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Francis J. "O.B" O'Brien Memoir

OB7. O'Brien, Francis J. "O.B."

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 90 mins., 14 pp.

SPRINGFIELD ROTARY CLUB PROJECT

O'Brien, member of the Rotary club since 1950, discusses the Rotary Club: international meetings, citrus drive, public activities, and a history of the club members.

Interview by Mike Schramm, 1988

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Preface

This manuscript is the product of tape-recorded interviews conducted by Mike Schramm for the Oral History Office on May 16, 1988. Florence Hardin transcribed the tapes and Linda Jett edited the transcript.

This memoir is part of a series on the Springfield, Illinois Rotary Club's 75th anniversary. O. B. O'Brien joined the Rotary Club of Springfield in the early 1950s. His classification was listed as life insurance. At the time of this interview, at eighty-four years of age, his classification was senior advocate.

During the mid-1970s O'Brien served as president to the Rotary of Springfield. He considers the biggest accomplishment of his one-year administration to be the installation of the now-famous citrus drive which has contributed almost one million dollars to the Springfield area.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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O. B. O'Brien, Springfield, Illinois, May 16, 1988

Mike Schramm, Interviewer.

Q: What is your classification at present?

A: At present, I am senior advocate. I was life insurance.

Q: When did you join Rotary Club for the first time?

A: Well, it was about thirty some years ago. I think it was 1950 or 1951.

Q: Was that in Springfield?

A: Yes.

Q: You have been in the Springfield club the whole time?

A: The whole time.

Q: Where were you meeting at that time?

A: At the St. Nick Hotel, I think. I am not sure, but I think we were at the St. Nick.

Q: How many people were in at that time?

A: Well, we had a bigger club then than we have now. We had about two hundred people at that time.

Q: What type of people?

A: Well, I think we had a high-class group. We had the lieutenant governor, John Scotland, and we had a man, now let me see, we had the mayor at the time, I am not sure. Anyway, we had a lot of attorneys, not a lot of them. You can't have a lot of them.

Q: (laughs)

A: That's not Rotary. But we did have many representatives of the people back then.

Q: How did you first find out about Rotary?

A: Well, I've known about Rotary since I was a young man, I guess. I was asked to join at different times, but I was so busy. I didn't feel that I had the time. So finally Al Touch, who is now down at

Rotary South, asked me. The pressure was off a little bit at the time so I said, "Yes, yes, I will." And I did.

Q: He is the one who sponsored you?

A: He is the one who sponsored me.

Q: Do you remember anything about the first meeting you went to?

A: No, I don't.

Q: Did they have an induction ceremony that was similar to now or was it more elaborate, or less elaborate . . .

A: I remember it was similar to now. They put a pin on you, you know, and tell you all the things you have to be to become a good Rotarian. There is nothing in particular that stands out.

Q: Let's see here.

A: Really, I am a very ordinary Rotarian.

Q: That is okay. That is okay. Nobody is an ordinary Rotarian. I found that out. What was the club involved in when you first started into it? As far as the public is concerned? You know, like now they have got the citrus drive and the rose drive. Were they doing anything on . . .

A: I don't think they were. You mentioned the citrus drive. I had something to do with that. I was president when that was inaugurated. Did you know that?

Q: No.

A: Bill Montague was going to Florida where his father was either living or there for the winter, I am not sure which. I told him to look around down there and see what he could find that might make a good project for our local club to have. He came back with the idea of this citrus drive.

Q: That sounds fascinating. When were you president?

A: Well, I wish I had looked that up. I think it was in 1975 or 1976, I am not sure.

Q: How long have you been a member?

A: Well, I think thirty some years.

Q: Thirty some years. You are one of the . . .

A: I am one of the elders.

Q: (laughs) I wasn't going to put it that way, but all right.

A: That is a patres cripti way to put it.

Q: Oh.

A: You'll have to type that as P-A-T-R-E-S C-R-I-P-T-I.

Q: Thank you. I won't have to type it, but somebody will. What other projects do you remember that you were involved in?

A: Oh, such things as the kettle pots for the Salvation Army.

Q: My grandma told me that for a while Rotary Club was sponsoring one of the Boy Scout food pantries. Do you remember anything about that?

A: (inaudible) I don't remember that. (inaudible)

Q: When did you move to Springfield?

A: I came to Springfield in the 1940s.

Q: Where were you from originally?

A: Wheeling, West Virginia. Well, I was born in Wheeling. I eventually went to college in Pennsylvania and spent a year in Alabama and three years in New York City, so call me what you will.

Q: (laughs) How did you end up in Springfield?

A: Charles Becker called me and asked me to come out. He wanted to interview me and hire me if I came out.

Q: What went on the year you were president, besides the citrus? You got that organized. Was there anything else?

A: Oh, nothing outstanding. We had good speakers. (inaudible) The citrus drive was really the biggest thing in my administration.

Q: The club has always met in the evenings, hasn't it?

A: Yes. The question came up many times about meeting at other times. It was always voted down. I think our club wants to meet in the evening.

Q: Yes. It seems to be a good time. I know it is a good time for me.

A: Morning was not good for me.

Q: Yes, and afternoon would be impossible here because I can't get out of all the stores. I would imagine there is a number of people that would attend meetings in the middle of the afternoon for a couple of hours. You can't always count on being available.

A: That is why I didn't become a Rotarian much sooner than I did because I was so very busy at my job at Franklin Life.

Q: What do you feel has had the most influence on you in Rotary?

A: Oh, I suppose I could say at the moment the "Four-Way Test" is just about the biggest thing in the Rotary. Anybody that says he is abiding by the "Four-Way Test" has to be a pretty decent fellow. I was about to say something that I think I won't say.

Q: (laughs) You don't have to worry about it. There will be no one listening to it but us. I am assuming that you ended up with a lot of friends in that group?

A: Yes, I have. I have made very many friends.

Q: You are a very likable person.

A: Thank you!

Q: So, I would imagine you would end up with a lot of friends there.

A: Before I became president, I didn't know everybody. While I was president, I knew everybody. Right now, I don't. We've got so many new members and that is good.

Q: Yes. I remember that myself, when . . .

A: How long have you been a member?

Q: This will be my fourth year.

A: When were you . . .

Q: Well, my second year, the start of my second year, I was sergeant-at-arms and . . .

A: (inaudible)

Q: Yes. You know, I think it was the greatest thing that has ever happened to me because I really got to where I knew all of them by name. (talking at the same time) It has surprised me. It is really a . . .

A: It is a very cordial group. Let me tell you an interesting story. We've travelled a lot, you know, around the world, and to Europe a half a dozen times. We were in Japan, in Kyota, which was the ancient capital of Japan.

Q: Before Tokyo?

A: Tokyo? Yes. Just reverse the syllables and you have got the name of Kyota. While we were in Kyota and staying at the Kyota Hotel, we found where the Rotary meets. I said to my wife, "I think I'll go." Well, I went in and I was the only non-Oriental there, everybody else was Japanese. The meeting was conducted in Japanese; they put me at the speakers' table and I heard everything in English. I got an instant translation of everything. I thought that was marvelous to be

able to make a translation like that so quickly not knowing that I was going to be there.

Q: You've been to a few meetings out of the country?

A: Everything.

Q: That's something I would like to do sometime.

A: Yes. Well, you'll make it, Mike.

Q: Where has been the most unusual place you have made up a meeting?

A: Well, I would say Kyoto is probably the most unusual.

Q: Yes, that has to be . . .

A: I have done it many other places. Oberammergau where the Passion Play is held every year, every ten years. I went in England one time.

Q: Where was it?

A: In the Cotswolds, I think, which is a very interesting place. It's an ancient, ancient place. In the Cotswolds they had stone roofs, and at the top of the roofs are big thick stones. As they have to reroof, they move them down, and they get a little thinner, and when they get down to the bottom, they are very thin, but they are thick when they are still up at the top. The Cotswolds is one of the loveliest areas in England, I think.

Q: How did you find them? As far as attending a meeting, I received some different reactions. I did a couple of other people that have made up meetings in England, and they . . .

A: I was only there one time and I can't say what percentage of the people were there. I would say we had a pretty good attendance.

Q: How were the people as to how cordial they were?

A: Very cordial. Now, a lot of people don't feel that way about England. I met some young Englishmen in Venice once on the promenade in front of the cathedral. It is a big cathedral. What is the name of it? St. Mark's. We talked for quite a while and they were telling us about their government that is not communistic, but socialistic, socialistic is what I want to say. They pay for everything, even teeth, you know, all for teeth. I found them very interesting. I met a couple of other people later who had talked to them and didn't like them at all. You run into different personalities.

Q: Yes.

A: Different reactions.

Q: I had someone else tell me that they felt they were extremely stuffy.

A: They are.

Q: And that they felt they got high-nosed something awful when they went to the meeting. One guy said he had been questioned whether he was even a Rotarian. He felt that was an insult considering that you just don't do that when you go to make up a meeting.

A: I found them interesting, but I can see why some people would call them stuffy because they are. Some have a right to be.

Q: Yes.

A: Because England is a remarkable country. And I am Irish!

Q: Your son is also involved in Rotary?

A: Yes.

Q: I think that is kind of neat, both of you in it. He thinks a lot of you, too.

A: Well, that is two-sided. I think an awful lot of Tom.

Q: I can imagine.

A: My son is a fine young man.

Q: Yes, he is. Was there anything on your overseas trip as far as any meetings other than the one in Japan that were kind of unusual?

A: I missed one in Fiji one time that would have been interesting at the Korolevu. The only thing about that which I can remember is the meeting was over. (inaudible) This is real. This actually happened. It was a pit. I would say from here to there about six to eight feet.

Q: About ten feet?

A: It was really wider than that. It was about sixteen feet in diameter, and they filled it with cobblestones early in the afternoon and then they put a lot of heavy logs on it and set them on fire. That fire burned until about six o'clock in the evening. Then they dragged the unburnt logs out and leveled off the stones, and then the firewalkers came out, individually, barefoot, and very deliberately tramped down on these stones. How hot were the stones? One of the firewalkers held a handkerchief over the stones, and it caught fire.

Q: Oh, my god.

A: They walked out very deliberately, not tiptoe or anything, very deliberately and slowly went across and turned around and came back over. Now, I've got a very curious wife and one of the speakers said, "If you want to examine their feet, then you are very welcome to do so." They were sitting there with their feet up and Peggy--I've got a picture of her looking down at these big bare feet, no marks of any kind, and don't ask me to explain. I can't explain, but I saw it!

Q: Those are things that you just scratch your head on.

A: They do this on the first Friday of every month. They are kind of proud of that. I am sure they are.

Q: Is there anybody in particular that you would say has had the biggest influence on you in Rotary?

A: Another Rotarian?

Q: Yes.

A: Well, that is a good question. I am sure there is and I hate to make such a comment.

Q: There could be more than one.

A: I should give it more deliberate thought.

Q: It could not be just one person either. If there are several people that you . . .

A: I would say that Marshall Luthringer, who is a member. In my earlier years, Marshall was president of C.I.P.S., a very fine person. He was a very good friend of mine. It hurt me when he died. I would say Marshall was the one.

Q: He had a big influence on you. How do you spell it?

A: L-U-T-H-R-I-N-G-E-R.

Q: I am glad you did it because half of the time . . .

A: That is a habit of mine. I dictated on a machine for many years.

Q: (laughs) What kind of influence would you say Rotary has on the community?

A: Well, I think it is a good influence. How could it be otherwise? How much money have we contributed from the citrus drive? About a million dollars, I think.

Q: It has got to be close to that. We've been doing it for how many years now?

A: Well, I would say since the middle seventies.

Q: You are talking over twenty?

A: No, over about fifteen years.

Q: I think they said it was just about fifteen years ago.

A: Well, the first year we made \$12,000 which was remarkable to me. That is a lot of money.

Q: Especially when you go back when \$12,000 was a lot.

A: We used to have the basketball team, the Globetrotters. We had them three or four years, and after that it wasn't there.

Q: Yes.

A: People didn't go. And that is why the question came up when I was president, "What can we do that will replace the Globetrotters?" Well, we found a good substitute. The interesting thing is that people like oranges. I am going to say something that perhaps I shouldn't say. I don't think much of the quality of the rose . . .

Q: What is that? I've got mixed opinions on that.

A: You might not like me to say that.

Q: No, not at all.

A: We have flowers at home in our garden, and my wife doesn't want me to buy roses for her. She has flowers. She picks them herself.

Q: There is a certain mixed opinion on that.

A: Well, I feel that I am sort of begging for someone else when I ask them to do it, and I am not a good beggar.

Q: The only thing I think that makes it appealing is the good price for a dozen roses.

A: It is a good price, yes.

Q: But, my father was a florist, and I feel like you are robbing Peter to pay Paul.

A: Yes, and in a way you are.

Q: It is helping these people, but it is taking away . . .

A: You aren't robbing anybody with the oranges, nobody small. A florist can be relatively small, but these huge grocery stores are not. And besides, the fruit that they sell isn't comparable to ours.

Q: No, not at all. I was kind of surprised because one of the Rotarians is a florist and she happens to be on my team. So, I have called her reluctantly on that, and said, "I know this is kind of a tough question," and she knew it was coming. She knew that it was part of Rotary to . . .

A: She was cordial.

Q: Yes. She was very cordial about it.

A: (inaudible)

Q: I thought that was admirable on her part because I feel like, "How would I feel if Rotary all of a sudden decided to sell pendants or earrings for a project?"

A: Of course, that would be your project.

Q: Yes. Your own business, but she was very cordial about it. That is kind of an up-in-the-air situation where I think they want to see what happens this year. They are preferably wanting to do it in off-season so that they don't hurt anybody particularly. I know there are people objecting to that because they are talking about selling them at a time when roses are growing.

A: That is right.

Q: I am selling at a time when the florist business isn't too good. So, they are taking some business that is something else. I don't know how much, maybe not much but some of the time from the florist. Were there any other projects that were going on that were . . .

A: Well, the Globetrotters were the thing that occurs to me, and I have mentioned that. I can't think of any others.

Q: It seems like, from what I understand, from other people I talked to, that actually the club is doing more community-wise now than it did in the past?

A: I think so. Something else that I like very much is that we are adding more (inaudible) fellows to the club. Now, when I first joined the club, I am not sure there was any . . . But we have got them in in quite a quantitative number, I think. I think it is good. Paul Harris was a remarkable person.

Q: Oh, yes. And reading his background.

A: I am writing a history of this local club right now and I am bringing Paul Harris in, and . . .

Q: Were you, are you writing this for the anniversary?

A: Yes.

Q: Are you?

A: Yes.

Q: That is fascinating.

A: I did it on the sixtieth. You weren't in the club at that time.

Q: No.

A: I've got a copy if you want to see it.

Q: I would like to sometime. It has been fascinating doing this oral history.

A: You are writing about all the older members?

Q: Well, not only that, but instead of just learning what the club did, you are getting different people's viewpoints of how they say things happen. It has been fascinating because I've gotten things that one person remembers happening and another person does not remember it happening. You know, two different viewpoints on how things happened.

A: There is another thing that occurs to me. Shortly after I became president, there was one group of people, _____ Rule was one of them. Can I mention these?

Q: Oh, yes.

A: And another one was the minister at the First Methodist Church, that is the church on Fifth and Monroe.

Q: Capitol and Fifth?

A: Capitol, yes. And several others, I have forgotten who they were. It does not matter, but they always stuck together, and I went over to them and I said, "I am going to tell you guys something. I am going to break your little team up. I am going to have you sit with other people." And they looked at me and one of them said, "When your term is over, you can join us." (laughter) I didn't break them up.

Q: You know, though, that is something that I can remember when I first got into Rotary. Bill _____ said to me, "If you want to get to know people, sit at a different table every week."

A: I think that is a good idea.

Q: It really is. I tried, and I still try to do that.

A: You know, some people can't do that. They want to sit with people they know. They find it a little awkward and a little embarrassing to move, and yet that is the essence of Rotary.

Q: Yes, and on top of that, we are not going to get to know these people if you don't move around.

A: No, you are not.

Q: If you don't sit with them and get acquainted with them.

A: That is right. As I say, when I was president, when you are president you have to know them. (laughter) You make a habit, make a practice of doing it. But before that, I didn't. Since then, we have had so many new members that I know of them. I know their faces, and sometimes I have trouble, but at my age (laughs) I have trouble.

Q: That is understandable. (both talking at the same time)

A: I am eighty-four years old, did you know that?

Q: No, I didn't. You don't look eighty-four years old.

A: (laughs)

Q: You are doing very well.

A: Well, I am kind of struggling.

Q: (laughs) Is there anything other than what we have talked about that you would like to share? It doesn't really matter, anything that you feel would be of interest?

A: Well, I can recite the Gettysburg address if you want to hear it.

Q: No. We've got that somewhere.

A: I would hate to do that.

Q: I think we have covered everything in particular. I think this has been interesting. It didn't have to go long, just so we get the basic information down.

A: Well, I think we have.

Q: I appreciate your doing this with me.

A: Well, Mike, I enjoyed doing it with you. You are a very good interviewer.

Q: Thank you!

End of Tape