

## A Cinderella Town Wins the Recreation Prince

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**G**AYLORD is a "Cinderella town" situated in the heart of northern Michigan's huge water-winter wonderland. Just 60 miles south of the mighty Mackinac Bridge that spans the junction of Lakes Michigan and Huron, this Cinderella is decked out in an eye-catching Alpine motif complete with townsfolk in lederhosen and buildings with Alpine architecture.

That new look is designed to make Gaylord the reigning queen in the booming recreation area that entirely surrounds the town with 7 ski resorts, an elk herd, a dude ranch, 5,000 vacation homes, and dozens of other attractions. In 1966, Gaylord's second Alpine Festival drew 20,000 visitors. Thousands more come to participate in the year-round activities that abound here. And besides its vacation atmosphere, the town has a solid new industrial base for a prosperous economy. Yet just a few short years ago, Gaylord was sitting amid the ashes of a burned-out agriculture and a stone-cold lumber industry—tired, threadbare, and very much down-at-the-heel.

No fairy godmother gets the credit for the change in Gaylord, however. The miracle was wrought by mortals—a handful of untiring, civic-minded local people who combined vision, a hardheaded business sense, and persuasiveness into a big new facelifting plan.

This plan involved:

- Creating a public image with the Alpine motif. (This was chosen because there were at least two establishments in

the community with that motif; the area was already known as the Ski Capital of Michigan; and finally, it is a distinctive styling that is generally acceptable.)

- Providing plenty of offstreet parking for the convenience of patrons.
- Having in the stores merchandise of character, in keeping with the theme.
- Staff training to provide good, well-informed people to work in the stores.

Today, just 2 years after the inception of the plan, the first two objectives are well along towards completion, while the third is nicely underway.

The fourth point, staff training, has yet to be accomplished.

A grant for long-range planning, small business loans, and reforestation aid are Government contributions to the changes occurring in the Gaylord community.

If there was a magic wand involved, it is interstate Highway I-75 which brushes the west edge of town. This twin ribbon of concrete binds our Cinderella closely to the millions of recreation seekers in the cities of southern Michigan and those of nearby States.

Other towns might fear that such a luxury route would speed the traveler right on past, but not Gaylord. At least, not today!

The transformation got going in 1959 when a group of businessmen headed by



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Harold Elgas, president of the Gaylord State Bank, took a good look at the town. They didn't like what they saw. There were 15 vacant stores in the three blocks of Main Street. Chronic unemployment among the 2,500 residents of the town and the 7,000 in the county drove young people to look to the cities for jobs and homes. The 2 industries in the town provided an average of 300 jobs. In the entire county the 18 manufacturing establishments employed only 371 people in 1958, according to a statistical compilation by the U.S. Census of Manufacturers.

### Business Seasonal

Business for the retail merchants and motel owners was highly seasonal. In the 3 months of summer, the tourist demands far exceeded the town's ability to supply services. And merchants were financially unable to stock shelves with goods that would be in demand only for this short season. During January and February, the three or four developed ski slopes brought an influx of visitors that overtaxed the town's motels. The overflow had to be sent to Vanderbilt and other nearby communities; yet the demand in other seasons could not support more motels.

After analyzing the facts, the businessmen formed an Industrial Development Corp. Through individual subscription, they were able to raise a total of \$100,000 with which to purchase industrial sites and lure manufacturers to their town. The fact they were able to raise this much money is proudly pointed out by the town fathers as proof that they were not a totally depressed community.

The IDC took options on three sites in town that were well suited for industrial development. All had sufficient acreage and suitable soils for large buildings, with easy access to both the railroad and the planned interstate highway.

Before they set about wooing industry, the businessmen first looked at the natural resources surrounding the town to determine what kind of manufacturer they should aim their promotion at. They found that within 30 miles of Gaylord there existed the largest supply of mature aspen for pulpwood of any place in the

United States. That was it! They would try for a wood-using industry.

Months of frantic negotiations ensued. This included some land swapping with a State agency, reengineering the county airport, and also conducting a newspaper survey that resulted in 1,800 replies from people who would be willing to work in a new industry at a given starting wage rate. Finally, U.S. Plywood Corp. agreed to construct a huge wood-using plant on IDC land. Today this plant employs well over 250 people, and besides it has under construction an additional 24,000 square feet of plant space.

This tremendous success showed the town what it could accomplish by sound planning and cooperative effort. The pumpkin coach had arrived!

Five and one-half years ago, Gordon

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### SCHLANGFEST

*Just 3 miles south of Gaylord, near one of the lakes with the highest elevation in Michigan, is the first commercial building with Alpine architecture in the community. Six-mile-long Otsego Lake was the major attraction for the Leo Schlang family when, in 1945, the family came here from Detroit on vacation and stayed to run a gasoline service station.*

*Starting out with a shoestring, two gas pumps, and a "we just like people" attitude, Leo, his wife Minnie, and now two sons, Bob and Jim, have developed a typical Bavarian inn that accommodates 225 diners at one sitting. When planning their own Bavarian Festival weekend in 1965, Leo and Bob talked the Gaylord merchants into having an Alpine Festival at the same time.*

*The response of the recreation-seeking public was tremendous. So for their 1966 festival, the Schlang's erected a big 60- by 175-foot tent to cater to the overflow crowds which attended.*

*Leo's voice quivers with emotion as he recalls, "You should have seen it—3,000 people from all kinds of communities and backgrounds sitting together and singing folksongs with our Bavarian band!"*

Everett came to Gaylord and established a weekly shoppers' guide advertiser. With shrewd sense he realized that if his business was to grow, his community must grow. What would help it most? As he looked up and down Main Street, he was depressed by the timeworn appearance of the old buildings.

How could businesses attract more of the thousands of uncommitted vacationers that hurried by in their search for atmosphere and enjoyment?

Gordon walked on Main Street for months, talking with fellow merchants, looking for an idea—an eye-catcher—a gimmick.

Finally he dusted off an idea that had been suggested years before by a steel industrialist, the founder of the nearby Otsego Ski Club. Why not turn Gaylord into an Alpine village?

He wheedled various architects into sketching a rough idea for storefronts in the Alpine motif. One such sketch was outstanding. Armed with this, Gordon presented the idea to the Otsego County Chamber of Commerce.

This body, which serves both Gaylord and the county, has Harry Collins as its hard-working secretary-manager. With the active leadership of Gordon, Harry,

and the chamber of commerce, a questionnaire was prepared and personally presented to each of the more than 50 business establishments. A summary of answers received showed that 45 believed a communitywide remodeling program would be successful in attracting greater numbers of people to Gaylord, resulting in an increase in business. Thirty-one said they knew that financing for individual remodeling was available through Federal Housing Administration business improvement loans. Twenty-eight said they would be interested in having an architect's drawing made of their block at a cost of \$2 per front foot.

In answer to the question "Would you attend a meeting of Gaylord businessmen for the purpose of investigating fully such a community project?" forty-eight said "Yes." The meeting was held January 15, 1964. Enthusiasm was high. Individual pledges to remodel were received, and the four-point plan mentioned earlier was then developed.

In the town's facelifting, the Gaylord State Bank, the only bank in the entire county, had already set the pace. Eight unsightly store buildings—five of which were vacant—were torn down and a new bank building erected there.

*Folk tunes by musicians in lederhosen create a festive mood at Schlang's Bavarian Inn.*





A striking structure costing about a quarter of a million dollars, it advanced the Alpine architecture through the use of native stone, exposed beam ceilings, and attractive landscaping.

Because Bank President Elgas sincerely believes in the future of his community through the tourist business along with well chosen and complementary industrial expansion, he is willing to back merchants aggressively in securing financing for their remodeling.

As Bob Doumas, coowner of a fine restaurant now undergoing the sixth remodeling since its founding in 1919, said: "One of the prime factors of success in a community project like ours is the availability of money. So we simply must have

a forward-looking bank and lending institution."

Cost of the facelifting operation is borne by the individual merchants. New exteriors range from \$700 or \$800 for a new front on a barbershop to probably \$15,000 for a large, elaborate building front. Of course many of the town's businessmen have completely restyled their building interiors in the chalet style, too.

U.S. Plywood, caught in the middle of building when this project started, had their architect redesign the foyer of their plant in keeping with the theme. Two national chain stores with set prototypes voluntarily adopted the Alpine motif for their new buildings here.

With this project well underway, the townsfolk turned their attention to the need for parking space. The merchants startled the Gaylord City Council by asking for a tax on themselves so they might acquire property for offstreet parking.

They have now purchased and are removing buildings from all the land immediately behind stores for a distance of 2½ blocks along Main Street. They have formed a Parking Authority and are financing paving and lighting of the area through sale of a bond issue. They regret having parking meters, but find it necessary to pay off the bonds and make other planned improvements.

This parking development came about when the supervisors were planning on relocating the courthouse. The courthouse sat grandly, but shabbily in the center of the main square, surrounded by green lawn, flowers, and large old trees. When it was proposed that this site would make a good parking lot, the citizens held a protest meeting. Weren't grass and trees important in a town, too?

The citizens won. A new city-county building will soon replace the courthouse, retaining as many of the large trees as possible in order to complement the new lawn and flowers.

And now that they have their offstreet parking about worked out, these same industrious folks are considering plans for parks and playgrounds. They secured a Federal grant through the Urban Renewal Administration of the Housing and Home Finance Agency and hired a firm

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## FOLLOW THE BEAR TRACKS

*"Call of the Wild" is a recreational attraction that the Industrial Development Corp. helped get started in Gaylord.*

*A large grottolike building houses 46 nature scenes consisting of more than 150 mounted animals and birds in natural settings. As the visitor follows the bear tracks through the caverns, he views the individually lighted scenes, reads interesting facts about the animals and vegetation of the northwoods, and listens to recorded sounds of the animals.*

*The Carl Johnson family developed this indoor nature tour with the backing of a Federal small business loan. Banker Harold Elgas says, "Because the Government offers programs which can finance in a business area where private banking firms would find it difficult, we have 'Call of the Wild.'" In 1966, about 140,000 people were entranced and educated by this attraction. Visitors from all States wrote in the 4- by 8-foot guestbook comments such as, "Excellent—inspiring—educational—and so reasonable for families. We need more such displays."*

*While keeping the exhibit open all year, the Johnsons busy themselves during the slack periods in winter with rock polishing, jewelrymaking, and assembling souvenirs to be sold in their gift shop at the cave's entrance.*



*Elk in a misty meadow near Gaylord, Mich. A few of the animals released in 1919 in the Gaylord area have increased to a herd of about 3,000. Controlled hunting has been permitted.*

of consultants to develop a countywide comprehensive plan. This plan will be used to guide the growth and development of public improvements in the area for the next 20 to 25 years. Parks and playgrounds are part of the plan.

The main accomplishment to date as a result of this plan has been adoption of a countywide zoning ordinance. While our Cinderella is growing up each day, she can't afford to ignore what is going on around her: The 7 ski resorts; the 2,000 to 3,000 people, mostly from out of State, that come to pick mushrooms; the 3,000-plus elk herd; the cross-country horse trail with 3 or 4 riding stables; the dude ranch; the State park; several State forest campgrounds; golf courses; hunting facilities; and the 3,140 permanent dwelling units, and nearly 5,000 vacation homes out in the county.

Gaylord's first Alpine Festival in 1965 found over 1,000 townsfolk—nearly one-third of the population—dressed up in Alpine costume, and at least 15,000 visitors on hand for the celebration. It

will be repeated each year, right after the Fourth of July weekend.

Visitors approaching the town drive past thousands of acres of planted pine and spruce. Reforestation began in earnest years ago with the help of the local soil conservation district and the cooperation of the Soil Conservation Service.

Through an agreement between the soil conservation district, local landowners, and the county highway department, trees furnished by the district were planted for windbreaks along the highway. These trees, now about 18 years old and 30 or more feet tall, beautify the roads. Additional millions of trees were planted on the sandy, hilly soils that proved unsuitable for the potato and dairy farming that started in this area after the old logging days. These pines, planted for Christmas trees and for potential timber products, are now providing beautiful vistas and building sites for both permanent and vacation homes.

Though the future looks rosy, there are some problems that beset our Cinderella. Several of the leading citizens point out that they need protective ordinances. Someone can upset the unity of their theme by coming in with a completely different architecture. They feel, too, that they now have need for a professional coordinator—one not touched by personal interest or professional jealousies.

All agree that the biggest danger to a town, though, comes from not recognizing change or being willing to plan for it.

That the planning done by Gaylord pays out can be seen in the statement of the town's only bank. In 1958, the total resources of the bank were \$6 million. In 1966, they are \$14 million.

The bank's figures on cash accumulations by months can be used as a business barometer, showing the relationship of one season to another. The recent figures show cash accumulations of \$350,000 in January and February, \$1.2 million in June and September, and \$2.5 million in July and August. Things in town are now moving throughout the year.

Today Prince Recreation has found his Cinderella. We are sure they will live happily together for many years to come.