

Booming Joplin Company Originally from Germany

Schweinfurt-based industry serves local community

By Ginny Dumond

From the twinkle in the eyes of a few locals to a center of manufacturing and technology in the four-state area is how far Joplin's F.A.G. bearings plant has come in the last 30 years.

Larry Hickey, of Hickey Distributing, was mayor of Joplin in 1968 when the nationwide search for a F.A.G. plant site in the United States began. He still sits on the company's board of directors.

"It began with some salesmen from Canada, and then we began developing a plan for the industrial park around where the Pillsbury plant is today," Hickey said.

Hickey, along with Jada McGuire, Jerry Wells, and others, began to meet with the planners and salesmen once the committee began focusing on sites in Kentucky, Texas, Oklahoma, and Illinois as well as Missouri. The team from Joplin then was invited to attend a meeting in Schweinfurt, Germany, company headquarters. It was announced that Joplin had been selected for the job.

"None of us expected anything like this, but we worked hard and they were impressed with Joplin," Hickey said.

Georg Schafer, whose grandfather founded F.A.G., remembers that Joplin had several things many other cities did not offer.

"Friendliness of the people, the good labor force, and the school system were all things which appealed to us about Joplin," Schafer said. "And we've never regretted our decision."

After the decision was made to establish the plant in Joplin, there were still bond issues to pass.

"The bonds were passed to me by the city of Joplin," Hickey said. "In early January of 1970, I flew to Kansas City to pick up the bonds." Due to icy weather at the Joplin airport, Hickey was unable to return to Joplin that evening.

"Here I am carrying \$5 million of bonds in a cardboard box with rope handles," he said. "Needless to say, I didn't sleep very well that night with those \$5 million on the floor."

Finally, later that spring, the company got under way, and has gone on to employ more than 500 people in the Joplin area in the past 28 years.

"History has proven it to be a very wonderful place to work," Hickey said.

Joplin is also important to the Schafer family. They have remained close friends with the Hickeys and continue to be involved in the success of Joplin's F.A.G.

"It's a real love story and it has been for more than a quarter of a century now," Schafer said.

"It's been a wonderful relationship," Hickey said. "I'm still serving on the board, and my family and I have grown to have a great respect for the Schafers as well."