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Music festival's idyllic setting

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hillside is arrayed with a patchwork of blankets, bedspreads, and ponchos from all over the state.

As the sun inches across the sky and people wait for the eight p.m. concert to begin, they party, watch other people walking by, and eat picnic dinners.

Meadow Brook picnics range from lemonade and bologna sandwiches on paper plates to chilled vichyssoise, taragon chicken breasts served on china and vintage Vouvray in crystal goblets. Those with a romantic bent add a hunk of cheese to the Rubaiyat menu of "a jug of wine, a loaf of bread and thou" and bring the classic fare to Meadow Brook for their preconcert supper.

Hardly a concert goes by without a crop of birthday cakes, and at Meadow Brook strangers join in singing happy birthday. Fresh air and music seem to foster comradeship.

On the lawn facing the pavilion, mere ribbons of grass divide one blanket from another, and it's not long before people start talking to the strangers on the next blanket.

Soon a bag of chips or a plate of brownies crosses the line as folks offer their bounty to neighbors. Kids from one family challenge those on the next blanket to checkers or Pente or a Frisbee contest on the other side of the hill.

Only lovers sit two by two, oblivious to the bustle around them.

ON SOME EVENINGS a hot-air balloon may drift languidly across the sky in the gentle early-evening air. All eyes watch its journey and listen when it fires its burners that sound like a dragon breathing.

Constance Schuller of Ann Arbor remembers watching a plane loop overhead pulling a trailer that wished "Happy Birthday" to someone in the audience.

Frank Bollinger, retired director of Meadow Brook Theatre public affairs, recalls about five years ago when "the wave" of U of M and Tiger fame came to Meadow Brook after a concert by the Canadian Brass. The wave arose spontaneously and washed across the hillside.

The midsummer night morn of Meadow Brook inspires serendipity. At a Boston Pops concert in 1985, it had just started sprinkling lightly when the orchestra under John Williams struck up "Singing in the Rain."

"Somebody started twirling an umbrella," Sylvia Coughlin, director of

public relations for Meadow Brook Theatre, remembers. "I looked around and in a matter of seconds the whole hill was covered with umbrellas twirling to the music."

Jim Spittle, assistant general director of Meadow Brook Theatre, recalls high jinks that got a little out of hand one evening in 1985 when the lawn was covered with picnickers munching drumsticks and partying contentedly before the concert.

Pranksters broke into the pump house on the grounds and turned on part of the sprinkler system. Swirling water sent people screaming and scrambling out of its reach.

At most indoor concerts, people will tap their feet when the beat starts to bounce and maybe they'll get to clapping to the rhythm. At Meadow Brook, they're more uninhibited and jump up the aisles to dance.

When The Rovers played their rollicking melodies two years ago, a few people on the hill leapt up to dance the Irish jig. Those around them made way for flying feet and clapped in rhythm. One by one, other dancers answered the music's call until the hill was covered with pockets of people dancing the jig in the growing dusk.

JANE MOSHER, WHO directs group sales and community relations for the festival, remembers standing beside the pine tree at the top of the hill on the night of the first festival concert.

"The barns near Meadow Brook Hall had just been painted white, and the moon was shining on them. It was perfectly beautiful." Such images imprint like snapshots in memory and bring fresh pleasure years later.

In 1976, the year of the nation's bicentennial, the festival staff passed out candles to everyone who came to concerts on the Fourth of July weekend. At a signal, people in the pavilion and on the lawn lit candles and shared their flame with those around them.

Each candle shone on the face of the person holding it, and the darkness came alive with light in celebration of the country's first 200 years. People who were there locked the candlelit image in memory, and photographers captured it to use on program covers the next year.

John Riccardo served with his wife, Thelma, as chairmen of volunteers during an early festival summer. He said, "I remember most the enthusiasm of volunteers and that they all had fun. The idea was fairly new in those days, and it was exciting to watch it grow."

June 2, 1988

MEADOWBROOK MUSIC FESTIVAL

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