

Growth aids chamber today

When Bill Wishart arrived in Gaylord in 1961, he attended his first Otsego County Chamber of Commerce annual dinner dance at St. Mary's School.

Wishart, who assumed duties as the Gaylord / Otsego County Chamber of Commerce's executive director last October, will steer the 50-year-old organization into a new decade and into its next 50 years.

On the occasion of the chamber's golden anniversary, the administrator took a few minutes to reflect on what he knows of the chamber's past and the past of the community.

"From 1961-1966 (it) was so exciting. Interstate 75 opened, and I consider that really the most significant thing to happen to the community. It meant easy access to our visitors...It opened us up for recreation — hunting, fishing, skiing, snowmobiling."

Other things began happening. A downtown revitalization project was in the mill. When Wishart first arrived, several downtown stores were empty and buildings were unattractive.

A commitment to form an Industrial Development Corporation materialized, and those involved were paying more than lip service to the project, he said. Glen's Market moved to a "field" on the west edge of town, and he recalled how some had called owner C. Glen Catt "crazy for moving the grocery store out in the country."

Wishart's first contact with the chamber was with its "dynamic" executive manager Harry Collins. "He was 'Mr. Gaylord' at the



Bill Wishart

time," Wishart said of the man who served as manager from 1958-1970.

The next chamber dynamo to manage the organization was Ed Calkins. "He made a lot of contributions," Wishart said of Calkins, who managed the chamber from 1970-1974.

"He has class and style and he's done a lot for the community. He did a lot behind the scene he's not gotten credit for."

On Calkins' heels came manager James Knight, who served from 1974-1980.

In 1980 a woman — Nancy Morgridge — took the reins of the chamber for the first time.

"That was unique," said Wishart, "for the first time we had a lady executive director."

Wishart believes as a successful woman, Morgridge brought a fresh perspective to the chamber.

"She realized a lot of decisions about vacations are made by ladies of the home and children." Morgridge developed promotions along those lines as well as the traditional ones.

Finally, Wishart's immediate predecessor, Paul Beachnau, headed the chamber during another major transition, 1985-1989.

"All kinds of things were going on, especially golf. He formed the golf council and golf mecca and promotions." With all that activity, it was under Beachnau's administration that the chamber board decided to split the chamber into a tourism and convention bureau and the chamber of commerce.

"It was good thinking on the part of the board of directors," Wishart said of the split. The two agencies work hand in glove, he added.

Wishart served as chamber president in 1969. The chamber's budget was \$28,000 that year.

This year, the chamber's budget is \$112,000, with another \$283,000 allocated for the convention and tourism bureau.

Summing up the progress the community — in many ways guided by the chamber — has made, Wishart shared this sentiment expressed by a friend: "If you could buy stock in Gaylord, I'd buy all the stock I could."

Chamber members are committed first to their businesses, and secondly to the community. That's why volunteer organizations flourish here, and schools and special groups find support in Gaylord, he concluded.

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