

IFEA 50th Anniversary History

Madame President

IFEA's first female member went on to become the Association's first female president.

Madeline Neupert was a Bridgeport, Connecticut native who has spent the past half-century in nearby Stratford, Connecticut. Neupert graduated from high school in her native Bridgeport in 1945 and worked as a legal secretary for nearly 15 years. During the 1950s, she became an active volunteer for the city's annual P.T. Barnum Festival, which got its start in 1949.

"P.T. Barnum was much more than a showman or circus operator," she said. "He developed a number of waterfront neighborhoods in the city and was actually elected Mayor of Bridgeport."

Neupert's volunteer activities with the Festival got her involved with the Parade of Champions and the American Legion Drum Corps competition. In 1956, Festival organizers asked Neupert to become executive director.

Neupert remembered how the Festival brought the community together. "It was a great equalizer," she said of the volunteer work that kept the Festival running smoothly. "For the guy on the factory floor, it was his chance to sit with the big guys. The fact that everyone was welcome was a great way to build volunteer participation."

Neupert added that the local ownership of what later became Fortune 500 corporations was of inestimable value to Festival organizers. "When I was executive director," she said, "I could pick up the phone and call the owner of Bridgeport Brass. Today, the corporations often make the decisions when it comes to local festivals, but the top people rarely participate."

Neupert joined what was still IFA in 1960, four years into her 12-year tenure as executive director of the Barnum Festival. At the time, she was the first female member of the Association. But there weren't all that many men who belonged to the organization, either. "I think there were only about six or eight people at the first meeting I attended," Neupert laughed.

Meetings in the early 1960s were far more informal and less elaborate than they later became. Neupert recalled that at the time, all of the Association's meetings were held at the Summit Hotel in New York City. "We didn't need too large a room," she said. "We met once a year, and we were in touch the rest of the time by phone and by mail. We didn't have e-mail then."

Neupert was elected vice president of the Association in 1962 and became president the next year. She noted that John Geisler and Ken Walstad, founding members of the Association and directors during her term as president, would typically take the train out from Minneapolis several days prior to IFA meetings to confer with Neupert. "All we would talk about was festivals," she said. "There was no discussion of world affairs, no conversation about religion, no debate about politics – only about festivals."

Neupert described her presidency as uneventful. "There was not an awful lot involved," she said. "You'd be responsible for getting a couple of speakers for the meeting. And you'd have to line up hospitality rooms where we would inevitably stay up all night talking."

One of the fondest memories of Neupert's years in IFA was how casu-

al those early meetings were. In the 1960s, there was no annual banquet. "Who wants to go to dinner?" Neupert would ask late in the afternoon, pairing up members by their preference that evening for steak, or Italian, or Chinese.

"Our meetings were obviously informal," Neupert added. "We did have speakers in those days, but the talent was in the gathering of the members themselves."

Madeline Neupert stayed active with IFA through the late 1960s. In 1968, she resigned as executive director of the Barnum Festival to raise a family. She did association work on the side, and after her children were raised, finished her career as coordinator of corporate compliance programs for General Electric Corp.

She never forgot those early years with the Association. "The thing I remembered most about the IFA was the people," she said. "We all had something in common. I grew a great deal because of my exposure to those people. Because of the small numbers, we were just such a tight-knit group."

Neupert paved the way for other talented female festival executives who would serve as president of IFA. The Association's second female president was Josephine Hauck of Indianapolis. Hauck, the executive director of the Indianapolis 500 Festival from 1962 to her retirement in 1992, served as president of the Association in 1967 and 1968. By that time, IFA membership represented 125 of the nation's better known festivals. IFA's third women president in less than a decade, Dorothy Walkmeyer of the National Cherry Festival in Traverse City, Michigan, headed the organization in 1972.