

Strength for next 25

For "Mr. Alpine Village" Harold Elgas, Alpenfest is not just a summer festival. It's a facet of Gaylord's identity as Michigan's Alpine Village.

And for Elgas, it is impossible to discuss the 25-year history of Alpenfest without explaining how the economic developments in Gaylord in the early 1960s that gave Alpenfest the impetus to start its 25-year run.

"The community had taken a look at itself and saw there were major things that needed attention," explained Elgas, who as president of the old Gaylord State Bank helped spearhead the transformation of the city into Michigan's Alpine Village.

Back then, such things as chronic unemployment, inability to retain young people, threat of US 27 being replaced by an interstate and 15 vacant stores on Main Street were troubling to area residents.

So a core of area business people and others put together the first Alpine Festival in 1965.

"It was not until four years later the term 'Alpenfest' was coined," Elgas noted.

Elgas named seven businesses as key to the formation of Alpenfest along with volunteers and the City of Gaylord: U.S. Plywood (now Georgia-Pacific), Schlang's Bavarian Inn, Hidden Valley, Herald Times, Weeklies Inc., Glen's Markets and the Gaylord State Bank (now Old Kent Bank of Gaylord).

Those nine will be honored at the annual Alpenfest Honors Luncheon Saturday, July 22 at Hidden Valley Resort.

"But there were many other businesses that played a vital role," Elgas added. "That's why it was successful, because it met with a high degree of acceptance and enthusiasm."

One of the most important aspects of the festival, Elgas stressed, is the wearing of costumes. Although the costumes are often considered a gimmick for tourists, that is not the case, according to Elgas.

"The wearing of costumes is the badge of participation," he explained. "We need to keep reminding ourselves of that. The major reason for having an Alpenfest is to provide the glue to hold us together."

For that reason, the costume promenade has been traditionally scheduled on the first full day of the festival, even though it is not a day when the bulk of the tourists visit Alpenfest.

"It wasn't meant to benefit the people who come here," Elgas said. "It's for us."

It is the participation in the festival, including the wearing of costumes, that has given Alpenfest its long run, according to Elgas.

"I believe that because people wear costumes we've lasted 25 years," he said.

Although the attraction of tourists is only a part of the reason behind Alpenfest, it is undeniably an important one.

Elgas said the well over \$50 million in Alpine architecture in Gaylord has transformed the town into a fantasyland that beckons those seeking uniqueness and intrigue.

The whole concept originated with Don McLouth and the ar-

chitecture at Hidden Valley. In the 1960s, the concept, which had laid dormant for two decades, was revived by the chamber of commerce.

And the timing was opportune.

U.S. Plywood was just moving into Gaylord and starting production of particleboard using a process developed by a Swiss man.

It was this Swiss man, Fred Fahrni, who worked with the city, chamber and U.S. Plywood to establish a sister-city relationship with Pontresina, Switzerland.

"I think the Alpine motif, the sister-city relationship and the wearing of the costumes makes us unique in the nation, except for a few," Elgas said. "You see different ideas in some of these places but you don't see many of them having the staying power."

Elgas said Alpenfest will need to keep recruiting enthusiastic, dedicated volunteers to see it through another 25 years.

"We need to maintain our quality, our enthusiasm and our environment," Elgas said. "What Alpenfest needs for the future is a continuation of the continuity of management, because it has to be done in a quality way. There has to be a very strong group that believes in the traditions that Alpenfest has fostered."

"The continuity won't just happen," he added. "A continuance requires leadership and hundreds of volunteers to pick up the tradition."

He said there will be a constant need for more enthusiasm, more ideas and more volunteers.

"With all of that, it will endure," Elgas said. "The future is so bright."

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