

LOOKING BACK

"Improving" Wolfeboro

Although quite a few people think that Wolfeboro isn't broken – so there is no need to fix it – others think that the Town Hall (Brewster Memorial Hall on the National Register of Historic Places) should be torn down, the Board of Selectmen should be "fired," and that given a chance they could do everything better, faster, and cheaper. Very few people who continually complain ever make donations or contributions to the town or work enthusiastically on committees. That is okay of course and makes life interesting. It would be boring if we all agreed on everything! And, the Letters to the Editor columns would be empty.

It seems that what is needed now in April 2012 is a new group to elevate our town to new levels. Let's call it the Wolfeboro Improvement Association. In that way we can become an ideal town—with modern buildings replacing all the old ones, with parking meters to gain revenue and reduce taxes, and perhaps with a bypass so that traffic can go nonstop from Alton to Ossipee without having to slow down. Street lights posted around town would be a great improvement, too, as who likes to calculate when to move at Pickering Corner? And, rather than having all of these little shops, how about bulldozing the downtown area (including, of course, Town Hall and that old obsolete Railroad Station) so that a Wal-Mart can be brought in? And, it would be good to have a new industry or two—how about a Toyota car-parts stamping mill and a Tyson chicken processing plant? With some careful planning Wolfeboro can look like, say, Providence, R.I., so that visitors from that place, or Newark, N.J., will feel right at home. Makes a lot of sense it seems.

Oops! I just remembered that the Wolfeboro Improvement Association is already formed. Or it was at one time. Organized in March 1913, one of its first bright ideas was to create a professional baseball team with hired players as well as locals helping out. If they had been prescient the organizers might have said, "If we build it, they will come." A scouting team was sent to various New England colleges to find exceptional players. However, the Red Sox were able to relax, as Wolfeboro never became a threat. Another was to try to breathe some life the west wing of the old Bell Shop, most of which had been demolished (the 1911 Municipal Power Plant building on Lehner Street is on the site of the main building) and to reactivate an idle woolen mill in South Wolfeboro.

Another plan was to tear down all of the buildings to the left of the Peavey Block (today's Avery Building) to create a park complete with a bandstand with rest rooms beneath it. None of these Association ideas ever came to fruition. However, not all was lost. At the time many town streets had no identification signs. They weren't necessary, as the locals knew where they were and others didn't need to know. In response the town began labeling the major rights of way.

In the same decade the Retail Merchants' Association

was formed as was the Wolfeboro Commercial Club, both intending to help retail business. Their activities were not well recorded, but, no matter, it was the dawn of the age of widespread tourist travel by automobile. In the late teens and early

1920s our town became a magnet for thousands of tourists riding in Fords, Overlands, Buicks, and Chevrolets, and even a stray Stutz Bearcat or two. Business was terrific!

On Jan. 11, 1926, the Wolfeboro Chamber of Commerce was organized. Harold H. Hart, prominent automobile dealer, was chosen as president. Clayton M. Wallace was treasurer, and Mildred B. Avery was secretary. This was the magic touch, the group strengthened, and today it has over 300 members. Last week I discussed the modern Chamber and its executive director Mary DeVries.

On Aug. 8, 1926, the Chamber sponsored motorboat races, with contestants roaring off from the town wharf, tearing along the shore off of Sewall Road to a point opposite the "Wiscasset" cottage, turning left to Clark's Point (Mitt Romney, present-day summer resident in that area, hadn't been born yet), zooming off of Brewster Beach, and circling around the town wharf again—four times around the course for a total of nine miles. The first race was between Hacker-Dolphin runabouts and was won by the RAM owned by Richard A. Mesters and driven by George Childs. The second boat to finish was Velmo II owned by Frank Hopewell and driven by John Hopewell. Both achieved 32 miles an hour and finished just 20 seconds apart. Wow! Thirty-two miles an hour. Imagine that! Which reminds me to mention that our town has one of the richest traditions in old-time wooden race boats of any place in America. Wonder what Mesters, Childs, and the Hopewells would think of 60-miles-per-hour Sea-Doos if they were living today?

Another sporting event formed by the Chamber in its first year was a bowling league at the Wolfeboro Casino. Remember bowling? It was something that people did before color TV and the Internet dominated leisure time. The Casino was located on the waterfront at the end of Endicott Street. It wasn't quite like the MGM Grand or Foxwoods, but people had a lot of fun there.

Next week: More about the Chamber and the Casino.

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