A BANK STORY, AND A BANKING LESSON, AMID HERDS OF WINNEBAGOS

Annual Forest City rally for RVers means music, education, and camaraderie

The Park Inn Hotel and City National Bank building, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, fell into disrepair but has regained its looks thanks to the Wright on the Park organization in Mason City, Iowa. Filled with Wright-styled furniture, the building is once again a functional hotel. Alas, the bank closed many decades ago. Larry and Mary Ann Marik visited the site while in nearby Forest City, Iowa, for the event in Winnebago circles--the annual Winnebago-Itasca Travelers Grand National Rally.

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New to this blog? After he hung up his president hat, bank chairman Larry Marik, and his wife, Mary Ann, decided to sell their house, buy a Winnebago, and see more of America. They are now blogging about what they see about banking for ABA Banking Journal. Read more about the Mariks in "Chairman of the Open Road." and "Saxophone In The Moonlight Of The Sonora."

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Invite people from all over the U.S. to gather, ask them to dress as pirates, and have them park their costly RVs in an undulating field with only 30 amp power. Would anybody come?

Yes. Who are they? Avid Winnebago and Itasca owners--Winnebago Industries make them both--eager to learn more about their RVs and have fun.

So this story is going to be a little bit about banking, and a whole lot about an RV rally.

Forest City's answer to Woodstock, Sturgis, and other big gatherings

Once a year, Winnebago Industries, producer of the motor home in which we travel, sponsors a national rally at the manufacturing location in Forest City, Iowa. The rally is hosted by WIT Club (Winnebago-Itasca Travelers), a subsidiary of Winnebago.

This rally has been going on for 43 years. This year, former bankers, engineers, physicians, college professors, farmers, and educators dressed as pirates and went on a pretend trip to the Caribbean. (The theme was "Treasure Island," by the way, not "Pirates of the Caribbean.") Approximately 1,000 Winnebago and Itasca motor homes with license plates from all over the continental U.S. and Canada covered 160 acres.

Attendance was down somewhat. Why? Fuel prices. It makes a big difference if you're traveling from Delaware or Yuma to Forest City.

That's a whole lot of RVs in one place. This overview shot gives you an idea how many folks attend the annual Grand National Rally.

Why did we go? It's a combination of the camaraderie, the ability to network with other RV owners, the entertainment, and the seminars.

Here's the program. It starts with a pre-rally (for those who don't get enough rally during rally week). During pre-rally week, we get to know the members of our group--the 365 Club. (Yes, there are lots of us who live full-time in our motor homes.)

There are other interest groups as well, including bowlers, ham radio operators, golfers, retired military, and computer enthusiasts. Most people, though, park in their state rows. What we all have in common is the fact that we live from a few weeks to full time in a motor home, and we thrive on information about how these machines work.

During the pre-rally, we figure out logistics and the content of rally week. We clean house, get the bugs off the front, and polish the wheels. No one wants to be seen with a dirty motor home during rally week.

Sidetrips with bank bits

Now, RVers do what they do because they want to see our country.

There are interesting places everywhere, and Northern Iowa is no exception.

We took an "Architecture of Northern Iowa" tour during this week. There were two highlight. One is the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, where Richie Valens, Buddy Holly, and the Big Bopper played their last gig. The other is the Park Inn Hotel in Mason City, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. The Prairie School structure was only recently restored.

And that's where one banking bit comes in. The Park Inn building was commissioned by the City National Bank. It housed the bank and the attached hotel. However, the bank was forced to close in the 1920s and the building went through a period of decline. But the hotel is now open to receive guests, once again.

The area that housed the bank is now the ballroom, but the sign above the ballroom door still reads City National Bank.

Meanwhile, back at the rally

Once rally week begins, the 365 Club serves coffee and pastry to anyone who comes between 7 and 9. That's 10,000 doughnuts and cups of coffee. (Oh no, we don't buy; Winnebago buys; we just serve.)

The highlight of the week is the arrival of the "honey wagon." The sites at the rally have no sewer hook-ups, and though rigs like ours have sizable tanks, we cannot last for two weeks without dumping them. The "honey wagon" solves that problem. The truck goes through the campground and drains the holding tanks. (Think Robin Williams in RV.)

A wonderful "aroma" fills the air, but now we're ready for another three days.

The seminars begin. We attended 12--ranging from diesel engines, leveling systems, transmissions, and refrigerator and toilet care to basic inside and outside care...and we got more information at vendors' booths..

Days start early, but at 4:00 PM, it's happy hour. It's a great time to network and discuss problems and solutions pertaining to motor homes.

Arrrrgh! Falling into the Grand National Rally's pirate theme, the Banker on Wheels, Larry Marik, couldn't resist a chance to perform with his saxophone.

But on one afternoon, Larry got to do some banking education.

As we sat around during cocktail hour, the "What did you do in your first life?" question always came up.

When Larry said "I was in banking," there was sometimes a moment of awkward silence.

You know that old adage that "Everyone hates congress, but loves the congressmen from his district." Well, that applies to bankers as well. It has become obvious to us that there's an ongoing necessity for banking as an industry to polish its image.

Seminars come to a close at the end of Rally Week, but for those who want to learn more, (and we did) there's Freightliner Boot Camp during the following week. We got two solid days of information about the chassis on which our motor home is built. Now, we're really dangerous.

When attendees at the Grand National Rally aren't having fun or sightseeing, they're learning more about their homes away from home. Seminars cover everything from bumper to bumper.

Looking in our rear view mirror

Last year, on one of our visits to Forest City for service, we wrote about MBT, the bank established by the founder of Winnebago. During rally week, people in need of cash can save ATM fees because MBT offers free check cashing.

So there's still a place for those paper checks. Our guess is that they never get stiffed with a bad check.

Each evening there's entertainment. Some people at the rally thought the music was too loud, but we didn't. We love Beach Boys music and Jimmy Buffet music and we like it played loudly.

After all, it was a party.

Keep your eyes peeled, should you see a huge black, tan, and steel Winnebago Journey roll through town or pass you on the highway. The Mariks will be displaying this poster as they search for stories for their blog.