

New and perennial NCF events for seniors

MELANIE TACOMA
Record-Eagle staff writer

It's a busy week for seniors. Not only are the annual favorites, shuffleboard, horseshoes, bowling, euchre, golf and pinochle, back again, but the National Cherry Festival and Grand Traverse Pavilions continue to update their selection of events for seniors.

"We have a full week of events for adults," said senior activities director Patti DeAgostino. "We're working to make more intergenerational events."

Among the newer events is the popular Grandparents' Picnic, which debuted last year.

"What we did (this year) is include the request that the kids bring their favorite teddy bear with them, and we'll have

a parade of bears," DeAgostino said. She added that there will be a prize for the best dressed bear.

Participation in the parade is limited to 250 children. Tickets are available at Grand Traverse Pavilions, the Traverse City Senior Center and the National Cherry Festival Office. The picnic will be at noon on Tuesday, July 8.

New this year are the Very Cherry Swing Dance Lessons and the Very Cherry Swing Dance which take place beginning at 7 p.m. on Wednesday. The swing dance will feature a "battle of the big bands," between two area big bands: Up North Big Band and Sun Radius Studio Big Band.

"There will also be some vocal performances," DeAgostino added. "So if you're a little shy you can sit

and listen to the beautiful music."

There is a \$10 entrance fee that covers both the lessons and dance.

Another new offering for seniors is the Historical Tour of Cherry City USA, which will take place on Friday between 1 and 4 p.m. For a \$5 admission fee, Festival-goers will be whisked on tour of historic Traverse City. The tour departs from Northwestern Michigan College University Center and includes stops at the City Opera House, the Heritage Center, Grand Traverse Pavilions, Building 50 and the Commons Barn.

"I chose these sites because of the restoration and preservation projects going on," DeAgostino said. "We wanted to showcase the real gems of the city."



Record-Eagle file photo

The Very Cherry Distinguished Senior Breakfast, sponsored by Grand Traverse Pavilions will be Monday, July 7, starting at 9 a.m. at the Traverse City Elks Lodge. Northwestern Michigan's Distinguished Senior Citizen will be announced by last year's winner Margaret Dunn. For reservations, call the Traverse City Senior Center at 922-4911 by July 2. The cost is \$3 per person.

Mel Gee celebrates 50th year with Festival

BY SARAH HENRY
Record-Eagle staff writer

In Mel Gee's apartment, at the base of the Old Mission Peninsula, telltale National Cherry Festival memorabilia lurk around every corner.

A white teddy bear with images of cherries scattered on it sits on the TV, a souvenir from the year he was the Grand Marshal in the DTE Energy Cherry Royale Parade.

A large National Cherry Festival flag waves in the breeze outside the sliding door on his balcony. Gee said he asked for a flag with no year imprinted on it, because he wanted it to be timeless.

Framed certificates of participation at the Festival hang on the walls, as well as an exaggerated caricature sketch of Gee that grins broadly from its perch.

A National Cherry Festival history book rests on a shelf. A megaphone used during the annual Milk Carton Boat Regatta sits beneath a table with a Christmas village and electronic train set, silently announcing that Gee is still a kid at heart.

Mel Gee, born in 1927, has lived in Traverse City all his life. This year he celebrates his 50th year as a volunteer for the National Cherry Festival.

Gee can tell many long ago Cherry Festival memories that few can recall.

"One year, people gathered along the banks of the bay across from what is now the Chamber of Commerce building to watch the fireworks," Gee said. "I don't know what happened, but they caught fire. They went every which way and everyone scattered."

Gee can remember when Governor Mennen Williams came to the Cherry Festival in 1951, and got thrown in the Cherry Jail.

"He wasn't wearing his button that said, 'I ate my cherry pie' and they took him down to Front Street and put him in the jail," he said. "He was also put in the stocks."

In 1975, President Gerald Ford visited the Festival, which created quite a stir. So much of a stir, in fact, that Gee said earlier in the day before the parade there was a bomb threat.

"They never did find anything, but the secret service

men opened up every manhole cover and opened up everyone's coolers," Gee said. "They wouldn't let people stand on porches or in windows during the parade."

Gee said the parade proceeded uneventfully, with the President's car escorted by Traverse City Central's high school band.

He also has fond memories of 1987, when the largest cherry pie in the world was created, and made the Guinness Book of World Records. The pie tin is mounted in front of Sara Lee on Cass street still today.

Most of Gee's memories, however, involve music in some way or another. From the time he played the bass clarinet in high school to his former store on Union Street, Mel Gee's Music Shop, to his 50 years of participation with the bands and parades at the Cherry Festival, Gee has never been without a cheerful tune.

Each year for the past four or five years, Gee has been in charge of the public address at the parades during the Cherry Festival.

He sets up at the corner of Front and Union Streets and provides lighthearted com-

mentary as he introduces various bands to the public and provides a history of the buildings downtown for visitors and passersby.

He is also the founding member of the Grand Traverse Highlanders Pipe and Drums, a bag-pipe band, and has sung in his church choir for 65 years.

Gee is a prominent figure in the community. He volunteers at his church every Wednesday morning to set tables for the weekly TGIW (Thank God It's Wednesday) dinner. When he fully recovers from hip surgery, he will return to his job at Prevo's Family Market.

Whether you catch sight of him enjoying breakfast at Round's restaurant on Eighth Street or introducing bands at the National Cherry Festival, Gee is always a smiling Traverse City face.

Mel Gee



Gee said he will continue to volunteer at the Festival as long as he is able.

"We just have a good time, that's all," he said.