



PARKING LOT PARTY

The evolution of tailgating tradition at Kansas State University



Photos and story by Kaitlin Morgan

The smoke of a charcoal grill floating across an asphalt lot, the smell of barbecue lofting in the air and the sound of laughter and cheer coming from a sea of purple and white. Although this is the tailgating scene today at

Kansas State University, it wasn't the same 30 years ago.

The story has been told often: Bill Snyder took one of the worst football programs in the nation and created possibly the greatest turnaround college football has

ever seen. But what about the evolution of the K-State game day? When did tailgating hit the Little Apple and transform into a party in the parking lot?

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Back row, L to R: Eric Atkinson, Charlie Lee, and Daryl Buchholz. Middle row: Joyce Buchholz, Barb Losey, Sherry Lee and Rhonda Atkinson. Front row: Roger Losey and Barry Flinchbaugh.

The Turnaround

Just a senior in high school at the time, Eric Atkinson, extension agricultural radio specialist, remembers the first K-State football game he ever attended. It was 1973, and K-State was playing its in-state rival, the University of Kansas, but he says back in those days both teams played the game for bragging rights and then looked ahead to the basketball season. He jokes that for either team, that win could have been their only one of the season.

Atkinson purchased tickets in the student section every year of his undergraduate career at K-State, but did he tailgate?

“Heavens no, nobody did,” Atkinson says. “Tailgating wasn’t that big of phenomenon back then. I’d say it didn’t start picking up here until the early ’90s when it became a big thing at the Kansas City Chiefs games.”

Atkinson’s longtime friend and tailgating partner, Barry Flinchbaugh, professor of agricultural economics at K-State, likes to joke that the team was so bad before Snyder came, not even

Willie Nelson could fill the stands during halftime.

It is a valid point considering Nelson stopped in Manhattan as part of his Farm Aid concert tour in the ’80s to help raise awareness and funds for struggling family farmers. Flinchbaugh recalls the university having to pay Nelson for the charity concert because they couldn’t fill enough seats in the stadium to cover the concert fee.

As director of athletics in the late ’80s, Steve Miller had a lot to do with the increase in pregame activity. He hired Snyder as head football coach, fundraised for the athletic department and planned events like carnivals before the games to draw families into the parking lot.

“The program really turned around in 1991 when K-State fans finally got a taste of success,” Atkinson says. “We had a winning record, but the keynote of that year was when we

came back and beat KU. That year they actually had a fairly decent football team and K-State rallied to come back and win, shocking both K-State and KU fans.”

As the team continued its success, Atkinson says “the fever grew.” The once “good-sized crowd” of 15,000 was replaced by sold-out seasons. The gravel parking lot surrounding the stadium was paved, and the football program, “breathed spirit back into the university.”

Atkinson says Snyder’s success on the field led him to be a leader off the field as well, and fans and alumni started feeling good about the university again. The spirit he brought with him was so much more than athletics; it was a spirit of support.

“A K-State home game in a sense has become the event of the weekend,” Atkinson says. “It does not matter if you’re a high-rolling, big-time donor or a freshman in college attending your first football game, when you’re in the parking lot there’s no difference, just a big group of people celebrating their pride for the team, the program and the university.”



Larry Reichenberger, Bill Miller and Debbie Miller show their K-State spirit at their tailgate.

“Your actual family, your K-State family — it doesn’t make a difference because when you’re in the parking lot we are all family.”

—Kelsey Olson

Family Reunion

Larry Reichenberger and Bill Miller started tailgating together more than 20 years ago, but back in those days it was different.

“The first tailgate I actually remember was against Missouri,” Reichenberger says. “We got to the game and parked right outside the stadium maybe an hour before kickoff. I had a small Weber grill and we tried to cook brats, but had trouble getting the coals lit and ended up eating them nearly raw. By the time we got into the game, we were behind 21-0 with time left in the first quarter and eventually lost 52-21.”

Both the football team and Reichenberger’s tailgating skills have improved, but his favorite part of tailgating was never the food. To him, tailgating is all about spending time with friends and family, like the Millers.

Larry and his wife, Sue, met Bill Miller and his wife, Debbie, while they were all at K-State in the early ’70s majoring in journalism. Reichenberger, who now works as an editor for John Deere’s *The Furrow*, was once the editor of the *Agriculturist* in 1975.

Now, even though the couples live in different parts of the state, they use tailgating as a way to reunite each fall. The group has even started its own tailgating

tradition, an annual shrimp boil, which has become their favorite tailgating dish.

“Tailgating has become a regular part of our game day routine,” says Reichenberger. “Like a lot of things at K-State, it’s just become a part of who we are. I could count on one hand the games where we haven’t tailgated in the past 20 years. I guess it’s sort of like a regularly scheduled family reunion of friends and family that everybody just knows will happen.”

Sharing the Spirit

Any good tailgater knows there are many factors that play into hosting a successful tailgate, but the most important is the atmosphere. K-State may not have an oak grove like Ole Miss or a giant pasture outside a stadium that seats 100,000 people like Penn State, but what it does have is many friendly and welcoming people packed into parking lots right next to the stadium.

It’s not uncommon to see complete strangers, maybe even opponents, sharing food and making conversation.

“Tailgating brings together people from all walks of life unlike anything else,” says Kelsey Olson,

K-State College of Agriculture alumna. “It’s not about the food and the drinks; the most important part is surrounding yourself with fellow K-State fans. You may have known them all your life or met them in line to use the Cat Cans porta-potty.”

Olson first began tailgating with her family in the late ’90s. In college, she remembers walking around the east lot with her mom visiting friends’ tailgates.

“She can be the life of the party with her jokes and wit,” Olson says. “My friends still laugh about some of the jokes she’s shared over the years.”

A shiny new pickup truck, the best grill money can buy or the



Kelsey Olson with her mom, Kathy Holste, celebrating family time by tailgating before the game against the University of Kansas.

best football team in the nation: none of that creates the magic made at a K-State tailgate.

“Tailgating is all about family,” says Olson. “Your actual family, your K-State family — it doesn’t matter because when you’re in the parking lot, we are all family.” **KS**