

Son of NCF founder remembers Festival's first years

BY MELANIE TACOMA
Record-Eagle staff writer

Dr. Robert Jay Smith, professor of biology, can recall with perfect clarity the day he first heard about the National Cherry Festival.

"I remember one day when I was 7 or 8 years old, my dad came home for lunch and said, 'I have the most wonderful idea. We're going to have a national cherry festival,'" Smith said. "I remember it like a snapshot. He was so excited about it, I thought I should be excited too."

Smith's father was Jay P. Smith, who was president of the Traverse City Chamber of Commerce in 1928 and worked for the Traverse City Record-Eagle from 1921 to 1961, with the exception of five years when he worked for the Michigan Public Service Commission. For many of these years he was the paper's editor. According to Smith, his father and Harold Titus, an area author, came up with the

idea to replace the two-day "Blessing of the Blossoms" festival with a cherry festival.

"He wanted to put forth Traverse City as a resort destination," Smith explained. "As president of the Chamber of Commerce and editor of the paper he and Harold Titus hatched the idea. My dad presented it to the Chamber of Commerce and they accepted it. It took off from there."

Smith explained that his father was committed to bringing tourism and attention to a place that he thoroughly enjoyed himself.

"My dad loved this area," Smith said. "He said, 'I don't have to travel the world, I just have to go out to the countryside here.' That was long before Traverse City was recognized as a resort area."

"I don't know much about the planning or the financing of the Festival," he added, reflecting on his father's contributions to the Festival. "All I do know is that, even after he retired from the Record-

Eagle, it was my dad's job to pick the dates for the Cherry Festival. For 20 years he did that and not once in 20 years did it rain."

Though Smith hasn't been to the National Cherry Festival for 10 years, he has many memories of the first years of the festival.

"There are three things I remember most," he said. "The children's parade; I was a child at the time. The Mummer's Parade, where they had clowns and everyone went wild, it was like Marti Gras.

And the biggest event of the festival was the Grand Floral Parade on Front Street."

Smith recalled that the Festival in those days was as big an event as it is now, and he remembers many of the same activities: pie-eating, fireworks and parades among them.

"Mother was asked several times to be the grand marshal of the parade," Smith remembered. "And she said, 'Who do they think I am, Queen Elizabeth?' She would never do it."

In addition to the parades, contests and displays, one event stands out in Smith's memory: choosing the National Cherry Queen. He remembers Queen candidates coming from all around Northern Michigan.

"We used to have the crowning of the queen on the steps of the courthouse," he said. "And she had a float and everything. That was big, I mean big. During the Floral Parade, all the streets were closed off. It was the biggest event of the year."

Cherry Memories

1999 was my first year in Traverse City and my first Cherry Festival. I lived in the Park Place Hotel prior to moving my family up from Memphis, TN, and met Chuck, Susan, Tom and other other Festival staff. I told Susan that, while I was unfamiliar with the Festival, I had worked with the May Festival in Memphis, and said she could call me if they needed anything. A huge thunderstorm rolled in on the first or second night of the Festival, with bolts of lightening and sheets of rain. WJR Radio was to do a live remote broadcast from the Open Space the next morning at 6:00. The phone in my room rang at about 2 a.m. and Susan Olson from the Festival said, "Robert, we've been washed out at the Open Space — do you have a meeting room available for the radio show?" I agreed to check it out, but there was no room at the Inn. When I called Susan back with the bad news, she asked about the lobby. In addition to dealing with the small 3 a.m. staff, we needed to have four phone lines, a T1 and lots of extra electrical. For the next few hours Susan, the morning show crew (barefoot and soaking wet from salvaging equipment) and I improvised, adapted and overcame, and WJR went on the air on schedule.

Robert Gattin


general manager, Holiday Inn—West Bay

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