

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

If you want to know history, ask those of us who were there

While we still have Railroad Days on our minds, let me do a little reminiscing. We'd like to think that historical accounts are accurate and complete, but in fact, they are very subjective and selective, depending on the person relating his or her version of events.

As first Downtown Council director from October, 1975 to October, 1977, I served on the first Railroad Days Committee, which was organized in 1976 or early 1977. Tom Wilson, who succeeded me as downtown director, became a member of the committee in 1978, the year of the first citywide celebration, which not surprisingly took several years to develop. The chairman of our committee was Bill Meier, who was not only head of the Trade Development committee of the Chamber of Commerce, but the first manager of Sandburg Mall. He and I lived across the street from each other on Bateman Street so were neighbors and friends.

Our friendship and ability to work together on community-wide retail promotions was one positive factor in Galesburg being named a Main Street Project Award winner of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The National Trust did not like sections of the community pitted against one another or the downtown competing against other retail areas. Even though the Main Street project directly benefitted the core downtown businesses, it was supposed to enhance the entire community.

Bill and I quickly learned that when we had promotions the same day or week-end, both the downtown and the mall benefitted. People came to town to shop in both locations. Needless to say, the downtown merchants thought the mall was a terrible thing and the mall's



Pat Littrell, Scott Swanson, Merle Gardner, Jamie Templeton and Caroline Goltermann (now Porter)

establishment did indeed change the comfort zone downtown merchants had enjoyed for so long.

Another member of the first Railroad Days committee and designer of our first RR Days logo was Merle Gardner, who was promotions director for the Downtown Village Council. Having retired, he was recruited to work part time for the downtown organization. He passed away many years ago.

It's scary to think of the members of the Downtown Council who have since left town or passed away. When I was hired, Dick Bishop, who has since died, was president of First National Bank (now Wells Fargo) and the Downtown Village Council. He was followed by Dick Johnson, president of Home Savings and Loan. Dick is alive and well and still involved in community activities, such as the Carl Sandburg

Foundation Board. They were both wonderful mentors for me. Other council members then were Tom Frankel of Frankel's Clothing store, Bill Hoerner, of Fleck's, Don Strand of Mass Mutual Insurance, Dick Lindstrom of Lindstrom's, John Burns of Continental clothing store, Art Keiser of Illinois Power, Larry Larson, Stern and Field, and Bud Bondi of Bondi Corporation. I'm sure there were others, but I just can't remember.

We did a lot of crazy things those first two years. J.C. Penneys moved to the mall and the vacant building downtown became a discotheque. Really, it was a lot more fun than Penneys. We held a beautiful fashion show there, with linen table cloths and fresh flowers, and participation by the women's clothing stores downtown at that time — Fleck's, Frankel's, Kline's Department Store, Leslie's, Halpern's, Gerwigs. I think O.T.

Johnson Department Store had already left, which left a gaping hole in the fabric of the downtown, both physically and socially. What I really remember about the fashion show was seeing the distinguished Bud Bondi entering the discotheque for the first time. He just wasn't too sure about the whole thing, but did enjoy himself.

The discotheque was very popular, although some of the older merchants and property owners thought it would attract "riff-raff." Actually, the younger crowd loved the place. I celebrated one notable birthday there, which featured champaign and pitchers of beer flowing over people's heads, and I might add, the first and only time I danced on a table. Every woman should do that at least once, preferably while our weight is at its lowest.

But I digress. What I'm trying to say is that there aren't many of us left who remember those tough and fun first years, when the Downtown Village office opened with a desk and a phone.

Scott Swanson, pictured above, now manages AutoZone and became a member of the Knox County Board. Pat Littrell is a Knox College graduate and went on to organize talent on Broadway in New York City, and later was associated with the American Shakespeare Festival. I'm not sure of Jamie Templeton's whereabouts but his family is still in Galesburg.

And by way, Everytime you see those twinkling lights on Main Street at Christmastime, (excluding the square), think of electrician Lee Hall and me. They belong to us.

Caroline Porter is a freelance writer from Galesburg who can be reached at cporter@galesburg.net.