

An idea born, nurtured through determination

Alpenfest today is one of the state's premium festivals, but 25 years ago, it was a fledgling, small-town event faced with looming threats of financial insolvency.

A committee of about a dozen area people organized the first Alpine Festival, as it was called in 1965.

One of those people, Jerry Fox, recalled the early-morning round-table discussions in which that festival was planned.

"The object at that time was to have a festival for the local people — for the city of Gaylord," Fox said. "I don't think it was ever meant to be a commercial thing."

At numerous 6 a.m. coffee meetings, the details were worked out. Some of the ideas succeeded, some failed.

"We had a lot of ups and downs," Fox conceded. "Probably the biggest problem we had was raising funds. I can remember digging in our pockets at the end (of the festival) for \$400-\$500 apiece to make ends meet."

Fellow organizer Tag Tripp, who was chairman of the second festival effort, said the group operated on a thread-bare budget.

"We got all the free acts we could get," Tripp said.

What made the festival a success, according to Fox, was the efforts of all the volunteers.

"Everyone worked hard but everyone worked together," Fox remembered. "It was easy because we worked together."

"I don't think it was ever hard because we had so much fun doing it," he added.

Bob Fritz, the first Alpine Festival chairman, said the seminal influence for the entire Alpine theme, including the festival, was the Alpine architectural motif employed in the construction of The Otsego Ski Club / Hidden Valley facilities.

Fritz said he and Harold Elgas, then president of the old Gaylord State Bank, and Donald Smith, manager of Vaughn's Dept. Store, were sold on the idea of marketing Gaylord based on an Alpine theme and decided an Alpine Festival would be a good way to do it.

"We didn't know what it would become," he said. "We played it by ear."

From the beginning, he said, the success of the festival depended on local cooperation.

"Everybody worked together," he said.

Many of the ideas for events, including "the world's largest coffee break" came from "brainstorming," Fritz said.

Some things just fell together, he said. An example was the drum and bugle corps that appeared in the first few grand parades.

It just so happened, he said, that many of the bands came from Ohio and were traveling through Gaylord on I-75 on their way to band competitions elsewhere.

Gary Waldo, then Gaylord High School's band director, and music chairman for the first festival, helped make arrangements for the band members to sleep in the high school gymnasium, and for local restaurants to feed them, Fritz said.



Betsy Gilmore, daughter of Gary and Shari Waldo, carries on alphorn tradition in late '70s.

Many coincidental elements helped the first Alpine Festival succeed, he added.

U.S. Plywood opened its new plant and held an open house at the same time as the festival, he said, which insured more people, including the governor and other dignitaries, would be on hand for the parade and other activities.

Schlang's Bavarian Inn on Old 27 South had planned its first Bavarian Festival Tent, with beer, bratwurst and polka dancing. Its opening coincided with Gaylord's festival, Fritz said.

"They weren't part of the festival, per se," he said, "but we

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