

IFEA 50th Anniversary History

The First Meeting

IFEA came to life at a day-long meeting at New York's Park Sheraton Hotel on October 31, 1956. U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower was less than a week from re-election, and New Yorkers were still reveling in the World Series perfect game pitched by the Yankees' Don Larsen against the Brooklyn Dodgers just three weeks before. Overseas, the world was in Turmoil that October Wednesday. British, French and Israeli commandos were battling Egyptian troops holding the Suez Canal as the United Nations met in emergency situation on the other side of Manhattan Island. In Budapest, 1,000 Soviet tanks were massing to crush a revolt by Hungarian rebels.

Meanwhile, delegates to the inaugural meeting of what would evolve into the International Festivals & Events Association (IFEA) were ready to go shortly after breakfast. Robert Meyer Jr., the New York writer and freelance communications consultant who had called the meeting, noted that "the earnestness and sincerity of delegates became evident early on the morning of the meeting. They were ready for business at 9."

Meyer welcomed the delegates and immediately moved that John Geisler, managing director of the St. Paul Winter Carnival, whose idea it was originally to form a Festival Manager's Association, "be asked to serve

as chairman until election of officers at the afternoon session."

Geisler took the gavel from Meyer and immediately got down to business. Geisler said the new association would be formed to address four issues which festival managers had indicated were paramount in their line of work: Finances, publicity, attendance and attractions. Geisler opened the floor to comments from the delegates, and it quickly became obvious that "finance and publicity were uppermost in the minds of all," Meyer reported.

Since publicity was scheduled to be the topic of the luncheon session, Geisler recommended that financing festivals be the major topic of discussion at the afternoon session. The motion carried unanimously.

Meyer had lined up an impressive group of speakers for the luncheon. Meyer, whose book, *Festivals U.S.A.* had sparked Geisler's interest in creating an association of festival managers, had superb contacts in the nation's travel and entertainment media. Those chosen to speak at the Association's first luncheon included Harriet LaBarre, associate publisher of *Cosmopolitan Magazine*; Lois Winston, director of research for NBC-TV's *Wide Wide World*; Arthur Perles, assistant director of press information for CBS-TV; and Paul Showers, associate travel editor for *The New York Times*.

Following the luncheon, the delegates discussed finances and

then proceeded to the organizational part of the meeting. The group voted to approve the name, Festival Managers Association (FMA), and set dues at \$25 for members whose annual festival budget was less than \$50,000; all others were assessed dues of \$100 a year. Robert Meyer Jr. was named FMA's first executive secretary. He quickly rented a post office box at 123 Cooper Station as the Association's first address.

Following the organizational portion of the meeting, delegates then turned to the important matter of electing a slate of officers for 1956 and 1957. John D. Meyers, executive secretary of the Rose Festival in Newark, New York, took the floor to propose a slate of candidates. Meyers nominated Geisler for President; Joe Mickler of the Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla Pirate Festival in Tampa, Florida for Vice President; Reynolds Andricks of Fiesta San Jacinto in San Antonio, Texas for Treasurer; and all remaining charter members for the board of directors. Nominations were quickly closed, and Meyers' slate was elected by acclamation.

Following the meeting, Robert Meyer sent a news release announcing the formation of FMA to all of the hometown newspapers of the charter members. Meyer also sent dues statements to each member and engaged a printer to print letterheads for the new organization. The dream had officially begun.