

Welcome to the SeaComm Federal Credit Union podcast, your guide to financial information and what's going on at your credit union.

Jackie Hallock:

Thanks for joining us today. My name is Jackie Hallock and I'm the Vice President of Marketing and Communications at SeaComm. And I'm so excited to be joined today by Patricia Dodge, who is celebrating 50 years of service to the SeaComm board.

Jackie Hallock:

And I'm especially thrilled today because Mrs. Dodge and I have a very special connection. She attended my mother's baby shower before I was born because in full disclosure, my mom worked here in the late seventies and the early eighties, and a bunch of ladies from SeaComm threw her a baby shower, not to give away how old I was. So very special, and that's what SeaComm is really all about. It's about family connections. We have a lot of people who have, their parents have worked here, and in the case of mine, I'm so happy to be back in Massena, but I'm very thrilled to be talking to Patty Dodge today about her, just remarkable years of service on the SeaComm board. So, 50 years. That's a long time. So what made you decide all those years ago in 1975 to get involved with SeaComm?

Patricia Dodge:

I originally started because my first husband was a member of the credit committee, and through the course of his tenure, he ended up getting changed to an off shift where he was unable to go to the meetings anymore. They asked me if I'd do the minutes and do the paperwork for them because the whole bunch of them got put on a different shift and it just evolved from there. In '75, they actually appointed me to the committee because I was doing all the paperwork.

Jackie Hallock:

Oh my. And this was the credit committee?

Patricia Dodge:

This was the credit committee at that time, yep.

Jackie Hallock:

Oh, my goodness.

Patricia Dodge:

Which we no longer have. They were the precursor to the loan officers, which evolved because we were growing and needed a faster response to our members.

Jackie Hallock:

That's wonderful. So what was it about SeaComm that both you and your husband liked back then? What was it about SeaComm that drew you here to this credit union?

Patricia Dodge:

Personally, it was the involvement with the members, the caring, they want to help, and they did have always wanted to help. They still do, but back then there were a couple of different strikes. There were, the members from Chevy, we were a Chevy credit union at the time, they needed help to get through the duration and that type of thing. And we were kind of there to help them and it really paid off, it was members helping members.

Jackie Hallock:

Getting through some of those early strikes.

Patricia Dodge:

Just the little struggles.

Jackie Hallock:

Yeah.

Patricia Dodge:

Because money was tight.

Jackie Hallock:

Absolutely.

Patricia Dodge:

Money was tight. And of course, nobody wanted to loan just a little bit of money to tide you over. Everybody wants big business.

Jackie Hallock:

But SeaComm was willing to do those kinds of things to keep people-

Patricia Dodge:

SeaComm did those things.

Jackie Hallock:

And that is really remarkable.

Patricia Dodge:

That is what it's all about, helping everybody.

Jackie Hallock:

And it still is that way.

Patricia Dodge:

It still is that way. Yes.

Jackie Hallock:

All those years, people come in all the time.

Patricia Dodge:

The volume has changed.

Jackie Hallock:

Correct.

Patricia Dodge:

More money. Like everything else, everything's more expensive, but everybody needs more.

Jackie Hallock:

Absolutely.

Patricia Dodge:

It's back, when I started, I can remember people would come in for \$5-\$10,000 car loans.

Jackie Hallock:

Wish it was still that much money.

Patricia Dodge:

Yeah. Well, I just bought one and it was a lot more than that.

Jackie Hallock:

I'd like to spend \$5,000 to buy a nice new car.

Patricia Dodge:

Wouldn't that be nice?

Jackie Hallock:

Yeah. So take us back to the mid-to-late seventies. What was SeaComm like back then? Where were we operating?

Patricia Dodge:

When I first started, we were operating on East Orvis Street used to be White's Insurance Agency in that area.

Jackie Hallock:

Ok.

Patricia Dodge:

We were in that area on East Orvis Street.

Jackie Hallock:

Right.

Patricia Dodge:

And then in the process, we built the original lower level here at SeaComm where it now exists. And we moved over here. I can remember taking people on tours-

Jackie Hallock:

Oh my goodness.

Patricia Dodge:

Showing around the building because it was so new-

Jackie Hallock:

The new headquarters.

Patricia Dodge:

And there was absolutely nothing around us, and we couldn't imagine wanting to build there when there was nothing here. But of course somebody had, the board and probably the CEO at the time, it was Gordon Cliff, had the foresight to see that it was going to evolve. As you can see, it has. And then of course with our growth, we've grown a lot. So a couple of renovations.

Jackie Hallock:

So that's right. So we were here on Stearn Street corner of Stearns and 37, and then there was also the location that opened on Andrews street in Massena to serve that part of town. That was really big when lots of credit unions and banks would have two different branches in the same town. A lot of that's kind of been consolidated in the financial services industry. And then of course we had a location on Main Street-

Patricia Dodge:

Right.

Jackie Hallock:

-when we closed Andrews Street.

Patricia Dodge:

When we closed Andrews, we opened the branch on Main.

Jackie Hallock:

Yeah, which was a beautiful-

Patricia Dodge:

Which was, it was a semi-college type building it was originally built for.

Jackie Hallock:

Oh, okay.

Patricia Dodge:

And then it evolved when that fell through and passed into SeaComm. And it was a nice location. You could get in from the back or park out on Main. It was good.

Jackie Hallock:

Yeah, it was nice. So what was it like? I mean, obviously you were on the board, so you were overseeing, on the credit committee, a lot of the day-to-day functions.

Patricia Dodge:

The credit committee is a subcommittee of the board.

Jackie Hallock:

It was.

Patricia Dodge:

The board appoints, at that time appointed the credit committee.

Jackie Hallock:

Got it.

Patricia Dodge:

And our main objective was to reject loans. No one had the authority under regulation to reject a loan except a credit committee, which was a review.

Jackie Hallock:

Ok.

Patricia Dodge:

So that there was no impropriety.

Jackie Hallock:

Yeah.

Patricia Dodge:

Everybody was checked. It was a check and a balance. That was it.

Jackie Hallock:

Just like today.

Patricia Dodge:

Just like today. And then we evolved lower limits for our loan officers. And the credit committee still had oversight on rejection when the loan officers first started, but it evolved that it wasn't, we only met once a week.

Jackie Hallock:

Ok.

Patricia Dodge:

And that wasn't servicing our members. So-

Jackie Hallock:

Yeah. Had to wait for a week.

Patricia Dodge:

Yeah, exactly. Or sometimes if you put in a loan on, we met on a Wednesday, for example. They put in a loan on Thursday. It was a whole week, you know, and a long time when you're trying to buy a vehicle because you need one, whatever. But it worked.

Jackie Hallock:

So giving the loan officers a little bit of-

Patricia Dodge:

We--the board at that time authorized the loan officers, it became something to do with the federal regulations. We were allowed to have loan officers and they had to change the charter to allow loan officers, gave them certain parameters like they still have today.

Jackie Hallock:

Correct.

Patricia Dodge:

And then they were able to slowly, it became redundant to have a credit committee because they really knew more about the person, you know?

Jackie Hallock:

Right.

Patricia Dodge:

And as we grew, when we first started as the credit committee, we knew everybody. Knew everybody, because everybody was from GM. Well, then we merged with the Seaway federal employees, which was

the Seaway and the post office and became Seaway Valley Community Credit Union. There was another influx of members that we didn't know quite as well. And then we merged again. And as we grew, you lose track of the personal knowledge, but you still get it.

Jackie Hallock:

Yeah. And that's why it's so important that we have these wonderful branch managers and loan officers, each of the locations-

Patricia Dodge:

That know their people.

Jackie Hallock:

So they know their people.

Patricia Dodge:

That's the purpose.

Jackie Hallock:

As opposed to it being centrally located, it's really being pushed out to the various communities.

Patricia Dodge:

Yup. And they are the center of the whole lending department. So to speak.

Jackie Hallock:

You talked a little bit about how SeaComm has evolved, especially in the eighties. Take me up through the eighties and nineties watching it evolve. Because the thing about SeaComm, I've observed as an outsider looking in, I mean, I've been a member since I was a Moola Moola kid. But I mean the growth of it is really something special. A lot of credit unions don't see the kind of growth that SeaComm has.

Patricia Dodge:

A lot of that is due to our board in hiring the right people at the time. If we made a mistake, we corrected the mistake. And we admit the board is human. They made some little tactical errors, I like to call them, but we corrected them and it's been to our advantage ongoing. And right now we've got an excellent CEO.

Jackie Hallock:

Oh, we do. Yes.

Patricia Dodge:

He's really doing a good job.

Jackie Hallock:

Oh, I'm sure he'll be so happy to hear that. But talk to me about how--what was the decision? I mean, you would've been part of the decision when it was made to go into Potsdam and then made to go into Malone. How were those decisions made?

Patricia Dodge:

Those were board decisions. They had requests from the members that were trying to use our offices here in Massena, and it was just not convenient. And they got--as we developed more and more members from those areas, you had to give them a place that they could do business, much more convenience. It all boiled down to convenience for the member. And that's how they got started. We started in Potsdam and then we started in Malone and they boomed. It took them a while, but they boomed. Then we went to Canton, and then we also tried Ogdensburg, which we've got all of those branches. Each has its own uniqueness. And then to continue the growth, we, as a board decision, decided to try out for the Vermont market. It's coming. It's going to be slow because it's a different clientele.

Jackie Hallock:

Yeah, absolutely.

Patricia Dodge:

But it's coming.

Jackie Hallock:

Absolutely.

Patricia Dodge:

But if you don't grow, you end up dying.

Jackie Hallock:

Right, and it's so important for us to grow so that we can continue to serve these communities.

Patricia Dodge:

We can't serve our members if we don't grow.

Jackie Hallock:

And why do you think SeaComm is so important? I think a lot of us know who work on it day in, day out, why SeaComm is so vital to the communities it serves. But why do you think it is so important to have a local credit union available?

Patricia Dodge:

Again, it's service to the member, service to the customer, whatever name you want to put on it. But our membership enjoys having a personal touch, so to speak.

Jackie Hallock:

Oh, sure.



Patricia Dodge:

They like to come in and know who they're talking to, at least by face. They may not know your name, but they know your face. And we pride ourselves on being welcoming to our members. And that makes a big difference. The quality is there to make them feel comfortable. You are dealing with their money, and that's very important to people.

Jackie Hallock:

Probably the most important. Money and health.

Patricia Dodge:

Money and health. You've got it.

Jackie Hallock:

Yes.

Patricia Dodge:

So I think that's why. But then we try to give back, not just to our members, but to the entire community because we all live in these communities.

Jackie Hallock:

And that's the thing that people don't realize sometimes about credit unions is that we push all of the money back to our members. So we're able to pay them bigger dividends than you could at another financial institution. And we're constantly looking for community projects that we can give back to.

Patricia Dodge:

Which benefits the entire community.

Jackie Hallock:

Correct.

Patricia Dodge:

Our members just as much as everybody.

Jackie Hallock:

It's not just for the members, it's for everybody. To better our communities, yeah. So I don't want to say this without making it sound like it's a long time, but 50 years is a long time to serve on any kind of board.

Patricia Dodge:

It's gone by so fast.

Jackie Hallock:

Most people do their couple of terms and then they're like, "You know what? I'm going to do something else." But you stuck with it. What do you think drove you to stay with SeaComm?

Patricia Dodge:

I learned something. I learned something every day and it's valuable. I had my own business for a while, so I was able to understand business better.

Jackie Hallock:

Now, what was your own business?

Patricia Dodge:

I had a Seaway Mini-Mart over in the Massena Center at one time.

Jackie Hallock:

Oh, that was yours?

Patricia Dodge:

When they were constructing the mall. So it was quite a while ago because I've been retired for a while. But I had moved a mom-pop over to the Seaway Mini-Mart where we had food. That was a challenge.

Jackie Hallock:

Oh, I bet.

Patricia Dodge:

And it was amazing. The number of people that we were able to service and service is what it's all about. That's my fault. I love people. And so to me, this is an organization where you feel that you've improved somebody's way of life.

Jackie Hallock:

Yeah.

Patricia Dodge:

You really do.

Jackie Hallock:

I think that, I'm so glad you said that because I know our branch staff in particular, and obviously us as senior management, all we care about is what can we do to make the financial life of our members better? Because when we have strong communities, we're all stronger.

Patricia Dodge:

That's right.

Jackie Hallock:

But I want to ask you about that Seaway Mini-Mart, because that was during when the mall was being built, you went out there?

Patricia Dodge:

When the mall was being built. So the customers I serviced were the construction workers, and then the people mainly from the Seaway would stop in for lunch or whatever. I did a great takeout business. So they loved that-- subs. And the Seaway was also right there, the Power Authority. So I mean, those folks were really good customers and enjoyed every one of them. And it was a neat time. It was a neat time. We did that for a few years and then it got to be time to retire.

Jackie Hallock:

Yup--but you didn't retire from the board.

Patricia Dodge:

No. Well, you need something. And to me, this is where I was still learning. So I figured that was valuable—valuable to me.

Jackie Hallock:

So speaking of learning, and I think people are learning, there are so many choices when it comes to where you keep your money and where you go to for a loan. So why should someone use a credit union for their financial needs? What makes it even more important to choose a credit union versus all of the hundreds of millions of other choices, banks, online things that they could be using?

Patricia Dodge:

I think it boils down to service.

Jackie Hallock:

Yes.

Patricia Dodge:

It's a local organization. You can deal with somebody locally and you have a variety. I, for example, just bought a new vehicle and did our first indirect lending, which was amazing to me. Whereas we always came in and sat across the desk from somebody at SeaComm. But you still have that option. You've got all these options. And as you had mentioned before, the rates and stuff are basically the same. There might be a little bit of difference this way or that way, but basically the same. And it boils down, I think, to service.

Jackie Hallock:

Yeah, I think you're right. So you knew many of the original founders from GM, from Chevy.

Patricia Dodge:

Yeah. I had met most of them.

Jackie Hallock:

You had met most of them who all invested \$5 to start what we know as SeaComm today. One of them is still with us, Earl Jackson. I was so lucky to have met him. But when you think about those 10, since you had known them, or even when we talk about some of the early CEOs and early employees in the seventies, what do you think they would think of SeaComm today? So looking at where it started on East Orvis to what the nine branches across all of the North Country-

Patricia Dodge:

I don't think anybody could have foreseen where we'd end up.

Jackie Hallock:

Really?

Patricia Dodge:

The time has gone by and we've grown gradually. It's a gradual but steady growth. It's just phenomenal that it would amount to what it is today. I mean, when I started on the credit committee, I think our assets were around 25 million approximately. And now what? We're almost 800.

Jackie Hallock:

That's right.

Patricia Dodge:

I mean, the growth is phenomenal, but we've still gone back to that service to the member. And I can't stress that enough, that's what's—what it's all about. It's helping our people.

Jackie Hallock:

And I think what you said that we've grown slowly, because it's been strategic. People have asked for us in certain markets. I remember in Plattsburgh there were a lot of people from St. Lawrence and Franklin County who had moved to Clinton County who wanted a SeaComm branch there. And so that's been-

Patricia Dodge:

Something to give them the service that they wanted.

Jackie Hallock:

Exactly. Exactly.

Patricia Dodge:

I think that's right.

Jackie Hallock:

Yeah. So I think that's really great. So we've got to look, we've project out into the future a little bit. So what do you see for the future of SeaComm? Where do you see us going? I don't want to put a year on it.

Patricia Dodge:

Yeah, you can't put a timeline on it, but I think again, we need to have slow steady growth to maintain the viability of the organization. I'm a believer in the future looking out. I think it's a good organization. I can't see why we wouldn't continue to service our members and grow, but it's got to be a slow, steady pace so that we can do it in the right way. If you make a mistake, it ends up, even if it's only a little one, it ends up being a big one. So you got to be slow and methodical, is a good word.

Jackie Hallock:

I think that's exactly right.

Patricia Dodge:

Yeah.

Jackie Hallock:

Is there anything else that I haven't asked you that you'd like to talk about?

Patricia Dodge:

No. We've had some great people working for us, and I've met and worked with a whole bunch of them. Every one of them has supplied something of value to the organization, every one of them. And it's so great to have met them all and worked with them all and keep going.

Jackie Hallock:

That's right. Many more to come.

Patricia Dodge:

Many more to come. I hope so.

Jackie Hallock:

Well, Patricia Dodge, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me for our podcast, and you'll also be able to read this interview in the Advisor magazine. So thank you very much.

Patricia Dodge:

Thank you.

That's it for this edition of the SeaComm Federal Credit Union podcast. Thanks for joining us.