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Heritage of hospitality: Stafford's turns 50



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AEBRA COE/NEWS-REVIEW Stafford's Hospitality owners Stafford (left) and Janice Smith stand outside the company's historic Perry Hotel in downtown Petoskey. This month, the Smiths celebrate the 50th anniversaries of both their marriage and their business. (Aebra Coe)

Aebra Coe Staff Writer
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As Stafford's Hospitality celebrates its 50th anniversary this June, owners, Stafford and Janice Smith have many memories of the company's beginnings in 1961 and how the business and communities around it have grown and changed since.

The Smiths were both 22 years old in June 1961, when they were married and bought the Bay View Inn.

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"We met at the Bay View Inn during the summer of 1960," Janice recalls. "Stafford was the assistant manager and had worked for Dr. Roy Heath since the summer of 1957. I was the newly hired dining room hostess.

"As the summer unfolded, Stafford and I fell in love, not only with each other, but also with the area. We were destined to be in Petoskey, but we did not understand that destiny until December 1960."

Stafford, who graduated college the year before, needed a job opportunity and with the guidance of his mentor, Heath, bought the hotel. The Smiths were married June 17, 1961, and opened the inn 11 days later.

In 1960, the Bay View Inn was one of several **hotels** in Northern **Michigan** that were open only two months of the year, in July and August. These hotels served the resort community and, like the inn, didn't have central heat or air conditioning.

"There's a huge difference we've seen in our lifetime," said Janice.

The face of tourism began to change in the '60s, though, according to the Smiths.

Previously, passenger trains had played a significant part in travel, and vacationers would take a train ride up from Cleveland or Chicago and stay in a hotel for the summer. With the improvement of the interstate highway system and proliferation of [automobile](#) travel, people would be up for a week or weekend and move along to their next destination.

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The tourism season also began to slowly extend. By 1968, the Smiths installed heat into the hotel so that they could stay open for the fall color season. The skiing industry was becoming established in the area as well, making it extremely important for the business to winterize its buildings.

"We didn't have a business plan, but we had a vision," said Stafford.

In the early years, the Smiths began with restorations and improvements. The first step was to revamp the first-floor lobby and public areas.

Janice, a schoolteacher, had a classroom job in Alanson in those days, but also found the time to do just about every job needed for the new business — whether it involved cooking, training new employees or running the dining room.

After buying the Bay View Inn, the Smiths focused on catering for events like banquets, weddings or their \$3.50 chicken dinner for sports leagues and groups that wanted a meeting place to get together, [eat](#) and drink.

Stafford's later bought The Pier restaurant in Harbor Springs, the Perry Hotel in downtown Petoskey, and the Weathervane restaurant in Charlevoix. The business grew as Stafford made improvements and additions and acquired new businesses in the area.

When founded, Stafford's had 28 employees. The hospitality company now employs up to 450 employees in the peak summer months.

The Smiths say one of the things they are most proud of in the past 50 years is the chance they've had to take over key properties that are "architectural gems," restore them and make them keystones of their communities.

"We wanted to emulate the historic qualities of these beautiful towns," said Stafford.

Not every venture panned out, though, over the years. The Smiths laugh now about several businesses they experimented with when younger. One was a pizza joint where teens could eat, play records and dance. The building that they ran the business out of was torn down, though, and they were on to the next idea.

Stafford reflected on his plan to have an outdoor patio restaurant in Petoskey's Gaslight District with views of the bay. Al fresco dining was essentially unheard of at the time, but it was unsuccessful because the culture at the time didn't support the now wildly popular style of dining.

"These were not failures; they were concepts that weren't right at the moment," said Stafford. "If your business is going to be viable in the long-run, it has to change frequently with the culture of the time."

Today, Stafford's offers outdoor dining overlooking the bay on the Perry Hotel's Rose Garden Veranda.

The face of tourism in 1961 was such that the city of Petoskey didn't even plow the snow from certain sections of downtown because the shops there were so geared toward the summer resort crowd, said Janice.

"It's a whole different community now, much broader," she noted.

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