

IFEA 50th Anniversary History

The Growth of IF(E)A

Bruce Skinner, IFEA's president from 1990 to 2001, was a former chair and longtime board member when he took over day-to-day administration of the Association.

A native of Port Angeles, Washington, where he still resides today, Skinner was a University of Washington journalism graduate who embarked upon a career in athletics administration in 1968. Following stints with the University of Washington athletics department, the NCAA in Kansas City, the NBA's Houston Rockets and a newspaper in Longview, Washington, Skinner joined the staff of the Fiesta Bowl in 1973.

For the next seven years, he served as assistant executive director of the Phoenix-based holiday football bowl. In 1980, he was named the Fiesta Bowl's executive director, a position he held for the next decade. During the 1980s, Skinner was instrumental in the Fiesta Bowl's successful bid to crack the coveted New Year's Day bowl-game lineup, moving the game to January 1st in 1982. Skinner created a 60-event festival, including a nationally televised parade and football classic. The bowl game's budget escalated from \$1.5 million to \$11 million on Skinner's watch, while the

pay-out for team's competing in the New Year's classic increased more than six-fold, from \$475,000 to \$3 million.

Bruce Skinner became a member of IFA in 1977. He was elected to the Association's board in 1980, was chairman in 1983-1984, and "served on the board every year except one between 1980 and 1991."

'Pages and Pages of Notes'

Skinner will never forget his first IFA convention in Honolulu in 1977. "There was a grand total of 77 attendees," Skinner said, "and 11 of them were from the Anchorage Fur Rendezvous."

But what the convention lacked in attendance, it more than made up for in the warmth of the welcome it afforded the assistant executive director of the Fiesta Bowl. "I was absolutely amazed at the depth of knowledge of the attendees. And there was just such an eagerness to share. I was even more amazed at how willing everybody was to share information. I came away with pages and pages of notes."

Skinner admitted he has "never had an original idea. I've stolen a lot of my best ideas. But I learned so much from those early IFA members." He was in the first

class that received its CFE (Certified Festival Executive) designation from Purdue University in 1986, and when he left the Fiesta Bowl after 17 years in 1990 to do consulting, the Association was his first client. Later that year, executive director Don Lunday, who served in that position from 1988 to 1990, left the IFA and Skinner was asked to replace him as president of the organization. This also represented an organizational title change reflective of the changing industry the IFA represented. The Association's CEO position changed from executive director to president and the IFA board president position now became the board chair.

"Even though I had an athletics background," he said, "at the Fiesta Bowl, the philosophy was to expand into other events. We realized that only 20 percent of America reads the sports pages. We always wanted to appeal to the other 80 percent."

That was a similar philosophy that Skinner brought to the IFA. The festival and events business was undergoing a sea of change at the time, with corporate sponsorships taking an ever more prominent role in the financing of North America's events. The 1984 Los Angeles Olympics had

brought the idea to the forefront of festival and event planners' agendas when Olympic organizers sold corporate sponsorships and made a profit – with little or no support from federal, state or local governments.

"They had to find a way to get revenue," Skinner said. "And corporate America found it could sell products by sponsoring festivals and events for a lot less money than it was spending on traditional advertising venues. The level of corporate sponsorship in this business rose dramatically."

According to several industry sources, corporate sponsorships of festivals and events skyrocketed from \$182 million in 1982 to more than \$2 billion five years later. By the time Skinner took the reins of the IFA, corporate sponsorships were having a decided impact on the growth of festivals and events nationwide.

Upgrading the Organization

Skinner's number one goal when he took the reins of IFA in 1990 was to continue building the Association's membership. Herb Melleney and Don Lunday had increased membership during the mid- to late 1980's, and when Skinner was named president, the IFA numbered 414 members.

"I wanted to make the IFA the organization that people in the festivals and events industry would have to join," he said.

Skinner realized that to increase membership, he had to upgrade the organization itself. "That was a key part of our growth strategy," he said. "We had to develop an organization that was more than just a

place to get together, have a few drinks and share information."

To that end, Skinner moved to improve the Association's conventions. "The convention was always very good at fellowship," he noted. "And as a member, I knew that the first couple of times you attended a convention, you learned a lot. But then it dropped off after two or three conventions."

The IFA began bringing in paid keynote speakers such as Al Roker of NBC-TV. The Association also started bringing in more outside professional speakers. Finally, the IFA made vendor/supplier members much more important to the Association's future growth. Vendor/supplier members were given a full vote in the Association's affairs in 1988 and as a result the Association's annual trade show, held in tandem with its annual convention, began taking on a larger role of importance. Many vendors and suppliers also took on critical roles as sponsors of the Association's programs.

The proof was in the pudding. In 1990, the year that Skinner was named president, the IFA's Pittsburgh convention drew 380 attendees. In 2000, the Association's New Orleans convention welcomed more than 1,100 attendees.

In 1992, IFA created the International Festivals Education Association, which quickly took on the moniker of the International Festivals (& Events) Association Foundation in 1993, to provide a vehicle in which people could further support the Association and industry. At the same time, the Association estab-

lished a professional resource library to provide an industry data reference that members could tap when seeking information.

"All of that work got us to about 1,000 members," Skinner said. "In the mid-1990s, we started reaching out and marketing to regional and smaller events at the state level." Simultaneously, the Association also expanded its membership to include more international events, particularly in Europe and Australia, but while successful, the real growth area came from the increase of state and regional events, many of them now backed by the growth of corporate sponsorships.

"A lot of niche events started during the 1990's," Skinner said, "like arts events and book festivals. That was reflected in our membership growth." Before the 1990's, the typical IFA member represented the largest event in a specific city, such as the 500 Festival in Indianapolis, Seafair in Seattle, the Portland Rose Festival or the Kentucky Derby Festival in Louisville. Since that time, however, dozens of regional and statewide festivals from every one of the 50 states have joined the IF(E)A.

"So many new events have been created in the past 20 years," Skinner said. "IFEA has been the most incredible organization I've ever been involved with."

In 1996 the IFA officially changed its' name, from the International Festivals Association (IFA) to the International Festivals & Events Association (IFEA), further broadening its' membership and representation to include all events.