

IFEA 50th Anniversary History

Interregnum

Herb Melleney takes great pride in the fact that he was able to make the job of executive director of IFA a full-time paid position. Melleney, who attended his first IFA meeting in 1962 at the Summit Hotel in New York City, served as the Association's first full-time executive director from 1984 to 1988.

Melleney followed the immensely popular Ken Walstad, who had passed away in his sleep at the 1983 Phoenix Convention. Melleney's first task was to transfer the Association's records from the office of the Minneapolis Aquatennial, where Walstad had been the managing director since 1961 and IFA's volunteer executive since 1969.

"What I got from Minneapolis was a very small plastic box with 3X5 cards listing membership information," Melleney recalled. "At the time, we only had about 70-75 members."

Melleney brought a lifetime of festivals experience to his tenure as IFA's executive director. The son of a U.S. Air Force officer, Melleney grew up on a succession of military bases. Melleney himself served in the Air Force during the Korean War and after and wound up in California selling ski packages at Squaw Valley. He moved back east in 1956 and spent the next six years in advertising with Shell Oil and the McCann Erickson Agency.

Melleney got into the festivals business in 1962 when he was hired by the Festival of States in St. Petersburg, Florida. The

Festival had been in business since 1917 and had joined IFA in 1960. Melleney's first convention in the fall of 1962 was an eye-opener. "We didn't need a meeting room," he recalled. "I think there were only about seven people in attendance. We just got a hotel room and moved the bed out into the hall."

Because he was a member of the organization just six years after it was formed, Melleney worked closely with the founders of the organization, including John Geisler of the St. Paul Winter Carnival, Joe Mickler of the Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla Pirate Festival in Tampa, and Leon Cazin of the Latin American Fiesta in Tampa's Ybor City.

Melleney had the highest regard for Geisler, who started in festivals immediately after World War II in South Dakota and managed the St. Paul Winter Carnival from 1952 to 1970. "John was just a very unique guy," Melleney described Geisler, who died in 2002. "We called him our knight in shining armor. He would go anywhere and ask anybody for anything. He had a real knack for putting stuff together. He was extremely well thought of in this business."

Melleney worked his way up through the chairs of the Association in the 1960's and served as IFA's President in 1970. Along the way, he hosted two conventions in St. Petersburg and knew everybody in the festivals business nationwide.

Shortly after Ken Walstad died in Phoenix, Melleney retired as

executive director of the Festival of the States. When the IFA board asked him to take over the reins of the Association in 1984, Melleney agreed, but with the stipulation that the management of the organization be put on a more professional basis. Melleney's salary for the next four years was \$15,000 a year, and he was given enough of a budget to hire two part-time staffers.

"I still had to furnish the office out of my own pocket," he said.

One of Melleney's primary goals during his four years as executive director was growing IFA's membership. "I started going out and beating the bushes," he said. "One of our major thrusts was to help the small festivals, most of which were staffed by volunteers. We operated from the philosophy that there was no reason an insurance salesman should necessarily know how to run a parade."

In four years, Melleney and his staff increased membership in IFA four-fold, to 300 members.

"We were all about the sharing of ideas," he said. "We pitched ourselves as a networking organization. None of us were really competitors, so there were no secrets. We were always very clean, very open."

In 1988, with Melleney's retirement, management of the IFA became the responsibility of Don Lunday, a longtime member and supporter of the IFA and festivals in general. Lunday moved the office to Pasadena, California during his brief, two-year tenure as executive director.