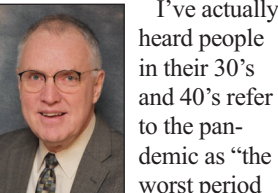




## Comparing adversity

As the darkest days of Covid-19 show signs of melting harmlessly away, a growing number of people have chosen to reflect on just what transpired during the past twelve months and how it compares to the tragedies of the past.

Those people need a hobby.



**Joe Hurd**

Blair County Chamber of Commerce

I've actually heard people in their 30's and 40's refer to the pandemic as "the worst period of time that the country has ever endured." If you died during that time or had someone close to you die, it would be hard to argue with that. Yet I can somehow envision a cynical smile on the faces of people in their 80's and 90's whose recollections of dreadful occurrences go a bit deeper.

It doesn't even take a health calamity to rekindle those bad memories. When the New York Stock Exchange experienced a sell-off that resulted in billions of dollars of losses on October 24, 1929, the Great Depression was technically underway and the financial carnage was extreme. This is how humorist Will Rogers described that day in his New York Times syndicated column:

"When Wall Street took that tail spin, you had to stand in line to get a window to jump out of." A little insensitive but an indication of the degree of desperation that was to last for twelve years and only ended with America's entry into World War II. When you're enduring a period of unbearable hardship and your only salvation is a World War, things are clearly not going your way.

To minimize the impact of Covid-19 is foolhardy. Those who believe that the vaccine alone will make all things well again are stretching optimism well beyond its normal limits. Yet those are the people with whom I'd sooner hang around. Gloom and doom seldom make things better.

The main feature on this Business Insight page focuses attention on our local hotels and their ability to endure the one-two-punch of crippling mandates and low occupancy. They are not the exception. It should be mentioned, however, that with so much to complain about, we hardly heard a peep from any of the hotels. "Will complaining make a difference?" one of them asked me at the height of the restrictions. "Because I'm willing to try if it does."

We both know that answer. It's all those other answers that we don't know. (Joe Hurd is President/CEO of the Blair County Chamber of Commerce.)

## Hotels dealing with difficult recovery

Blair County's hotel industry has traditionally been a strong selling-point for travel and tourism marketing efforts. The common promotional preface that most hotels are able to use with high justification is "award-winning." With few exceptions, the reputation for excellence has continued to grow.

Then Covid-19 arrived and the landscape changed. People stopped traveling. Mandates required safety measures that made it practically impossible for hotels to offer the type of comfort and hospitality to which people were accustomed. Fewer guests meant fewer resources to remain viable.

While the plight of restaurants and taverns drew most of the attention for continually having to adjust to changing guidelines, the hotels were essentially ignored, despite the fact that they were suffering many of the same challenges.

"The pandemic decimated the hotel industry," acknowledged Patrick Schurr, Altoona Area Director of Sales & Marketing for Courtyard by Marriott, Microtel by Wyndham and Wingate by Wyndham. "We don't anticipate a full recovery until well into 2023. However, we are encouraged as business travel is resuming, leisure travel is increasing as attractions reopen and out-of-town fans will be coming back to support their teams in person at sporting events."

Peter Plamondon, Jr., Co-President of Plamondon Hospitality Partners, agreed.

"The lodging and travel industries were some of the

earliest and most heavily impacted, due to the pandemic, and by many measures will be some of the slowest to recover," explained Plamondon, whose company owns the Fairfield and TownePlace Suites by Marriott in Altoona. "Our biggest challenge as an industry is to effectively communicate the many initiatives that have been undertaken to address the public's concern around the safety of travel. We need to clearly convey the message that guest safety is our top priority."

For the Comfort Inn in Duncansville and the Comfort Suites in Altoona that safety pledge is more than just the cleanliness of the rooms and the common areas. It also applies to food handling and food quality.

"We had to modify our hot breakfast bar to comply with Covid-19 safety protocols," disclosed Donna Helsel, General Manager of the Comfort Inn. "Therefore we have enhanced the minimum requirement set forth by Choice Hotels to insure guests receive a well-balanced breakfast." Even at a reduced cost.

"We've added selections to our breakfast bar as well while also offering deep discounts to our groups booking for this year," admitted Julie McConnell, General Manager of the Comfort Suites. "The incentives have helped boost the level of interest."

Promoting safety hasn't been the only arrow in the quiver for hotels looking to reclaim market share. Creativity has played a part, according to Lindsay Danella, General Manager of AI-



Serena Patel, the new manager of the Quality Inn Altoona, is hopeful that the hotel industry is on the rebound after many months of the pandemic.

toona Grand Hotel.

"As bad as the pandemic has been, there have been some upsides," she pointed out. "It has made us look at how we can do things more effectively and with a little different focus. For instance, we put live entertainment in our outdoor dining area and it generated a really positive response. This has been far from an easy ride but thanks to a great staff, we've steadily moved forward."

Hotel staffing, while unpredictable in many cases, drew praise from all the hotel managers.

"Our staff has been unbelievable," stated Sarina Patel, General Manager of Quality Inn Altoona. "With so many new regulations to deal with, they helped us get through the tough times. We owe them a great debt of gratitude."

### OUR CHAMBER HOTELS

<b>Altoona Grand Hotel</b> 814-946-1631	<b>Hampton Inn Altoona</b> 814-941-3500
<b>Comfort Inn Altoona</b> 814-693-1800	<b>Microtel Inn &amp; Suites by Wyndham, Altoona</b> 814-946-1400
<b>Comfort Suites</b> 814-942-2600	<b>Omni Bedford Springs Resort and Spa</b> 814-624-5622
<b>Courtyard by Marriott</b> 814-312-1800	<b>Quality Inn</b> 814-944-9661
<b>Days Inn &amp; Suites, Altoona</b> 814-944-4499	<b>Rodeway Inn</b> 814-902-7026
<b>Econo Lodge</b> 814-944-3555	<b>Wingate by Wyndham Altoona Downtown/Medical Center</b> 814-515-2233
<b>Fairfield and TownePlace Suites by Marriott Altoona</b> 814-946-0422	

## Oak Spring Winery approaching 35-years as a premier destination

In the travel and tourism world, the more attractions a county can boast, the more likely visitors will consider it a premier destination. That was a large part of the mindset of John and Sylvia Schraff in 1987 when they opened Oak Spring Winery in Altoona. A winery, located just off the exit of an interstate highway, would provide another reason for people to either plan a visit in advance or stop on their way through.

"It's pretty much happened that way," acknowledged Scott Schraff, who has operated Oak Spring for the past twenty-five years. "We probably get more 15-minute tourists than any other attraction in the area. People will see our sign on I-99 and get off to check us out. Most have no other reason to stop as they pass through. We've had people from France, Russia, England, New Zealand and Australia and many more."

The transient customer aside, Oak Spring has increased its reputation for fine products by marketing to people in its backyard. According to Scott Schraff, the main selling-point has been the composition of the market.



Scott Schraff of Oak Spring Winery brings a quarter-century of experience to the winemaking business.

"People in Central Pennsylvania are very sophisticated and knowledgeable about wine," he pointed out. "Our favorite customer is one who can appreciate a good dry red wine as well as a sweet fruit wine. The variety of wines that we offer increases the chance that everyone will find something suited to their taste."

Like most businesses, Oak Spring was heavily impacted by Covid-19.

"We lost all of our off-site events," Schraff disclosed. "The festivals in particular are important in what we promote and how we add to our customer base. It also affected our concerts and other

on-site events since we were limited in how many people could attend."

While people were staying close to home, Oak Spring was still able to maintain a portion of its business and actually noticed a dramatic increase in one aspect that was still in the formative stage.

"We found that people were coming-in and grabbing a few bottles of our wine for home consumption," Schraff noted. "But it was our Home Brew Shop that suddenly became very busy as people started to make wine at home during their free time."

(Oak Spring Winery has been a Chamber member since 1986.)

## Blair Chamber to host discussion on workforce

Attracting and retaining talent are critical to the future of Pennsylvania's workforce. For that reason GrowPA is holding a number of strategy sessions throughout the Commonwealth during 2021.

The Blair County Chamber is hosting one of those sessions this Wednesday, March 24th at 11:00 a.m. on Zoom.

GrowPA is a statewide initiative to convene people and organizations to establish a modern economic growth agenda. Since its inception in 2017, GrowPA has evolved into a movement focused around three pillars, working to: modernize all facets of our infrastructure, accelerate health care innovation and transform post-secondary education.

Wednesday's session will be moderated by Chamber President Joe Hurd and will include two local business leaders – Philip Devorris of Blair Companies and



Stephanie Doliveira of Sheetz, Inc. Dr. Lori J. Bechtel-Wherry, chancellor of Penn State Altoona will also be one of the speakers.

"We're excited that GrowPA has identified the Blair County Chamber to host a discussion on a topic that is extremely important to everyone in Pennsylvania," Hurd pointed out. "There is little doubt that we need to work collaboratively with organizations that are seeking ways to recruit and develop talent. GrowPA is certainly one of those."

There is no cost to attend Wednesday's session. To register, go to [www.blair-chamber.com](http://www.blair-chamber.com). You will then receive an email explaining how to join the meeting.

## Highmark/Chamber Golf Classic

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