

History # 14
Central Michigan University

The Impact of Interstate Seventy-Five on
Gaylord, Michigan, Otsego County

Joan Glasser

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The wilderness area in the interior region of northern Michigan was largely uninhabited until the second part of the nineteenth century. The early Indians preferred to live close to the natural water route of the great lakes and its connecting rivers and lakes. The vast forests were a natural resource that remained undisturbed by man until the lumbering era began to spread through Michigan in the 1860's. Early surveyors discouraged settlement of this land when they reported Michigan was mainly marshland unfit for cultivation.¹

One of the last areas to be lumbered was in the center of the lower peninsula, sixty miles south of the straits of Mackinaw. Otsego County was covered with virgin timber and visited only by occasional trappers. The timber rights had been obtained by David Ward in 1854 during the race for timber resources in Michigan. Ward worked for a firm named Smith, Kelly and Dwight. The company was unable to lumber the 32,000 acres of pine under their control until there was adequate transportation and communication available. Dwight made an unsuccessful attempt to establish a settlement in Otsego County in 1868. Realizing a road would be important to the growth of the area, Dwight was instrumental in the passage of an act by the state legislature which began the construction of a state road from Torch Lake in

Grand Traverse County to Otsego Lake. The first permanent settlers arrived near Otsego Lake in 1869.² The development of the railroad also was important in the settlement of the north.

The Federal government encouraged the opening of the western land by the passage of a railroad act in 1850. The railroads were given a two hundred foot right of way for the track and even numbered sections of land to a depth of six miles on either side of the track. The government kept the intervening odd numbered sections of land for sale. The railroad financed construction through the sale of bonds.³ The Jackson, Lansing and Southern Railroad reached Otsego Lake area in the spring of 1873, and was extended to Gaylord in the summer of the same year.

In 1867 the government set aside two million acres of Michigan land (as bounty land) for the veterans of the Civil War.⁴ This encouraged the homesteading and settlement of the county. Gaylord was destined to be the largest settlement in the area. The county seat was moved to Gaylord in 1878 and Gaylord was incorporated as a village in 1881.⁵ The railroad company donated a piece of property to the village to be used as a site for a courthouse. This building, finished in 1891, became a landmark of the community.⁶

The lumbering of white pine continued until the early 1890's when it was nearly depleted. Several saw mills were in operation in the county. The hardwoods in the area

encouraged the growth of new industry. The Detroit Iron and Furnace Company built two charcoal kilns north of Gaylord prior to 1890 and operated them until 1896. The Dayton Last Block Works began production in 1891. This company made ten pins and shoe lasts from maple lumber; remaining in business until 1931. The Jackson Wylie Company of Saginaw operated a hoop and stay mill from 1890 to 1915. The Gaylord Manufacturing Company, specializing in logging sleighs and wagons operated from 1900 to 1915. An automobile factory began production in 1910, manufacturing the "Gaylord 30", but it remained in business only a few years. The Saginaw Wood Products Company operated from 1915 to 1922. The depression years saw little industrial activity in Gaylord. An economic boom reached the county in 1941 with the building of Otsego Ski Club and Higgins Industry. Standard Products and O. W. Rowley Company located in the area in 1945.⁷

The location of Gaylord in the forty-fifth parallel and the esthetic beauty of the county saw the increase of a new economic factor, tourism, in the years after the second world war.⁸ Otsego County is a four season vacation paradise. There are one hundred twenty-one inches of snow, with an average depth of eleven inches for sixty days, each winter.⁹ The second growth of forest provides cover for many species of fowl and animals. The rivers and lakes invite the sportsmen to try their skill at fishing. There are motels and several resorts that have rentals

available by the day or week. Camping grounds are available and a state and county park are near Otsego Lake. The Chamber of Commerce promoted the delights of vacationing in Otsego County during the fifties. Tourism was one of the largest sources of revenue in the county in 1955.¹⁰ The completion of the Mackinac Bridge in 1958 saw a surge of tourism in Michigan. Use of the state parks increased threefold this year.¹¹

In November 1958 several area businessmen met at the Chamber of Commerce to promote Gaylord as the ski capital of the midwest. The men knew the area was in direct competition with other Northern Michigan counties for a ski livelihood, so they formed a nucleus for the promotion of Gaylord and Otsego County.¹² This was one of the first efforts of the citizens to organize a committee to attract more tourist business to the area. Gaylord could boast of six ski resorts within the county. The invention of the snow-making machine enabled other areas to compete and open new ski slopes. Gaylord did not become known as the ski capital of the midwest, but the businessmen had cooperated together and proved they could work for the good of all.

Economic factors looked bleak in 1958 and 1959, and a proposed new limited access highway would by-pass Gaylord when completed. The businessmen were not willing to sit back and watch Gaylord become a ghost town. In December of 1958 a group of civic minded men concerned for the

growth and progress of their community formed an Industrial Development Corporation (I.D.C.), to acquire and invite new industry to locate in the Gaylord area.¹³ The I.D.C. was a nonprofit corporation whose main goal was to acquire tracts of land and locate new industry. The members raised \$100,000.00 through individual subscription to purchase property and attain new industry.¹⁴ They took a survey of Otsego County and found that within thirty miles of the area there existed one of the largest supplies of mature aspen (used for making pulpwood) in the nation. The area was a natural one for the location of a wood using industry.¹⁵

In 1960 the economic outlook for Gaylord had not improved. There was an unemployment rate of nine per cent, and fifteen vacant stores. The area suffered from the loss of its young people's potential and enthusiasm when they had to look elsewhere for employment. Interstate seventy-five was being built and would definitely by-pass Gaylord.¹⁶ The Industrial Development Corporation had not yet succeeded in locating new industry but had purchased several suitable tracts of land within close proximity to Gaylord. The I.D.C. also conducted a newspaper survey which resulted in over eighteen hundred replies from people interested in employment.¹⁷ After months of searching, the I.D.C. located an industry willing to locate in Gaylord on land it owned. The United States Plywood Corporation would be able to utilize the available

lumber, employing two hundred fifty people, when in full operation. This plant began production in 1963.¹⁸ Gaylord's future seemed assured.

Gordon Everett moved to Gaylord and established a free weekly shopper's guide in 1962. Everett realized if his town and business were to grow, it needed to create an image entirely its own that would attract new people to the area. This would revitalize the town, encouraging growth. He had no definite image in mind but knew that unless the city did something to improve its rundown appearance, the area would be slow to grow into a thriving resort center, especially after the new highway was opened. Gaylord would need some type of image or promotion to lure the traveling public, searching for atmosphere and enjoyment, into town. The town's image would not only attract more business but would become a show place.¹⁹ The individual merchants would all favor different designs after their own preference, and unless they were correlated, they would be an incompatible mixture of ideas. Everett wanted to promote a theme of unity. He proceeded to contact several architectural firms, asking them to submit a redesigned drawing of Main Street, and keeping in mind the possibility of Gaylord adopting a unified theme.²⁰ One of the architectural firms, Begrow and Brown Associates of Bellaire and Birmingham, Michigan, responded and indicated they were interested in the idea. Working for them was

Hans Weimer, a talented architect steeped in Austrian background, projections and ideas.²¹ Everett took a picture of each business in his block on Main Street; each photograph taken from the same distance and exact center of the road. Having been exposed to advertising, Everett knew that a picture taken of the whole block would not show up the poor qualities of the buildings; however, a composite would accentuate all the features of the buildings accurately. He had an enlargement made of the composite and sent it to weimer, asking him to redesign the stores.

Within a short time Weimer, by incorporating the Tyrolean motif, had completed the design and returned it to Everett. (See copy in Appendix) The nature of Everett's business put him in daily contact with the businessmen in town. Using the design as a tool to project his dream for Gaylord, he was able to reach the imaginations of the merchants, generating enthusiasm and interest in his scheme. Everett realized that he would not be able to promote the Tyrolean theme alone; he needed the help of an organization. He contacted Harry Collins, Secretary-Manager of the Chamber of Commerce and the board of directors, explained his plan and asked them to form a committee to sell the idea of a unanimity of design in the Austrian Tyrolean Motif to its members. The board agreed and appointed a committee to plan their next move.

The committee decided to send a questionnaire survey to all the business establishments on Main Street to determine whether there was enough interest among its members to warrant expending more time and energy on the project.²² A summary of the returned questionnaires showed that ninety per cent of the businesses believed a community wide remodeling plan would be successful in attracting more people to Gaylord and thus, increasing business. Sixty per cent knew that financing was available through the Federal Housing Administration's business improvement loans.²³ A graphic chart was made from the returned surveys, polling the results of the survey. (See appendix) The Gaylord businessmen indicated they would be interested in attending a meeting that would investigate the possibility of community wide remodeling.

The meeting was scheduled for January 15, 1964, under the chairmanship of Dr. Louis Hayes. The committee had planned the agenda so that experts in the fields of architecture, financing, insurance and city-county planning were present. The county treasurer, city assessor and city manager also sat in.²⁴ The panel of experts were well qualified and adequately informed to answer all questions. Enthusiasm was apparent and several individuals pledged to remodel. The architectural firm offered to provide drawings in the Tyrolean motif at two dollars per front foot. This meeting was the impetus that started "operation boot strap" rolling.²⁵ Every business

was represented; interest, concern and excitement about the community project was obvious. The Tyrolean motif theme had taken hold.

The Gaylord State Bank was the first business to set the pace with the new look. The Board of Directors asked their architects to design a building that would be representative of the new theme. Eight unsightly buildings were removed from Main Street when construction began. Five of the buildings were vacant. The architects utilized exposed beams, native field stone and landscaping to achieve a handsome building that would set the trend of the Tyrolean theme. Guggisberg, a men's clothing store was one of the leaders in remodeling the entire old building and revitalizing its appearance. Denholm's Little Dime Store and Audrain Hardware, on each side of Guggisberg, followed suit. Everett remodeled his business and quickly several more stores began making plans to join the trend. The businessmen were believing in the new community project and started investing their time, energy and money. Each new remodeling and face lifting became progressively better and generated more enthusiasm. The men encouraged other businessmen to follow and become involved. National chain stores even started to deviate from their national image in order to adopt the Alpine motif. The Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, the Big Boy Restaurant, the Wickes Corporation, Colonel Sanders Kentucky Fried Chicken, and many others, all went with the new Gaylord Alpine image.²⁶

The unique feature of the Alpine motif is that there has never been any mandatory program of any nature stating that new businesses should adopt the theme. It has grown as a matter of community pride without pressure from any particular group. The committee named by the Chamber of Commerce to poll the businesses about the proposed new face lifting was only a temporary committee and once it had held the public meeting, its purpose had been fulfilled.²⁷

While the merchants in the city were giving their establishments a new face lift, one serious problem still faced them. Parking was not adequate in Gaylord to serve their needs. This problem was tackled as vigorously as Gaylord's new image, by the formation of a new committee in the Chamber of Commerce to study parking needs. A special committee to study parking needs was appointed by the Gaylord City Council.²⁸ The two committees reached the same conclusion; off street parking was essential to the growth of Gaylord. The new image would be seriously handicapped by the lack of convenient parking for visitors and residents. The two committees correlated their efforts, the special city council committee concentrating on the legal aspects and the chamber committee acting as a liaison between the merchants and the city. The Main Street merchants were acquainted with the proposal and agreed to a voluntary assessment to help defray the cost without raising taxes.²⁹

The temporary parking committee reported to the city council their findings. They recommended that a city

building authority be established to immediately set up the machinery to implement their findings. The City Council appointed the parking authority. Its main objective was to form a non profit corporation so they could legally acquire property and sell bonds to finance off street parking. The special voluntary assessment on the sixty merchants was seven thousand five hundred dollars per year for ten years. The city agreed to pay the balance of five thousand dollars yearly and to maintain the parking lots thereafter. The parking authority provided two hundred twenty new parking places in Gaylord's central business district at the cost of approximately one thousand dollars per stall. The city set aside all parking monies in a fund for future parking development. The entire project was completed from the fall of 1964 to 1966.³⁰

During the same period of time, the county board of supervisors were faced with a new problem not seemingly related to Gaylord's new image. The state had condemned the county jail and it was ordered dismantled by the supervisors. Now they had to decide whether it would be feasible to add on to the present seventy year old court house or build a separate jail within the city limits. Several years earlier the supervisors had established a sinking fund for future building purposes. In 1966 the supervisors placed a proposal on the ballot asking the voters to approve a one mill tax increase for the purpose of constructing a new county court house. At the same election

a new county prosecutor, Sidney Wizer, was elected. He could clearly see the need for the jail and a new county building. He made a proposal to the county board of supervisors to appoint a joint city-county building authority to look into the possibility of receiving federal monies especially designated for this purpose. They agreed, and the county supervisors and the city councilmen jointly approved of a three member committee. This committee had the use of the sinking fund established earlier by the county board of supervisors, and they sought an architect for the proposed new city-county building. The new city-county building authority acquired the deed to the courthouse property which allowed them to sell bonds. The Board of Supervisors decided they could spend fifty thousand dollars without levying any additional millage. With the additional revenue returned from state income tax and other monies and fees collected by the county clerk, they decided they could go ahead with plans to build a new court house and jail. The city and county officials would share the new structure. The county would pay eighty-three per cent of the cost; the city would pay the balance.

The city-county building authority selected the firm of Frank and Stein of Lansing, Michigan as the architects to design the new building. The supervisors recommended that Gaylord's new image should be kept in mind in designing the new building.³¹ The city-county building, dedicated on September 12, 1968, is very much

evident of the Alpine theme.³² Today the structure serves as a focal point, uniting Main Street in the Alpine Theme. The Gaylord city council officially renamed Gaylord the Alpine Village in 1965. Gaylord, The Alpine Village, painted on the water tower, greets every traveler as they approach the city on the new interstate highway seventy-five.

The Alpine theme is further perpetuated by an Alpine festival first initiated in 1965. The Alpenfest, as it has been renamed, is a four day celebration in which the majority of the citizens participate, dressing in lederhosen and Alpine attire. The July festival has become an annual event which attracts thousands of tourists each year. Many of them actively participate, dressing in the same fashion as the residents. The four day Alpenfest is designed to please people of all ages. The celebration begins with a walking parade with the people wearing their Alpine attire. The world's largest coffee break is held on the city-county court house lawns, followed by bicycle races for children, pie eating contests, dance revues, band concerts and many events planned throughout the week. Each year an Alpine queen is chosen to reign over the festivities. She represents the Alpine Village for one year at all events and queen contests held throughout Michigan. The highlight of the Alpenfest is the grand parade at the end of the festival. The success of the Alpenfest has grown from the cooperation among the com-

munity residents who are proud of their city and devote many hundreds of hours planning the festival.³³

Due to the advertisement of the Chamber of Commerce and the participation of the organization in all the major vacation shows throughout Michigan and its neighboring states, the Alpine Village is one of the five best known towns in the great lakes region. People have heard of its accomplishments and want to see for themselves. Once in the area they find Otsego County a delightful resort area abounding with service centers, motels and restaurants. Otsego County is in the middle of the snow belt of Michigan. Ski resorts are available close to the city. The newest winter sport, snowmobiling, finds the county suitable with numerous trails and ample snow during the winter. The deer hunter can plan to hunt two weekends in the county without taking additional time from work. Gaylord is only a two and a half to three hour drive from the metropolitan area of southern Michigan. In the spring of each year, more than six thousand visitors come to Gaylord in search of the morel mushrooms which grow wild in the woods near the city. In recent years the mushroom hunters have surpassed the deer hunters.³⁴

The growth of tourism in the area is due to many factors: Gaylord's central location in the state, the opening of interstate highway seventy-five, the availability of the vacation area to metropolitan southern

Michigan, the growing enthusiasm of winter sports, and the effort put forth by Gaylord citizens to make Gaylord an attractive town. An indicator of the growth of tourism is shown by the report of sales tax receipts collections. For four years in succession (1965-1969), the honor of the highest collection of sales tax ~~par~~ capita went to Otsego County.³⁵ Gaylord serves as a service center to travelers; the Standard Oil Company pumps more gasoline in Gaylord than anywhere else in the state of Michigan. Thirty per cent of the increase of business in town is attributed to the impact of interstate highway seventy-five.³⁶ A traffic survey shows traffic is heavier on Old Twenty-seven since the opening of the new highway than before. This is based on two surveys taken in 1963 and 1969.³⁷ Many communities would have been hurt by traffic by-passing the central business district; Gaylord has grown rather than decline.

The overall financial impact of the growth of Gaylord can be seen easily on a financial statement. The Gaylord State Bank's assets have increased from six million dollars in 1960 to twenty-four million dollars in 1970. Eight hundred fifty new jobs have been created by newly acquired industry. Sixty business establishments have remodeled, either completely or partially to the Alpine motif. Four hundred new homes have been built. The city has experienced thirty-three per cent growth in

new business. Gaylord serves northern Michigan as a distribution center for products; many companies have warehouses located here.³⁸ The preliminary census figures for 1970 state that Gaylord's population has increased sixteen percent; Otsego County's, thirty-two per cent.³⁹ The Gaylord Community School System is progressive and planning for the years ahead. Two new elementary schools are under construction and scheduled to open in the fall of 1971. The Gaylord High School was rated a Class "B" school in the fall of 1970 based on enrollment figures.

Gaylord received the 1967 Community Pride Award as a result of state-wide competition during Michigan Week.⁴⁰ A slide set has been developed through the efforts of the Chamber of Commerce which shows some of the aspects of the Gaylord story. Harold Elgas, President of the Gaylord State Bank, has traveled to more than one hundred communities throughout the United States to present the Gaylord story. Other towns faced with the prospect of having their town by-passed by highways are encouraged by the success story of Gaylord and inspired to create new interest in their community.⁴¹

The growth of Gaylord, The Alpine Village, can be attributed to many factors. The citizens took positive action and formed an industrial development committee

to seek new industry to provide employment for the Gaylord area. The city merchants were willing to cooperate with enthusiasm and optimism when Everett proposed giving Gaylord a new look. Every merchant participated and expressed his views about the Alpine motif, becoming involved in the project and doing something about the depressed central business area to attract tourists and new business off the highway that was by-passing the town. The Gaylord story is unique because all phases of improvement began and happened at the same time. It was not haphazard development but community planning. Civic minded citizens, city and county government worked together for the good of all. Some of the sociological motivators that encouraged the people to participate include community pride, ego, new ideas and men to spark others to action. Numerous men were responsible for the success of the Alpine motif and growth of Gaylord. Through the effort of every interested citizen, Gaylord is a thriving community. The citizens are proud of their community and its accomplishments.⁴²

As the seventies decade approaches, Gaylord has prepared itself for the future. The citizens are optimistic about Gaylord's growth and are planning for the years ahead. They have forged ahead with a plan that seemed like an impossible dream a few years ago.

The citizens foresee Gaylord to be one of the fastest growing communities in northern Michigan. The Alpine Village is moving ahead with the pace of the seventies; each year new innovations and improvements will be made. The imaginations and perserverance of its residents will see to it.

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42. Elgas, interviewed, October 7, 1970.

Interviews

Elgas, Harold, A., interviewed September 30, 1970 and October 7, 1970. Elgas is the President of the Gaylord State Bank (1960-1970), charter member of the Industrial Development Corporation and Chairman of the Alpenfest from 1965-1970. He has given a great deal of time and energy to the growth of his community.

Everett, Gordon, interviewed November 4, 1970. He is the owner and publisher of The Northern Star Shoppers Guide. Everett was instrumental in the city adopting the Alpine Motif. He is active in community affairs, a member of the Alpenfest committee, and President of the Otsego County Fair Board.

Collins, Harry, interviewed September 30, 1970. He has served as Secretary-Manager of the Chamber of Commerce from 1955-1970. Collins has devoted numerous hours to the success and growth of the Chamber of Commerce and Gaylord.

Harmon, Donald, interviewed October 30, 1970. Harmon has served as the Gaylord City Manager from 1963-1970. He moved to Gaylord at the beginning of the Alpine movement and has been active in its development.

Magsig, Stanley, interviewed November 4, 1970 and November 11, 1970. Magsig is the Magistrate of the Otsego County District Court (1968-1970), and Livingston township supervisor, from 1962-1970. He served as Chairman of the Otsego County Board of Supervisors from 1964-1968.

Appendix

A copy of the design that was used to promote a unified Main Street theme. It shows Everett's composite of the North side of West Main Street, and the design submitted by Weimer in the Tyrolean-Alpine Motif.

A copy of the questionnaire that the Otsego County Chamber of Commerce sent to the merchants on Main Street concerning the development of a unified Tyrolean-Alpine theme.

A photostat copy of the merchants survey questionnaire that was returned to the temporary committee of the Chamber of Commerce. It shows the polled results in graphic manner. The original copy is in the possession of Everett and he made the copy for the author.

(The author wants to thank Gordon Everett for the help and cooperation he gave her in the writing of the paper.)

A Xerox copy of the application of the 1966 All-American City Award applied for by Harold Elgas. Gaylord received the top State Award in 1967 during Michigan Week.

Picture Credits

1. Gaylord Main Street. Circa 1900.
2. Otsego County Court House, ~~1894~~ Gaylord, 189.
3. The new County-City Building.
4. North side of West main Street,
5. Another view of North side of main street looking East.
6. South ^{side} Main street at Court Street depicting Buildings before Remodeling
7. South ^{side} Main Street at Court street After Completion of Remodeling
8. South side of main Street Before Remodeling.
9. Building on South side of Main Street After Remodeling
10. Gaylord main Street ~~intersection~~ looking East, 1962.
11. Picture depicts ^{first (in 1962)} stores on main Street that remodelled to Alpina theme
12. The consumer Power Building ~~After~~ ^{Main Street} ~~Completion of~~ Remodelled, 1968.
13. The ~~old~~ Remodelled Sugar Bowl Restaurant ~~in~~

14. South ~~Block~~^{Side} Main Street ~~before~~ 1960
2 Building were removed when
Bank was built.
15. Gaylord State Bank, Main Street.
first Building completed in Alpine Motif.
16. Vacation Land Lanes and Laundry before
remodeling. West Main Street.
17. Vacation Land Lanes and Laundry after
completion of Alpine motif. W. Main St.
18. picture of City-County Bldg. after recent
snow storm - clipping from Orsego Co
Herald Times, Nov 25 1970
19. Chamber of Commerce Buck pole
circa 1952. Original in possession
of Willard Gocha, Gocha's Motel,
Orsego Street Gaylord -
20. Aerial view of Gaylord taken
September 1950. Depicts Inter-State
75, and its location near Gaylord, and
the school grounds.

~~of~~
~~All the photographs above~~
 The author extends her appreciation to Robert
 Sheriff, ^{owner of} Northland Photo who reproduced the