

100 Years of the Watkins-Montour Rotary Club (Written for the 100th founding anniversary in 2021)

On Nov. 17, 1921, a group of aspiring Rotarians gathered at the Jefferson Hotel in Watkins Glen. Clarence W. Stewart of the Elmira Rotary Club, representing the Rotary district governor, was there to launch the new Watkins-Montour Rotary Club.

“The new Club starts off with much enthusiasm,” a reporter for the Elmira Star-Gazette wrote for the next day’s paper. “Mr. Stewart stating in the course of a splendid talk that it was one of the most promising Rotary Clubs he had assisting in organizing.”

Today’s 50-plus members of the Watkins-Montour Rotary Club are proud that Mr. Stewart’s prediction has been proven correct again and again over the last 100 years.

The two prime movers behind the new Club were Edward C. Cooper, a Watkins Glen insurance agent, and Frank Hatch, an official at Shepard Niles in Montour Falls.

“Mr. Hatch and Mr. Cooper could not have imagined the duration, steady growth and eventual strength of the fledgling Rotary Club they initiated,” according to the Club’s 75th anniversary history in 1997.

The Club’s charter from Rotary International was presented on Jan. 17, 1922, at the Glen Springs Hotel. Some 300 people attended the gathering. From its inception, the Club seems to have been blessed with a spirit of friendship and fellowship, but it soon demonstrated its strength in developing worthwhile projects.

Shepard Hospital, the precursor to Schuyler Hospital, was the beneficiary of one the Club’s first money-raising projects, a minstrel show. The shows were highly successful and always played to packed houses.

A student loan fund was started in 1925 during the presidency of Harvey Couch, who at the time owned the Odessa bank. By 1942, the Club had loaned nearly \$5,000 to at least 35 different young people for college expenses.

The student loan fund lasted until 1970, when the membership decided to instead award scholarships to a graduating senior from Odessa-Montour Central School and Watkins Glen High School.

The Rotary Boys Band was considered one of the biggest and most valuable projects of the Club in its first 50 years. Club President Art Peck led the effort, supported by Elmo Royce, Harry Durland and others, for six or seven years. The band performed at community concerts and the New York State Fair and in parades and regional competitions, bringing back almost \$5,000 in prize money over the years.

After band expenses were covered, proceeds were donated to the community. One year, a room at Shepard Hospital was fully equipped with a \$500 donation. When the Boys Band dissolved, all the instruments were donated to Watkins Glen High School.

In following years, the Club sponsored the Boys Hobby Fair, a school festival and public concerts and organized cleanup efforts after the devastating flood in 1935.

Rotarians as a Club and as individuals backed up World War II endeavors in many ways, but their greatest project was the construction of an Honor Roll in Lafayette Park in Watkins Glen. It eventually contained 1,492 names. Watkins-Montour Rotarian Charles Warden was killed in the war.

In post-war years, the Club sponsored a Boy Scout troop. Very few records of those years exist.

International friendship was established in 1955 when local Rotarians traveled to meet with an Ottawa, Canada, Club. In 1961, they traveled to the Toronto Club. Both times, Mohawk Airlines planes were chartered for the trip.

Other projects: a blood bank contest with the Odessa Lions Club, March of Dimes dinners, a series by international lecturers and Camp Star.

The Club became a Camp Star - Southern Tier Area Rotary - sponsor in 1962 and still is today. Charlie Cole, our Club's longest-serving member today, was president. He would be a member of the Camp Star board for many years.

Camp Star benefitted from the money raised by the Club's first Rotary Radio Day on station WFLR. Rotary Radio Day was a hugely popular event for both Rotarians and radio listeners. It was heard for decades.

"This has always been a great participation event; virtually the entire membership coming through with advertising sales, as well as joining the fun at the mike," according to the Club's 75th anniversary history.

The Club received national exposure in 1965 when Gov. Nelson Rockefeller visited a weekly meeting at the Jefferson Hotel. Rockefeller's visit was filmed for a series of TV presentations. "Executive Chamber #8: A Walk in the Glen" can be seen online on YouTube.

An annual spaghetti dinner to raise funds for Schuyler Hospital was a partnership with the Schuyler County Medical Association and Auxiliary for many years. Rotary joined this effort in 1966.

Notes from the 1960s and 1970s show that popular membership activities included a Past Presidents Dinner at a member's home and the regular Ladies Night, "one of the highlights of the year."

Joint meetings with other Rotary Clubs also were popular, as were the occasional sessions with the local Lions Club chapters.

In the 1970s, projects included planting trees on Franklin Street in Watkins Glen. At weekly meetings, collecting money for fines and celebrations was started, as were monthly auctions. County Judge Clare Barkman was selected as the Club's first Paul Harris Fellow.

The Jefferson Hotel, long the Club's meeting place, was demolished in early 1978. Meetings moved to the M&M Club in Montour Falls and then to the Town House and Paradiso's Restaurant in Watkins Glen.

The AMBA blood testing program, which continues today, was started when Peter Honsberger was president, in 1982-83. Also in the '80s, the annual Antiques Show and Collectibles began.

President Joseph Fazzary, 1987-88, spearheaded a community endeavor to build a playground at the Watkins Glen Elementary School. President Robert Chapman, 1988-89, led the erection of the two brick monuments and flagpoles at the street races' start-finish line in front of the Schuyler County Courthouse.

The milestone of the 1980s was the admission of women as Rotarians. Nancy Loughlin, today one of the Club's most sincerest and involved Rotarians, was the first woman member, joining in 1989. She was the first woman president in 1993-94.

David Ryan was president in 1992-93 when the Club began its Student of the Month program, each month during the school year honoring a senior from Odessa-Montour Central School and Watkins Glen High School. The students are selected by their teachers, and the program continues today.

The 1993-94 Rotary year was significant for many reasons in addition to Nancy's term as president.

Watkins-Montour Rotarian Ed Cullen was District 7120 Governor. Ed and his wife, June, had a wonderful year of travel to Rotary events around the world and United States, as well as the District.

The Club proudly organized a Youth Exchange with David Dougherty of Odessa traveling to South Africa and Bern Goosen of South Africa traveling to Schuyler County and attending OMCS. It was an historic exchange across Rotary International as both young men used wheelchairs.

Also that year, the Club began its involvement with the annual Wine Country Circuit dog show at Sampson State Park. Doggy-Do continues to be one of the most rewarding Club projects, in both financial outcome and entertainment.

The twice-yearly roadside cleanup along Route 14 also was started in this year.

The Club's first Group Study Exchange came in 1994-95, when Rick Weakland was president. The first group came from New Zealand. The first Friendship Exchange also involved Rotarians from New Zealand.

In subsequent years, the Club would host Group Study Exchange visitors from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Germany and Greece and Rotarians from Great Britain, Australia and India.

At the end of 1995-96, under Tom Clifford, the Club was second in the district in Rotary Foundation giving.

The Watkins Glen High School Interact Club was chartered in the 1995-96 year. The following year the Interact Club at Odessa-Montour Central School was chartered.

The Club's Youth Exchange program grew strong, with a visiting student at each high school almost every year and frequently a Schuylers County teenager hosted overseas. The program was cur-tailed by the covid-19 pandemic in 2020, but we're optimistic that it will resume in the 2022-23 school year.

Every Youth Exchange student has been enthusiastically welcomed to Schuylers County and our Club. We are grateful for community support from host families and the students' schools.

Timoteo Kamanga from Malawi was one of the most-loved ex-change students, embraced by Club and community. Tim's 2005 journey here was sponsored by the Watkins Glen High School Interact Club and Rotarians. After his senior year at the high school, he was able to continue his education and became an adopted "son" of Hector. Tim tragically died after being struck by a car in August 2018.

Using Rotary Foundation grants in 2019 and 2020, the Club purchased many books, academic and fiction, for the library at the Malawi Children's Village, where Tim, an orphan, grew up.

As the Club entered the late 1990s and the new century, its activity list began to get longer and longer. In addition to involvements already mentioned, Rotarians have donated their time and skills to: hosting college basketball fanatics at the annual NCAA team auction; serving meals to scores of long-distance bicyclists in the Bon Ton Roulet summer event; distributing dictionaries to third-graders at Hanlon Elementary School and Watkins Glen Elementary School; reading to young students at B.C. Cate Elementary School; hosting a Christmas party for children from the two elementary schools; helping at The Arc of Schuylers holiday party; gathering gifts for Schuylers County families at Christmas; offering community concerts; sponsoring students for Rotary's RYLA leadership program; sponsoring boys and girls in the Empire State leadership program; grilling up some great chicken barbecues; serving breakfast at the Moose Club; encouraging gambling at the over-under table at the Schuylers County Italian-American Festival; selling waterfalls calendars; hauling wine bottles at the Seneca Lake Wine and Food festival at Clute Park; stomping grapes at the Montour Falls Harvest Festival; telling people where to go at Watkins Glen International races; raising funds for community groups while enjoying "Ribs & Riesling"; hosting the District Youth Exchange picnic at Watkins Glen State Park; and selling raffle tickets for mini race cars, groceries and baskets filled with lottery tickets.

In 2005-06, Jim Howell became the second Rotarian to serve two years as Club president. William Ellison served from 1957-59. In 2019-20, Glenda Gephart served a second year. Her first was 10 years earlier in 2009-10. And, now, in 2021-22, Judy Phillips is in her second consecutive year as president.

In 2014-15, under John King's leadership, the Club partnered with the Hepcats Big Band for "Swingin' on Seneca's Shores," a dance at the Clute Park Community Center. The event continued

for a couple of years, raising money for PolioPlus, Rotary International's campaign to help eradicate polio worldwide.

Pre-covid, Rotarians were encouraged to participate in polio immunization days. Nancy Loughlin was able to be part of immunization teams in Nigeria in 2016 and in India in 2018.

In May 2015, the Club was presented with the Partner of the Year Award by The Arc of Schuyler for the Club's support of the agency and the people it serves.

The Club again collaborated with the Watkins Glen High School Interact Club to install striking, blue metal benches at key locations in Watkins Glen and Montour Falls. The students paid for the benches, and Rotarians installed them. The project began in 2015-16, when Chris Burns was president, and continued the next year when Bill Phoenix was president.

Increasing and improving Club membership are goals faced by every Rotary Club. In Rich Greenberger's year, 2017-18, an "open call" membership event at the Harbor Hotel introduced Rotary to a roomful of people, several of whom did join the Club. Rich also wanted Rotarians to get to know each other better. His surprise trivia quizzes about members, with candy bar prizes, were notorious and great fun.

Many Rotary Club presidents have sought ways to collaborate with our friends in other community organizations. Our Club had a long relationship with the League of Women Voters. When Rebek-ah Carroll was president, 2018-19, we joined the Watkins-Montour Lions Club in honoring Schuyler County military veterans. The event was at the Harbor Hotel. Some of our own Rotarians were included in those cited that evening.

And then there was 2019-20. The Club was enjoying more evening social events. The 2019 Christmas gathering at the Seneca Lodge, with its fun gift exchange, was a big hit. In February, a talented group of Rotarian chefs served pasta at Veraisons at Glenora Wine Cellars. The annual Antiques Show and Collectibles was coming up in March, as was the NCAA team auction. Other events were in early planning stages.

Everything came to halt when the Covid-19 pandemic fully struck New York in March. The board and President Glenda Gephart cancelled events and then weekly meetings. But we didn't cancel our two high school scholarships or distribution of community grants during the shutdown. We also welcomed two new members and awarded a Paul Harris Fellow online.

We used email to stay in touch, posting weekly celebrations and confessions with pledges to pay later. We began meeting on the Zoom online platform on April 15, 2020. Judy Phillips inherited 2020-21 Club leadership in a changeover on Zoom.

We resumed in-person meetings, with a Zoom option, at the Clute Park Community Center in August 2020 and hosted AMBA there in November. Student of the Month honors also resumed - via

Zoom. Meetings returned to the Elks Lodge in May 2021, but providing lunch was problematic. The decision was made to move to the Harbor Hotel, and Nov. 4 was the first meeting there. The Club also decided to meet twice a month instead of weekly.

Events have resumed: spring cleanups along Route 14 and the Clute Park lakeshore; a hugely successful chicken barbecue; volunteering at the race track; Doggy-Do; Antiques Show with a new date; and AMBA. President Judy's continuance at the helm for 2021-22 was celebrated at a gathering at the new Clute Park event center.

Members' commitment, patience and flexibility have ensured that our Rotary Club has stayed strong as President Judy and the board guide us through challenges and changes - and toward the 100th anniversary celebration of this great Rotary Club!