Divers were standing by, just in case, too. Other agencies also had personnel on duty. Even with the size of the 2008 party, there were only a few minor cuts, just four arrests, and no Operating Under the Influence citations issued.

Lt. Bert Foster, the Marine Unit Commander for the Lake County Sheriff's Department said the department was "extremely pleased" at how it was all handled. He said Deron and his people "really wanted to do the

right thing" by including everybody they could think of in the planning stages. Noting that safety is their first priority, the Marine Unit prepared for—and expected—the worst. Unit members were pleased when it didn't happen.

Deron said he simply took the view that trouble at the party would mean the end of a good thing.

"The police gave me enough rope to hang myself," he said.

Deron based the planning on his personal feeling that if the party were not safe, he wouldn't want to be there himself. An important aspect of the planning, he noted, is that it was important "to understand the police and their views." Once that happened, policies and rules were established so that people could enjoy the party but participate responsibly.

One of the problems Deron noted is that the party brings out a lot of non-boaters on the boats. Sometimes they just didn't "understand the way of things." He said that seemed particularly noticeable with regard to discarding cigarette butts.

As of the middle of last February, organizers were pretty pleased with their efforts and the event. The law-enforcement agencies said good things about the level of responsibility of the planners and the partygoers. Many of

the surrounding homeowners reportedly enjoy the party and take part in the fun. Folks who attend seem to have a great time, so you would think everybody would be looking forward to a bigger and better 2009 version.

But whether there will be a party this summer is still up in the air. Nobody has ever made any money from the party and donations have covered the expenses, so that is not an issue. But because of the party's size, there were discussions about whether it needed to obtain permits. If that happens, insurance would probably be required, and such a situation would most likely sound the death knell for this popular event in its present form.

But because it hadn't happened, Deron and his crew continued to try to cooperate and communicate with the numerous agencies and offices that harbor concerns about the party. During the years it's happened, a lot of folks have attended and enjoyed the party. They have generally been well behaved and have not caused major problems. But only time will tell whether this major event on what is billed as the "Key West of the Midwest" will continue. 🇺🇸

Award-winning writer **Gary Kramer** has written about boats and the Mississippi River since 1972.