

July 26, 2001

**IN MY OPINION****Caroline Porter****Railroad Days close to the third rail**

Galesburg downtown merchants seem to have forgotten, but the original purpose of Railroad Days was to bring people downtown. In the mid-1970s I was the first executive director of the Galesburg Downtown Village Council and served on the first Railroad Days Committee.

The Burlington Northern Railroad had already begun a small annual celebration and the Downtown Council and Chamber of Commerce asked if they could join forces and make it a much bigger festival — celebrating one of the basic industries in the history of our town.

At one time Railroad Days lasted four days and boasted an attendance of 70,000 or more people from all over the country. People are fascinated with trains and the workings of the railroad, which played such an important role in the history and growth, not only of Galesburg, but our country.

This year, because of complaints by some local merchants and churches, Railroad Days was disjointed and not very successful. The organizers did the best they could under the circumstances, but delays in deciding locations for the carnival and vendors made the job of the Railroad Days Committee and the Chamber almost impossible.

Railroad Days is only a two-day affair now, from Friday night through Sunday of the fourth week-end in June. Here are some of the complaints and answers to those complaints.

1) "Our businesses are affected by having the streets closed," Really? Few of the downtown merchants are open Friday nights, Saturday afternoons and Sundays, except for the Seminary Street Historical Commercial District. Most of them sacrifice about one-half day of so-called "inconvenience" during Railroad Days, when more people are walking by their stores than any other time of year.

2) "All the riff-raff from the carnival and RR Days want to use our bathrooms." The bathroom situation has been solved with porta-potties at every turn. Most businesses are closed, but a sign could be placed on

the door saying the bathroom facilities are not public.

3) "It's impossible to find parking for church that Sunday." The churches could sacrifice one Sunday of difficult parking out of the year. How about church in the park that day?

This year the vendors were separated by blocks and everyone was separated from the carnival by three or four blocks. Having worked downtown those two days, I know visitors were discouraged and disappointed. Certainly the vendors were — many who had traveled a great distance to be here. And when the activity suffers downtown, attendance is affected at Carl Sandburg College's huge, successful display.

So — what about next year? I don't think we should abandon the only railroad-oriented community festival we have — a festival that has drawn people even from other parts of the world. Let's go back to Main Street with the vendors and the carnival. Let the businesses use their imaginations and try to benefit from the extra activity and be a part of it. If people really want to attend church, they will find a way.

Let's either rewrite the rules for the basketball tournament so liability isn't so scary or find another kind of competition that will interest and involve people as much. Mud volleyball is fun but doesn't quite create the same level of excitement.

We have the organization and background for a hugely successful Railroad Days in Galesburg every year. We are already on the map for our unique railroad activity, Main Street Project Award, Knox College, Education and Technology Center, Center for Manufacturing Excellence, Heritage Days, Carl Sandburg Days and other events.

Our celebration of our railroad history is unique and important to the community. Let's have fun with it and keep it alive.

*Caroline Porter is a freelance writer from Galesburg who can be reached at (309) 342-1337 or cporter@galesburg.net.*