



J. Ross Felton – *Business, Industry and Professions*

In 1965 Fairmont native J. Ross Felton was hired to be part of the management team of WWVA. Country music was changing, and WWVA owners were bent on keeping the station and its programming at the forefront of this change. Four years later, WWVA and the Jamboree moved from the Exhibition Hall on Wheeling Island to the Capitol Theatre. The theatre became home to the Jamboree, Broadway shows, the radio station, and executive and management offices. The theatre's reopening on Dec. 13, 1969, set the tone for a golden era in our community's history, with performers such as Merle Haggard, Tanya Tucker, Loretta Lynn, Tom T. Hall, Charley Pride, Glen Campbell, Marty Robbins, Tammy Wynette, and Johnny Cash. This entire transformation took place under the watchful eye of one J. Ross Felton and led to tour bus packages and the bus-lined streets that so many of our residents fondly recall.

The success of Jamboree USA led to the creation of another country music tradition of which Ross was a co-founder – Jamboree in the Hills. This event grew throughout the 1980s and '90s to become the Superbowl of Country Music. It still flourishes.

Fast forward a few years to December 1984, when Ross and his wife were found dining with Randy Worls and his wife, discussing Wheeling's lagging tourism industry. That discussion resulted in the founding of the Festival of Lights – an idea that transformed not just Oglebay Park but the entire community during the holiday season.

Around that same time, Ross and his friend Randy were also working on another project, laying the groundwork for elevating Wheeling's economic and historic preservation capacity by founding the Wheeling Convention and Visitors Bureau. Since its birth, the Bureau has grown into a highly effective promoter of our community and is arguably the most innovative of West Virginia's CVBs.

When the Winston-Salem Thunderbirds expressed an interest in coming to Wheeling in 1991, Ross took the lead and worked tirelessly to arrange the advertising commitments that would woo the Thunderbird owners. Several years later, Ross was again leading the effort to assemble a group of local partners who would become the owners of the Wheeling Nailers – continuing a Wheeling sports tradition and a driver of downtown economic revenue.

Ross could never take on just one project at a time. So, while he was bringing professional hockey to Wheeling, he was also involved with the Wheeling Heritage Project, a burgeoning effort to root Wheeling's economic development in the preservation of its historic resources. In 1994, he was one of four incorporators of the Wheeling National Heritage Area Corporation and served on both the corporation and foundation boards for more than 18 years, helping guide decisions that would revitalize our waterfront, create our city's first façade loan program, and see the financial investment that resulted in Orrick, Herrington and Sutcliffe relocating to the Wheeling Stamping building. Towards the end of his 18-year tenure with Wheeling Heritage, the purchase of the Capitol Theatre was being planned. In simple terms, without Ross the theatre would be sitting dark and vacant.

Humble, soft-spoken and ever so kind, Ross Felton is never one to boast of his accomplishments. There are few people who have had more influence in charting the course of modern-day Wheeling than Ross. He is one of the people responsible for Wheeling's resiliency, helping to keep the ship steady when the economics of the region wanted to turn her on her side. His lifelong efforts have laid the groundwork for our city's 21st century reinvention, a reinvention that is taking place today on the streets of Wheeling. Quietly through his leadership he has created a path we can follow into the future, a path grounded in tourism, high-quality entertainment, and historic preservation.