

IFEA 50th Anniversary History

The Walstad Years

Because of its small membership, the International Festivals Association couldn't afford to hire an executive director in the early years. Instead, the Association relied on the good will of its volunteer officers and members to handle the administrative duties that kept the IFA operating on a day-to-day basis.

In the 1960s and 1970s, much of that administrative load – sending out invoices, lining up convention speakers, publishing and mailing newsletters – was handled from the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. John Geisler, the executive director of the St. Paul Winter Carnival and first president of the IFA, established the tradition of the IFA president being responsible for management of the Association. Ken Walstad, who succeeded IFA charter member Roy Erickson as general manager of the Minneapolis Aquatennial in 1961 and served as IFA president in 1964, effectively ran the IFA from his Minneapolis office from 1969 until 1983.

"Ken was just a number one guy," Janice Meyer, longtime executive director of the Pro Football Hall of Fame Festival in Canton, Ohio, and IFA president in 1983, said. "Ken was the executive director all those years, and he was also the managing director of the Aquatennial until his death in 1983. Everybody just thought the world of him."

Herb Melleney, who headed the Festival of States in St. Petersburg, Florida for more than two decades and succeeded Walstad as the IFA's executive director, recalled that his predecessor had abandoned a calling as a Lutheran minister to follow a career in festivals and public relations.

"If I had a mentor in this business," Melleney said, "it would have to be Ken Walstad. He was always such a giving guy."

Madeline Neupert, longtime executive director of the P.T. Barnum Festival in Bridgeport, Connecticut and 1963 IFA president, described her colleague Walstad as the person who really made the International Festivals Association a reality.

"Ken described for the rest of us, as far back as the 1960's, what the IFA could be," Neupert said. "He understood that Festivals would some day be big business and that the European and other international components would be a big part of the IFA. And Ken was the first person I knew to look at the impact that a festival had on the local economy."

For much of the time that Walstad ran the IFA from his offices in Minneapolis, Nancy Johnson, his administrative assistant at the Aquatennial, was the voice on the telephone that everyone in the Association knew. "Nancy was the organization's

number one person," Herb Melleney said. "She was, in effect, the IFA secretary."

During Walstad's tenure as executive director of the IFA, the Association grew slowly in membership but took some giant steps, nevertheless. In 1983, Walstad, Janice Meyer and Jo Hauck, executive director of the Indianapolis 500 Festival, convinced Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana to partner with the Association in an innovative Certified Festivals Executive program (CFE).

"Ken and I flew into Indianapolis and met Jo," Meyer recalled. "The three of us drove to Purdue, and we met with the president of the university and the dean. We had settled on Purdue because we wanted to be associated with a school that was prestigious and influential. Plus, Jo knew the president of Purdue through the 500 Festival."

The IFA held its 1983 annual meeting in Phoenix. Ken Walstad had been hospitalized in Minneapolis the week before, but got up from a hospital bed against his doctor's orders to attend the IFA convention. While in Phoenix, Walstad died in his sleep in his hotel room.

He was greatly missed. "I grew a lot because of my exposure to people like Ken Walstad," said Madeline Neupert.