

Chamber of Commerce takes a new turn

By **STEPHANIE DeCAMP**
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The Decatur County Area Chamber of Commerce is switching gears and drawing up a new model of operation focused on recruiting new business, but not without a few growing pains.

Chamber President David Swank told the Chamber board at a meeting Oct. 3 that he has been working with the Oberlin Business Alliance and Chamber board members to hone in on the organization's strengths.

Elected as president at the Sept. 5 meeting, Mr. Swank has discussed taking the Chamber in a new direction.

Mr. Swank, who is retired from the Department of Defense and whose wife owns Penn Avenue Boutique, said the Alliance

focuses on the businesses that are already here, so the Chamber should turn its gaze outward to focus on bringing new businesses in.

Membership has dropped, he said, most likely because of the cost. Mr. Swank said he visited with county commissioners Oct. 2 to see if they could help the Chamber pay its bills during this transition, but got no commitment.

At that meeting, Mr. Swank said that to join both the Alliance and the Chamber costs a business \$200, which he thinks is too much. He said the Chamber is working with the Alliance to figure out a cheaper way for area businesses to join both organizations, and drafting a new letter to pull new and returning members into the fold.

The duties of treasurer have been turned over to board member Ruth Miesner, who will oversee all financial transactions from now on and report on the Chamber's accounts every month, he said. The Chamber, Mr. Swank told commissioners, has been strapped for a long time. Between paying for the office and manager, and contributing to the Back-to-School Picnic every year, it ends up spending more than it has. A fundraising program offsets some of this deficit, but not enough.

Mr. Swank said the main project he wants the Chamber to focus on for the year is what he calls an "opportunity packet," an idea which sprang from the Chamber's resurrection of the 'Welcome Wagon' program. The opportunity packets, he said, should be

something that Connie Grafel, the marketing director for the Oberlin-Decatur County Economic Development Corp., can take with her to outside functions.

"When we or Connie go out of the county, we can represent the county and say 'Hey, if you're moving here, this is the kind of thing you can expect,'" he said. "Quality of life, demographics, benefits to moving here. Good work ethic and stable work force, that kind of thing."

Chamber members decided that they would go from business to business on Thursday and Friday to talk to businesses and see if they wanted to include anything of theirs in the package, like pens, magnets, coupons and other promotional items. At that time, they will also be taking donations

of candy for the spook parade, Mr. Swank said, since this year the Chamber will be assembling candy bags to hand out at the end of the parade instead of having businesses hand them out at their stores.

Also at the meeting, the board welcomed a new member, Whitney Bergling, who moved to Oberlin about four months ago. Miss Bergling moved here with her fiancée, Jeremy, and son, Jude, and works at the Good Samaritan Center. She has a degree in journalism and public relations, and will be helping the Chamber during its evolution into an outward-looking entity.

"I'm incredibly excited to be on the board," she said, "and for the opportunity to contribute to the Chamber and Oberlin."

* Corn yields meager

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ger to pick it," he said. "We want it to be around 14 to 15 moisture, no higher than that. The elevator won't take it much over 15."

Mr. Rowh, a farmer all his life, raises 150 head of cattle, has a son and a daughter, and is a volunteer firefighter. He is the fifth generation to live on the family homestead.

"It's probably been mediocre to poor for dry land farmers," said Keith VanSlike, agricultural agent for the Twin Creek Extension District in Norton.

Mr. VanSlike said that when the corn is pollinating, it's vulnerable to heat. The pollen from the male parts of the plants flies as far as 20 feet before it lands on the female silks, and can easily get burnt on the journey. It happened a lot this year, he said, and the extreme heat combined with the lack of water only doubled the stresses on the plants.

"The corn has been on average not as good as we'd like it to be," Mr. VanSlike said. "Some places had good moisture stored because of their practice of minimum till and no till ... Some places I'm surprised by how well they did, but overall, the harvest is probably going to be disappointing. I'd say zero to 40 or 50 bushel at best. I'd say we're lucky to have any corn the

way the heat was. Due to the fact of the very conservative farming practices, we were very lucky to store what moisture we had and to get the crop that we did."

Mr. VanSlike advised farmers that if they're feeding corn forage to their cattle, they need to watch nitrate levels. If cutting sorghums for forage, they need to raise the cutter bar several inches off the ground - nitrates are highest at the bottom of the stalk - and get a nitrate test to be sure it is safe for livestock to eat.

"Patience is a virtue out here. Sometimes I can lose mine pretty quick ... but you know, you think about it, get a hold of reality again, and realize where you stand. There's not a lot you can do. A lot of what you do is dictated by Mother Nature, and she can be a bitch."

But just because Mother Nature is disagreeable, that doesn't mean that Mr. Rowh doesn't love his job.

"Farming is fun," he said. "Are you kidding? You feed the world. The thing I love the most is picking corn. When it's really good, it's really fun. Everyone's just picking and hauling and going. There's no sitting around; you just run."

"You have to love to do this. You don't dictate to the corn or wheat or cattle when it's ready. They dictate to you, and you better be there for



CORNPOURED FROM Jason Rowh's auger into his truck Wednesday.

- Herald staff photo by Stephanie DeCamp

it. If you're not willing to do that, you better find another profession. It controls what you do, and it's not for the weak."

* Death of youth called a tragedy

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people - both the down-home country boy that he was, and a worldly and cultural explorer, a delicate balance that is hard for many, yet came easily for him. He never concealed his happiness, he said.

Grant said he wants those grieving his brother's loss to talk to other people grieving for Gatlin.

"Talk about him to people that you know," he said. "Remember the reasons why you are grieving for him; all the excellent stuff about him. Remember the ways in which he made the world a fun place to be in, and act those ways yourself."

"Gatlin deeply loved his family and friends," his Aunt Amy said. "I know, without a doubt, that he never wanted to hurt anyone, especially those who cared about him."

"And no matter how bad you may

be hurting, there is always a better way out of it, that ends with joy and happiness for you instead of grief and pain for others. Everyone feels pain, sometimes incomprehensible pain; you are not alone in that. But there is true relief for that pain by reaching out to your family and those who love you."

Grant agreed. "God, please just talk to someone," he said, when asked how he would advise others trying to make their way through hard and painful times. "Be around other people; do not be alone."

"Also, realize that there is nothing new under the sun. Whatever troubles you have now, you're be surprised to know that your parents and siblings have already gone through them. They've made it through them. You can, too."



EXPLAINING HOW THEY fell into knife making and leather working, Deb (above) Smith told the Decatur Professional Women last Wednesday what to expect at the gun show this weekend. - Herald staff photo by Stephanie DeCamp

Knife shop plans second show this year

By **STEPHANIE DeCAMP**
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The Oberlin Knife Shop, also known as J.W. Smith & Sons Custom Knives, will hold its second knife and gun show of the year Saturday and Sunday at The Gateway.

Vendors are expected from Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas and Arizona for the event, said Deb Smith, co-owner of the shop with her husband, J.W. Some from the first show will be returning and others will be new. Last June, she said, they had 85 tables, but this time they'll have 100.

"It's not just going to be guns and knives either," said J.W. at a presentation to the Decatur Professional Women last Wednesday at The Gateway. "There's going to be jewelry, buy/sell/trade gold and silver, military collectibles, arts and crafts. There's even a lady coming that makes ballet tutus."

The Smiths told the group they encourage a family atmosphere, a safe place to learn and socialize with others who share your interests.

"Our kids literally grew up at gun shows," said Mrs. Smith, recounting how the shows have affected her family. "We have a son that was so shy, so we thought, 'Well, we'll just have him run the booth then.' So we put him up at the table at our shows to get used to talking to people. Then when we moved here, last fall during the Spook Parade, you should have seen him. He was all over the place, talking to all the kids and asking

about their costumes. He really came out of his shell."

Mrs. Smith recounted how they had fallen into the business, all the while showing the professional women the leather work, stamps and knife styles that they have both learned to make, though J.W. does most of that.

"Four years ago," she said, "J.W. was a salesman at a dealership, and he was on four different blood pressure medications and twice as big as he is now. We kept going to the doctor for his health, and the doctor said, 'Well, get him an aquarium in his office, it will be soothing.' Then it was, 'Take him out to lunch every day, let him blow off some steam.' And none of it was working. So then he says, 'Get him a hobby.'"

So J.W. went home and tried to find a hobby. His mother had given him a custom knife when he was 16, his wife said, and he went on eBay one day to look for the rest of the set it had come from. As he looked through the different knives, he said, he thought to himself, "I can't afford it, but I bet I can make it."

Mr. Smith said he kept the first knife he made, and decided to sell the other one on eBay. Six months later, the couple said, they were making more money with knives than J.W. was at the dealership.

That's when J.W. began to look for good scabbards for his knives. Scabbards are standard for fixed-blade knives, he said, and are always made

out of leather. But he couldn't find any - there was only one tannery left in the United States, he said, and the rest were not of a quality he wanted to endorse with his work. So once again, Mrs. Smith said, he thought to himself "I bet I can do that."

Soon people were calling in requests, and the Smiths were leatherworkers overnight. "It's a dying art in the U.S.," said J.W., who claimed the Environmental Protection Agency had virtually regulated the trade out of the country. Soon enough, people also began asking for lessons, he said, and so the shop will start setting up leather-working classes later this year.

"It's just been a wild ride," said Mrs. Smith. "When J.W. quit his job, I cried for three days. But the Lord provides, and here we are today."

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* Meeting will be Monday

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executive director of the Franklin Center and other jobs. These neighborhoods, throughout the 1970s and '80s, were going through some of the same problems that rural towns see today.

"Everyone was leaving," Mr. Woodbury recounted. "Young people were leaving and never coming back. Property values dropped, and decent, affordable renting was nowhere to be found. The demand for social services went up, and with that went taxes."

"And now, it's the opposite. Everyone is flocking to the cities while rural America slowly goes downhill."

But he's not content to let rural area keep slipping silently away. Mr.

Woodbury hails from Leoti, population about 1,500, and, he said, it was there that the inspiration for Public Square really began.

"I saw that in Leoti, where I grew up, the same thing was happening," he said, "and we didn't have a physical public square, but an intersection of two highways. When I was growing up, everything was hopping there - it was active. But the clothing store closed with Walmart, and everyone either left or moved. We're isolated. So I decided that the image of what I wanted to do is rebuild the public square one community at a time."

Mr. Woodbury said that creating a positive space for ideas and bringing communities, people, businesses and groups together to make those

ideas happen is what he seeks to accomplish. By meeting on equal ground, he said, a community can succeed in doing what a government, organization or business cannot do alone.

"You can't blame what's happening right now on politics or just politicians," he said. "They're a reflection of us. They are fragmented and polarized because that's who we are; we put them there."

"The same thing is happening to religions and even medical services. You never see a family practitioner now, because it's easier to specialize and isolate yourself so you only have to work 40 hours a week. Isolation is all around us. We spend less time together than we ever have. And I want to change that."

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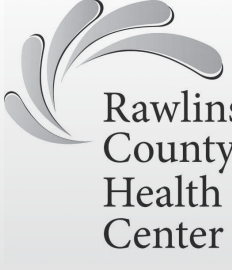
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