

HISTORY OF OLATHE ROTARY CLUB

Back in the 1930s, Olathe had a population of a little less than 5,000 people, but it was still, by far, the largest town in Johnson County. Gardner, Lenexa, and Shawnee were just whistle-stops on the railroad, and Overland Park and many of the other cities in northeast Johnson County were just beginning. Olathe was not only the county seat, but the retail center of the county, and all the stores were clustered around downtown.

Everyone in town knew everyone else, and no one locked the doors on their houses except during Old Settlers when the Carnies were in town. However, just because everyone knew each other, it didn't mean everyone liked each other. There were two separate factions in town back then, the Republicans, who owned the Patrons Bank, the Lanter Lumberyard, and the newspaper *The Olathe Mirror*. The head of this group was John Breyfogle, Sr. Some of our older members may remember Bill Breyfogle, who was a member of our club for many years. He was the grandson of John, Sr.

The Democrats had good representation in Olathe then (this was the depression, and Franklin Roosevelt was President), and the Hodges Brothers were the leaders of this faction. They owned the Hodges Brothers lumberyard, the First National Bank, and the newspaper *The Johnson County Democrat*.

In addition, there was a third faction in Johnson County at the time: the farmers. Johnson County was primarily agricultural back then and in the 1890's the farmers had formed the Johnson County Grange to represent them. Today we only think about the Grange as the group that sells Grange Pups at Old Settlers, but back then it was a very active organization. The Grange had created Patrons Insurance Company here in Olathe and the farmers owned the Farmers Union Co-op and grain elevator. The unofficial representative of the farmers was the County Agriculture Agent, Leonard Harden.

In the summer of 1937, Leonard Harden decided that Olathe should have its own Rotary Club, and he got a number of the leading citizens of Olathe to meet on the porch of Lewis "Louie" McGee. Louie ran an abstract and title company in downtown Olathe, and some of you older members will remember Park McGee, who was his son and a longtime member of our club. We are not sure exactly when this first get-together took place, but the application to set up the new club was signed on July 15, 1937, with 20 charter members, 7 directors, a President (Leonard Harden), a Vice-President, a Secretary, a Treasurer, and a Sergeant at Arms. The application said that the meetings would take place at noon every Wednesday at the Hotel Olathe, which at that time had the reputation of having the finest restaurant between Martin City, Missouri, and Lawrence, Kansas. Today we are celebrating the 80th anniversary of the official birthdate of the club, which, according to Rotary records, was August 4, 1937, when the provisional

application of the Olathe club was accepted by the Rotary International office in Chicago. The first official meeting of the Olathe club after the application had been accepted by Rotary International was on Wednesday, August 17, 1937.

If you haven't already looked at them, after this meeting is over you may want to look at some things on the table by the door which include the original list of charter members and the original application signed by Leonard Harden, Club President, and attested by W.R. Pearce, Club Secretary. We also have a number of other items of memorabilia from the history of our Rotary Club to look at, including a Rotary songbook entitled "Songs for the Rotary Club" that was published in 1925 and was used by the club when it was first founded.

None of the original members of our club are still alive, , but in 1939, two years after the club was founded, Tom Hall replaced Leonard Harden as the Agricultural Agent in Johnson County and joined the Olathe Rotary Club. Six months later, my father, Harley Haskin, who at that time was the General Secretary (what we would now call the CEO) of Patrons Insurance Company became a member. He was proposed for membership by Tom Hall. The older members of this club will remember them well, because Tom lived to be 105 years of age, and my father died at age 97. These two good friends attended Rotary meetings together for over 65 years. **(start video now)** Back

in the early 2000s, we made a videotape of the two of them, plus Glen Ewing, a club member and long-time Olathe resident, being interviewed by Glen Pierce, a club member, and here are their recollections of some of those original members.

CHARLES C. HOGE

Rotary Club had a rule back then that every member had to represent a different business or professional service, and the lawyer in the original list of charter members was Charles C. Hoge (spelled H-O-G-E), who was apparently a very colorful character. My mother-in-law, Betty Lutz, and her sister, Helen, each worked for Mr. Hoge at one time or another as secretaries. My mother-in-law was only 14 or 15 when she worked for him, and she only worked for him for two months because he never paid her for the work she did. However, she does remember him, and I asked her for her comments about Charles Hoge. This is what she said: "His letters were really a challenge with an original and at least six carbon copies. He used lots of unnecessary big words, ending each letter with 'Thanking you in advance, I beg to remain, Very Truly Yours, Charles C. Hoge. Betty's sister, Helen, worked for Charlie first, and they had a client named Mrs. Pigg. Helen could hardly keep from laughing when she said 'Mr. Hoge, Mrs. Pigg is here to see you.'"

Today we are celebrating the fact that 80 years ago, 20 community leaders in Olathe, including the representatives of the three different political factions in the county: the Republicans, the Democrats, and the farmers, all came together, along with many other local businessmen, two of whom who would go on to be mayors of Olathe, set up this club to meet

together on a friendly basis every week, sing a song or two, exchange ideas, and take action to organize community service projects in the city. We don't sing anymore in our club, which I regret, but the other objectives are still the same for our club, and, on a much larger scale, are the objectives of Rotary International and every Rotary Club in the world. Today we have talked about the past , but what will the future of Rotary be? Here's an example.