

# RELAX, THE SEMIQUINCENTENNIAL IS HERE



## DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

By Barry Cassidy

Semiquincentennial: A combination of "semi" (half), "quin" (five), and "centennial" (hundred), meaning half of 500 years, or 250 years. This plateau reminds me that 50 years ago, I produced one of the largest Bicentennial celebrations on the East Coast — the "ill-fated" Baltimore County Fair.

In my early 20s, I continued to have my pick of good jobs and began my career as one of the first "Job Hoppers." While others worked for the same company for 30 years, I was on my third job in less than five years.

I left Memphis and moved to Baltimore County to a lovely house in Cockeysville, MD. I got a job in the Baltimore County Executive's office. I was put in charge of the County's Bicentennial Celebration. This was the first Democrat elected to this position in a long time and was the springboard for Spiro Agnew in the '60s. When Agnew resigned, it was for corruption while he held the office; later, Dale Anderson also went down for crimes against the people.

My boss was a self-styled P.T. Barnum type who, while president of the county fair, ran California's Jerry Brown Maryland Presidential Primary and won. He was good at throwing out ideas and talking about drawing a million people to the eleven-day event. We were not just getting circus acts; we were getting Ringling Brothers. We were not just getting a local ski show; we were bringing in the Cypress Garden Ski Show.

Perhaps I was a little too attentive to his ideas. The following month, Cypress

Gardens Ski Show attended a meeting and signed a contract. The following month, Kenneth Feld was in the office signing a contract for "acts from" Ringling Brothers. The thing I remember about Feld was the Jensen Intercept he drove.

So on and so forth, we had the Acapulco cliff divers diving off a 100-foot tower into 10 feet of water every hour on the hour ... Demolition Derbies. Five live stages featuring local acts and a Main Stage with the likes of the Drifters and the Shirelles, with Count Basie and Mercer Ellington to even things out. We rounded it out with James E. Strates Carnival.

But there were a couple of problems. First, the Republicans on the County Council were critical of everything, and my having hair to the middle of my back did not endear me to them. The *Baltimore Sun* called it the 'ill-fated Baltimore County Fair.' At one point, a *Baltimore News American* reporter told me in a bar, "The county executive stuck his neck out, and it is my job to cut his head off."

But the biggest surprise was how the county treated us. The electrical inspector would not allow us to use the standard fair wiring plan for generators with thick wires on the ground. I had already set up with Strates' show, using extra generators for the booths I would sell to the locals. I had to go overhead with the wires and get switchgear and break down 17kva, costing a little north of \$300k.

Follow that with our million-person prediction, which led the county to reject porta-potties and require us to build a bathroom facility, adding another \$250k. There was talk about what the county people wanted, and the highest was 15k for the electrical and another \$20k for the restroom. But we were not going there.

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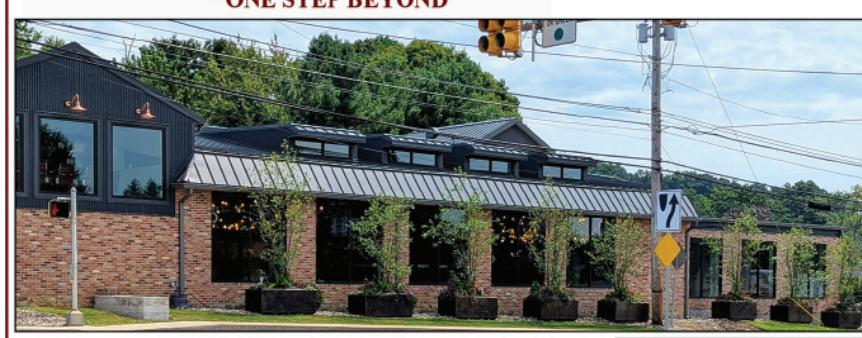
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## DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

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From then on, my life would be like that, not actually being outraged but just ignoring it. It was a sort of who I am, but really it was who the PT Barnum Guy was, and I cloned it as my personal code.

The job was a lot of fun, and I sometimes laughed so hard I cried. The carnival guys were a trip, especially the ones called names like "Blackie." The gypsies gave me a Panama straw hat and made me an honorary gypsy because I treated them the same way I treated everyone else. The George Family and the Stevens family were arguing over whether the customer should turn right or left after entering the gate. It was a classic and got so intense that I had to go to the bathroom twice.

So, I figured it out: at \$3.00 per adult and \$2.00 per child, we would need about 275,000 people over eleven days. I felt comfortable. The press was hammering us, and Republicans were making wild accusations. The political pressure was intense, and I witnessed something I had never seen before. The PT Barnum guy folded under pressure and announced that all children were free.

I'm standing there, and 15,000 people are waiting in line to get in, and they knew nothing about the free kids. I looked at

him and said, "We are bankrupt." He was unwilling to listen. He said he had already sent *The Sun* a press release. I told him they had never printed a press release we had given them. I quietly went to my trailer, put those two cases of Piper-Heidsieck on ice, and rode out the eleven days knowing we were never going to come close to paying what we owed.

Later, someone asked me if I had even put it on my resume, and I politely told him that, in five years, no one would remember it and that I did not want to lose that memory. Plus, it was one of the best times I've ever had. I gained valuable knowledge of electricity for streetscape projects and plumbing which benefited me during low-income housing tenant conversions.

But most of all, the PT Barnum guy taught me a lot, both good and bad. I learned to stay calm under pressure after watching him panic when someone tried to chop off his boss's head. I learned to think big picture and develop a positive vision for what I do.

Things have changed since 1976, but it is again time for revelry as we celebrate our country.

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