

Now I know ...

Behind the scenes at the Rotary Pancake Breakfast. by Lori Ruhlman

(A reprint ... originally published in 2015)

Back when the Rotary Pancake Breakfast meant a stack of pancakes and an opportunity to see everyone in town, I had no idea what all went in to pulling off this community-wide event. I was just focused on the slice-of-Skaneateles-life that the event provided. It was a once-a-year opportunity to see entire families together ... and a chance to watch a generation of children grow up, year by year.

It was a whole different story for me back in 2007 when I had just become a Rotarian. As a new Rotarian, I saw the planning begin in February and escalate to full pitch by June. I took pictures while a bunch of guys between the ages of 16 and 82 carried three or four tons of equipment out of David Lee's barn on Pork Street and loaded it into waiting pickup trucks and trailers the Friday before the event.

I had never thought about how those stoves got set up, or where the tables came from, or who ordered the 500+ pounds of sausage or the 550+ pounds of New Hope Mills Buttermilk pancake mix.



I never wondered about who cracked almost 10,000 eggs or made 10,500 pancakes. That was before I was assigned to work at Eggs East – not to be confused with Eggs West, headed by Jack Hyatt. Eggs East is the egg and sausage station to the left of the pancakes. Eggs West is to the right. Apparently there has been a long friendly rivalry between the two sides for years.



We folks at Eggs East cracked thousands of eggs while cracking jokes that first year ... (and every year since).

Although I didn't crack two at a time, as some told me I would, I got really fast – pausing after every three dozen or so to use an electric mixer and then to dump them into an even bigger pot with hundreds of other mixed eggs.

From there the eggs were poured into pitchers, where they were poured into individual pans, looked over by other volunteers who stirred them until they were ready to be served.

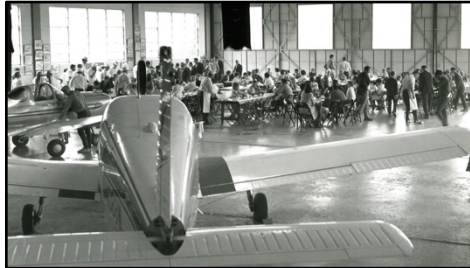


While the folks at Eggs East and Eggs West were focused only on cracking, mixing, and cooking, there were dozens of others who were zeroed in on making the pancakes. Karen Price, brand new to Rotary, was the first woman ever to be up there flipping pancakes. She joined long timers like volunteers Jim Murphy and Jim Rhinehart and Rotarians like Bill Stevens.

Meanwhile, dozens of others were performing very specific jobs. Gary Caldwell was assigned to be the maître d' (in more recent years this social task has been done by the one and only Bill Buterbaugh); others were assigned to oversee the volunteers on the floor; others had specific duties like keeping track of things like utensils and refrigerator supplies. Boy Scouts were on trash patrol. That is what makes this such a well-oiled machine: a total of about 150 people help, and each one has a job.

As always, many volunteers are related to the Rotary Youth Exchange Program and Skaneateles High School's Interact Club.

Long after the last pancake was served, people were working to fold up chairs, clean off stoves, wash supplies and take down banners that show Rotary Clubs from all over the world.



The organizers and old timers finally sat down in a back room, among the empty boxes and the supplies, to hash over the event. Dana Coye told how the breakfast started in 1968 as a fly-in at the Skaneateles airport hangar, drawing 80 to 90 planes from around the east coast. After seven years, the breakfast was moved to its current location.



That makes this year's breakfast the 48th one in Skaneateles. Rotarians have been busy planning for months. Every Rotarian knows to block off Father's Day, June 19, for an entire day of work ... and many will be working Friday and Saturday to set up for the community-wide event. On Monday, June 20, they will be back at the old arena tearing down the big equipment and loading it back up to be stored in David Lee's barn for another year. Why do they do it every year?

"We do it to make money for all of our community projects," said Coye. "We also do it for the fellowship it provides for the community."

It is a community happening; a once-a-year event that pulls all kinds of people and organizations together to work for a common cause. It is a tradition, and it is part of the fabric of the community.

Why else? I had a taste of why else. It isn't just a ton of work. It is more than that. Rotarian Roberta Williams put words to my feelings, as she sat there, exhausted, at the end of a long day. "It's fun. I look forward to it every year," she said.

Circumstances have made it difficult for me to be a complete part of the breakfast the past couple of years, and I found I really missed it. I am looking forward to being part of that big family of people again ... wearing my Rotary apron and working all day.

It's like throwing a big, huge party, and inviting everyone in town to attend. And in the end, instead of spending money, you've earned money. Enough money to support exchange students who come and enrich the community for an entire year; enough to contribute to worthy causes like food pantries, Boys State, literacy, Helping Hands, and Odyssey of the Mind. Enough to give a Rotary Scholarship to a graduating senior and to send underclassmen for leadership training. Enough to support the international Rotary Foundation, which works to make the world less hungry and more peaceful.

I'd crack an egg for those reasons any day.