

CHAPTER 13

EVENTS

Downtown's unique role is to be the "people's place," the place where common ground and common interests are shared by all citizens of the community and visitors and well. Downtown Evanston has performed this role admirably since its founding when it was not only a business crossroads, but a residential neighborhood. Among the first major celebrations recorded by photography was the dedication of the Centennial Fountain in 1876. Since that year the public has gathered downtown to participate in more special events than can be counted, including those traditional events such as patriotic celebrations, political gatherings, sidewalk sales, holidays (e.g. Santa's arrival), civic dinners, parties, (e.g. wedding receptions), church events, youth activities, and NU football weekends.

Following the opening of Old Orchard, however, Evanston recognized that attracting people to the downtown was not just an expression of civic enthusiasm, but a contemporary and necessary means of marketing. Beginning in the 1960's, it seems that every year has witnessed more and a greater variety of public events in all seasons. In fact, hardly a summer weekend and few summer evenings go by without some kind of event, often several on the same day.

The Chamber of Commerce was among the earliest sponsors of such events. Over the years, the Chamber has been joined by the Evanston Arts Council, Evmark, private corporations and businesses, garden clubs and many other non-profit organizations. In 2002, the Chamber estimated that 200,000 persons attended the 14 annual festivals and special events held throughout the city, and over 305,000 persons attended all Northwestern University sporting events. Even when events are held elsewhere in the city, many participants visit downtown for one reason or another.



Northwestern University Band



Earth Day Exhibits



Garden Fair in Raymond Park

In 1972 the Chamber of Commerce created “The World’s Largest Garage Sale,” held annually on one summer weekend in the Sherman Avenue parking garage. Conceived originally as a community-wide “flea market” for local residents to sell everything from cast-offs to antiques, it evolved into a much greater commercial event with over 500 vendors and 50,000 to 60,000 visitors at its three-day peak. Its success was due largely to the organization and enthusiasm exhibited by the Chamber’s Administrative Assistant, Ruth Smalley, who seemed knew everyone in Evanston. The event was discontinued after its 28th sale in 1999 due to competition from the multitude of lesser flea markets outside of Evanston, its image as commercial activity rather than a community activity, and the prospect of the garage being torn down to make way for a new mixed-use development.



World’s Largest Garage Sales

In 1979, Ira Golan, former Evanston United Way Executive Director, was chosen to be the Executive Vice-President of the Evanston Chamber of Commerce. His earlier career in private business, his penchant for marketing, and his optimistic personality were well suited to the Chamber’s evolution under then President Terrence Jenkins, an officer of the Washington National Insurance Company. Ira Golan’s mission was to expand membership (from 230 businesses to almost 700 businesses in 10 years) by emphasizing the role of small business. His style was hands-on, face-to face contact with business and civic leaders.



Tasters’ Fest

During his leadership decade, the Chamber initiated a banner program on downtown street light fixtures, sponsored an outdoor Tastersfest for several years with 30 local restaurants, organized the highly successful and respected Fountain Square Arts Festival, worked with the League of Chicago Theaters to bring a “Hot Tix” booth to downtown, sustained the Garage Sale, co-founded Design Evanston, and established Evmark.



Banners

Jonathan Perman became the Chamber's Executive Director in 1992. A native of Evanston, he previously served in a similar capacity at the New Haven, CT Chamber of Commerce. His mission here was fourfold: to continue the emphasis on small businesses and entrepreneurship; to expand tourism; to promote regionalism, and to strengthen networking. Membership has increased to well over 700 businesses under his leadership. The Chamber's largest summer event is the Fountain Square Arts Festival, which is now managed under contract by Chicago Special Events Management. Over 300 juried artists exhibited at the 2003 weekend festival to an estimated 70,000 visitors and potential patrons on six blocks of downtown streets. Many of Evanston's restaurants were featured at the outdoor food court, which also had live entertainment.

For two years the Chamber co-sponsored Pete Miller's Jazz Festival. Held outdoors in the Fall on Sherman Avenue, the festival featured renowned jazz groups and was well attended. It was discontinued as an outdoor event with Chamber involvement, because of its cost and its vulnerability to weather. It continues to be a highly successful week-long event held inside at Pete Miller's Steak House where live jazz is featured year-round.

Under Jonathan Perman, the Evanston Convention and Visitors' Bureau was created in 1994. It evolved into Chicago's North Shore Convention and Visitors' Bureau in 2002, representing Evanston, Skokie and Wilmette. Membership is open to other North Shore communities.

Once Evmark was formed it assumed responsibility for many of the Chamber's downtown functions, such as banner programs, marketing, holiday decorations, and special events. For several years, Evmark co-sponsored street performances related to the Gus Giordano Dance Studio's World Jazz Dance Congress. This global event became so popular that many of its performances are now held in Chicago at the revitalized Navy Pier. Evmark has also sponsored "Dancing Under the Stars" on Thursday evenings in the summer, and has promoted downtown as "The Dining Capital of the North Shore."

With the reconstruction and centennial celebration of Fountain Square Plaza in 1976, the Evanston Arts Council began sponsoring weekly noon-time concerts in the plaza during the summer, featuring everything from jazz to folk music, to ethnic rhythms. For several years the State National Bank supplemented this series with Big Band Concerts (e.g. Glenn Miller) in its own plaza.



Art Fair



Weekday Concerts

The garden clubs of Evanston are numerous and active, some dating back to the early 1900's. Their imprint of floral beauty is evident throughout the community, indoors and out, on private property and public property. Each April for over four decades up to seven garden clubs collaborated to hold a garden fair in downtown's Raymond Park. Each club sold speciality plant materials under festive tents. These three-day fairs inaugurated each summer season by attracting garden enthusiasts and their children from throughout the city and beyond. The garden fairs in Raymond Park were discontinued after 2001 due to competition from big box retailers and a series of rainy weekends, although a smaller garden fair continues to be held in Independence Park on Central Street.

Downtown Evanston has also been the location of the Chicago region's largest continuing Farmer's Market. Originally established by a city commission and the Chamber of Commerce on Benson Avenue in the 1970s with a dozen or so vendors, the market has moved to various sites in what is now the Research Park. Over 30 vendors of fruit, vegetables, flowers, and bread arrive as early as sunrise to satisfy crowds of over 3,000 residents each Saturday morning from May through October. This has become a community institution - - much more than a market place - - rather, a gathering place for residents to meet friends and establish lasting relationships with the vendors themselves. Currently, the Farmer's Market is operated solely by the City of Evanston.



Farmers' Market

December 31, 1993 marked the beginning of First Night—a family-oriented New Year’s Eve celebration organized by a group of Evanston citizens desiring an alcohol-free alternative. From 6 p.m. until midnight, entertainment takes place concurrently in 16 different venues throughout downtown (churches, banks, office building, hotels, library, YMCA etc.) which serve as performance sites contributed free of charge to the program. More than 300 professional artists are paid to perform at First Night, offering jazz, gospel, folk, rock, opera, classical and ethnic music; stage dance and dance bands; storytelling for children and adults; drama, comedy and improve theater; face painting, art-making and children’s performers. The art of ice sculpting is demonstrated and a special “Count-down to Midnight” outdoor event gathers everyone to the final celebration, usually fireworks. Attendance approximates 10,000 people from Evanston, 39 other suburbs and 22 Chicago zip codes (2001). First Night Evanston is managed by an independent non-profit corporation.

Still other events have been held downtown, such as the Rotary International 8K Race to the Finish in June to raise funds to eliminate polio in the world. Over the years other organizations have sponsored unique events: carnivals, Earth Day celebrations, professional bicycle races, parades, etc. Furthermore, numerous lakefront events are held just two blocks east of downtown, for which downtown parking serves as a significant resource. The annual Ethnic Arts Festival began in 1986 and is held annually.

Rotary International’s contribution to downtown extends beyond being one of Evanston’s largest employers. To over 1.2 million Rotarians in 165 countries of the world Evanston is as well known as Mecca and deserves a “pilgrimage.” Almost every day of the year the world headquarters at Sherman and Grove hosts visitors ranging from high school exchange students and college level Ambassadorial Scholars to Group Study Exchanges (young business persons, specifically not Rotarians), Friendship Exchanges (Rotarians) and to major donors and their families who want to see how their money is being managed (e.g. service projects throughout the world.) To each of these visitors, such pilgrimages are major events, even though they may go unnoticed by most Evanstonians.

Of course, much can also be said about visitors to Northwestern University, even though the campus is adjacent to, not in, downtown. For local residents, however, the performing arts events (theater, music, dance) held at Cahn Auditorium and the Performing Arts Center are but a short walk from downtown, enabling many patrons to park in downtown facilities and eat dinner in downtown restaurants.

Despite all of these success stories, champions of a downtown theater venue for the Evanston based, highly acclaimed, professional Northlight Theater Company could not win the support needed to achieved their goal. Northlight eventually found its home in Skokie at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts near Evanston’s nemesis - - Old Orchard Shopping Center.

To offset this loss, the Music Institute of Chicago, located at Chicago Avenue and Grove Street, opened a new campus with teaching facilities and a 500-seat concert hall on Chicago Avenue in May, 2003. The building was originally designed by Solon S. Berman in 1913 and was occupied by the First Church of Christ Scientist. The grand opening festival featured eight concerts in one week by gifted faculty and students.



Music Institute of Chicago