

1976 Telegraph Herald First Citizen Award

Paul Hemmer

In 1976, the First Citizen Award was in its infancy — and its seventh recipient, Paul Hemmer hardly seemed much older. In actuality, Hemmer was just 32 when the Telegraph Herald selected him for the award, which in some of its iterations has been treated as a “citizen of the year” award and other occasions as a “lifetime achievement” honor. Either way, especially considering Hemmer’s civic contributions in the decades since receiving the award, Hemmer is a worthy honoree.

In 1976, communities all across the country staged celebrations and special events to commemorate the nation’s Bicentennial — 200 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence. One of Dubuque’s major initiatives was to stage an original musical in the newly refurbished Five Flags Theater, which only through the initiative of citizens and civic leaders was saved from the wrecking ball. The musical would not only celebrate the U.S. Bicentennial but also the preservation of Five Flags.

Barely 30 but already an accomplished musician, Hemmer, then the morning DJ on radio station WDBQ, where he started as a part-timer at age 15, composed the score for “Get the Lead Out,” which a TH writer called Dubuque’s “event of the year” in 1976. The musical, with a plot built on Dubuque history, attracted more than 11,000 patrons during its 20-performance, month-long run. At the time, Hemmer said the musical represented fulfillment of a lifelong dream, and TH called it his “crowning achievement to date.”

There were more crowning achievements to come — to the



community’s benefit.

The Paul Hemmer Swing Band, which he formed in 1965 while a music major at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, entertained tri-state and regional audiences for more than 30 years — even after he started his own radio station, KGRR-FM, which went on the air in 1994. It was a family operation, with his son Steve working as an announcer

and his wife, Jan, taking on responsibilities in the business office. He and business partners in 2000 purchased KATF-FM and KDTH-AM from Woodward Communications, Inc., parent company of the Telegraph Herald.

In 2010, after retiring as a broadcaster, Hemmer stepped into the job of executive director of Dubuque’s Grand Opera House, a position he

held for 4½ years.

Over the years, Hemmer was active in professional and community organizations, in many cases serving as board president. The groups included the Dubuque Symphony Orchestra, Dubuque Rotary Club, Dubuque Arts Council, Grand Opera House, Salvation Army and American Federation of Musicians Local 289. All along, he continued



On Jan. 1, 2020, the Telegraph Herald will unveil the recipient of the 50th First Citizen Award. To celebrate this milestone in the making, we’ll count down all 50 award recipients from 1970 on, culminating with the 2019 winner to be announced on New Year’s Day.

creating music, occasionally performing, arranging pops orchestrations for U.S. and Canadian symphonies, and composing music and lyrics for three musical comedies and a children’s musical. Twenty of his arrangements for stage band and choral groups have been published.

Earlier this year, Hemmer authored “Entertaining Dubuque: The Untold Story 1900-1999,” a 500-page book that chronicles a century of history behind Dubuque’s performing arts scene.

“The arts have the ability to inspire us, through performances, exhibits, and events; to challenge our minds, nurture and heal our bodies, and lift our spirits,” Hemmer said in a 2011 speech. “We all need to be reminded that the arts really matter. The arts are an essential component of what it is to be human.”