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Joe Pehlman Memoir

P349. Pehlman, Joe

Interview and memoir

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SPRINGFIELD ROTARY CLUB PROJECT

Pehlman, Rotary Club member since 1945, discusses meeting sites, format, members and the Rotary Band.

Interview by Ron Krause, 1988

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Preface

This manuscript is the product of tape-recorded interviews conducted by Ron Krause for the Oral History Office on March 30, 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. Joe Pehlman joined Rotary in 1945. In this memoir he reminisces about his years of membership. Although he never served as president or held any other special position other than treasurer for one year, he feels he would have missed something very important in his life had he not joined the Springfield Rotary Club.

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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Joe Pehlman, Wednesday, March 30, 1988, Springfield, Illinois.

Ron Krause, Interviewer.

Q: How long have you been in the club?

A: I have been in the club since the 6th of August, 1945. I don't know how long that would be, but it would be quite a spell.

Q: It would be close to forty-three years.

A: Yes, I think that is correct.

Q: Who brought you in?

A: Well, actually, nobody. Back in those days, I don't know what the procedure was but my partner, Roy Whitney--I joined the firm in 1929, and I don't know, I got to be a partner somewhere along the line. I think we ran kind of loose in those days. Roy Whitney was a very sickly fellow, but he was a friend of everybody in the club. Everybody knew him, you know. We use to have about 200 members in those days. Now, we still have 200 members, but there are three different clubs. Well, Roy Whitney knew all of these fellows and he sent me out on work duty for them. Well, we had A. D. Macke down at the Central Illinois Light Company, who was manager down there. He was a nice guy. O. J. Scott ran a finance company, one of the first--he was the first guy that I can remember who got in the finance business, personal financing. Bill Vrendenberg over at the Vrendenberg Lumber Company. There was Dick Doyle over at Doyle, Sampson, Griffin, one of the big law firms in Springfield. I used to go over and make up Doyle's return for him through the direction of Roy Whitney because everybody liked Roy and he had a very nice personality. He died on May 15, 1945 and so that left the membership in the club open because in those days, we only had one accountant. You didn't have a tax man, a systems man, and all sorts of things. You had one guy.

Well, I thought about it a lot and I felt "Gee, I would sure like to have that membership because I thought it would do me a lot of good." Actually, it has not only personally and socially, but financially. A lot of those guys I do work for in the Rotary Club. Well, anyway, along about August after the dust had settled, I went over to Roy Jefferson who was the secretary in those days of the Rotary Club, and he had an office in the St. Nicholas Hotel, which was a hotel then and they had sort of business offices up above on the second floor. The Rotary Club had their office in the St. Nick Hotel. A matter of fact they met in the St. Nick Hotel. I went over to Roy and I said, "Roy, Whitney is gone and he was the accountant in the club." I said, "I

would like to get in the Rotary Club. What do you do?" He looked at me for a while. I knew him. He looked at me for a while and he sat around and thought about it, and he said, "Well, you are in." I said, "What happened?" He said, "You are in." I said, "Well, thanks, Roy." He said, "Start coming to meetings." It didn't seem like they had any screening committee or all of these committees and the board of directors should have voted on it. I know that there are a lot of things that they do nowadays on numbers, you know. When you came in, Ron, they went through three or four committees and all that sort of thing. The big secret, they weren't suppose to tell you who was going to be in. They voted on it and all that kind of thing. Roy just looked at me and he said, "Well, you are in." And I was. (laughs) I have been in ever since.

Q: Had you been in another Rotary Club before?

A: No, this is the first time. I have never been in any other Rotary clubs. That is the way they used to operate in those days. I don't know whether it is for better or worse, but everybody had a lot of confidence in Roy Jefferson. He ran the stationery store down on South Fifth Street in what they call the Jefferson Building, which is just south of Monroe on the west side of the street. He was a very likeable sort of a guy. They also had a bank out on South Grand Avenue that went broke during the Great Depression in the thirties. That is the way I got in the Rotary Club. It isn't the way you get in today, I know, but that was the story.

Q: What was the club doing in those days? What were the activities?

A: Well, I don't know. I think they were principally eating dinner. That was the main activity.

Q: Did it meet on Monday night then too?

A: Monday night. It always met on Monday night. We met at the St. Nick for a while, and then we met over at the Leland. Of course, I cannot tell you what year that was. We met over at the Leland and the food over there got to the place where they were kind of pinched and the guys were paying about \$2.50 for meals, you know. Whoever was president said, "Well, fellows, they are going to have to raise the price of meals." They said, "Well, what is it going to be?" "Well, it is going to be \$3.00" and everybody was ready to quit then. All of those guys didn't know what the devil to do with all of their money. They weren't going to pay over \$2.50 for a meal at night.

Q: That was a pretty good price.

A: Then we met down at the Elks Club for a spell. Well, we met all around. Where were we meeting when you came in?

Q: The convention center.

A: Oh, we were? Yes, well, I don't remember where we came from when we went over to the convention center. I do remember that we met at the St. Nick and then we met down at the Leland. Then we met down at

the Elks Club and the Elks Club served a pretty good meal down there. I forget what it was now. About \$3.00 or \$4.00. That was about the course in those days, you know. Go out and eat dinner at the St. Nick for a \$1.50.

Q: There was no citrus drive then?

A: No.

Q: There was no rose drive? Was there any kind of charitable stuff going on?

A: No, nothing. We just met.

Q: Did you have speakers?

A: Oh yes, the same program that we have today.

Q: Any of those speakers come to mind, anybody that stands out in your mind?

A: No, not really. No, I don't recall any. The format of the meetings in those days was about the same as they are today. We always had songs and there was a piano player and he played real nice. I forget who the song leader was now. We always sang three songs and we always had the announcements and always had a prayer. Now, one thing we didn't do, we didn't pledge allegiance to the flag in those days.

Q: When did that start?

A: Well, I guess about ten or fifteen years ago.

Q: You see, I always made the assumption that that had been going on forever.

A: Oh, no. It wasn't anybody disloyal. They had just been through it. (phone rings) That hasn't been going on too long. Maybe ten or fifteen years. That is the only thing--we always had somebody give an invocation and announcements and the president got up and led the meeting. And then we had somebody introduce the speaker and then they always had these classification talks. I gave my classification talk down at the Elks one time. I don't know how long ago it has been. It has been a long time ago. Those things were the same.

Q: Were you a director or an officer?

A: No, I never was anything except for one year I was the treasurer. I forget what year that was, but that was quite a while ago, too. No, I never was an officer. Except for treasurer.

Q: Have you been involved in any activities?

A: No, not really. I was never very actively involved. I had problems running this place and problems running other things. I just never felt like I had the time to do it.

Q: You do some traveling, Joe. You made mention of the fact that you just have been out of town a couple of times. Have you done makeups as you travel?

A: Oh, yes. Made up in Hot Springs the last week of February. I used to make up in California. I would go out and see my daughter. I was going to make up in California this last week we went out there. I took my wife out to Mahoya. We were only gone five days. We decided to go out south, so I didn't make up there. In Hot Springs, they had about the same group. I would say almost the same group we have here as far as numbers are concerned. A nice bunch of guys. About 150 to 200 members.

Q: Any of those makeups over the years stand out in your memory?

A: Well, the only one that stands out in my memory is we were in Acapulco one time. My boy took his medical work down there in Mexico. We use to get in the car and drive around in the summertime. We went down to Acapulco and I said, "Well, I have got to make up for the Rotary Club." So, he said, "We will go here." The Rotary Club down there, you know, you went over to the place where they talk Spanish fluently and found out where it was. We went over there and the place was empty. We didn't know what was going on. We got over there about six o'clock and it was empty. Finally, some guy came along and we asked him about it. He said, "Oh, well, the Rotary Club meets every week and they don't meet until about nine o'clock tonight." So, we came back about nine o'clock and we met and they had the program. I think it was in Spanish and French and German. I can't remember whether it was in English or not. It ended in about an hour and a half, just about like it is here. But that has been a good while ago because he has been back from there since 1960. I would guess it was about 1955.

Q: What did you enjoy most about the Rotary Club? About Springfield Rotary Club?

A: Well, the thing I enjoy most about it is going there Monday night and talking with the guys and it is kind of a social thing, you know, with me. Like I said in the old days, why we got a lot of business out of the Rotary Club. It has always been kind of a social thing and a lot of guys stand around and talk. They talk about things they are interested in and that type of thing. I suppose if I were a little younger, I would be more interested in deriving a little business from it. This is what it was suppose to be in the first place was a kind of an exchange business deal. I have gotten kind of away from that now. It is mostly social.

Q: How would you say the club is different today than when you came in? What are the biggest differences if there are any?

A: Well, I don't know. The club operates very much like it did in the forties and the fifties. There is no departure from the format of the operation that I can remember. I think it is very much the same except, as I say, they didn't recite the pledge of allegiance before we start a meeting. Other than that I think it is pretty much the same.

Q: Are you concerned about the fact that the membership is lower now than it was years back?

A: Well, I am not concerned because I am eighty-five years old. I am not particularly concerned about it. I would like to see a bigger club and like I say, we have a club of somewhere between 190 and 200 members back there. So, I think what they have done, I think that in a town the size of Springfield, there are so many people that are interested in belonging to a service club. I think what they have done is kind of spread it around a little bit. If you take South and you take the Morning Club and put them all together, you have about the same kind of a membership we had back then. It really doesn't matter to me. Back in those days, I used to know. I prided myself on knowing every member of the Rotary Club. Now, I don't know these new guys. Sometimes I don't make the effort to get acquainted with them like I should. I realize that is my fault. Back in the old days, I knew every one of them.

Q: Who in the club, if you name a person, who has had the most influence on you? Anybody jump to mind? Any names jump to mind?

A: No. Not really. No.

Q: It sounds like you thought of Roy Jefferson?

A: Well, of course, I did. Roy has been gone for forty years or maybe thirty years. Those guys back there were all good friends of mine. They are all gone. Carl Webber is gone. I knew Carl Webber real well. He and I used to work together. We worked on the . . . Fred Slit, I knew him real well. Ted Cole. Bill Schirring was a client of ours. Ray Graham. Bill Menghini, I knew him real well and all of those fellows back in those days. Tom Parrish, he was a client of ours. Don _____, he wasn't, but I knew Don real well. Bill Keeley, construction. William Greer, he ran a sign company. Grover at the The State Journal-Register. I don't know. I don't think there is any of them who are special.

Q: What do you think the club has meant to the city of Springfield?

A: Well, I think now that with the idea of a community service, I think that it is just thought of a little more by the leaders than it was back in those days when it was practically a eating club. The guys didn't do anything, they would just come down there and eat, and then they would leave. Of course, we would have a lot of conversation but that didn't account for very much. I think today it is better known and I think it is going along better than it did in those days.

Q: Anything jump to your memory if I said, what is the funniest thing you remember happening at a meeting?

A: Well, no. The only thing that knocked me down was when Roy Jefferson went over to apply for membership and he said, "Well, you are in." No committees, no president, no nothing. I don't know what they did with people. I don't think they had any set committees. They kind of got together and talked it over among themselves. Roy knew me pretty well. A lot of the fellows in there did.

Q: It kind of works in the same way. Have you been to any district or national conventions of Rotary?

A: No, I have not. There is only one other thing I can think of probably that might be of some interest to you. Oh about twenty years ago probably, had to be at least then, we use to have a Rotary orchestra and a Rotary band. It was called a Rotary band, if you like. The fellows that I can think of was Wendell Kennedy, who played piano. Wendell was the club pianist for many years until he got a stroke and couldn't play anymore. You have got Zeke Worthington, who is now incapacitated and you have probably heard about Zeke. Well, Zeke played a horn and Herb Wiley, who ran the typewriter service, he played the guitar and he sang. He was fairly good at it. I think he use to go out and do a professional job once in a while. There was Freeman Butts, who was an insurance man. Freeman played a guitar. We had Bill Montague, he used to play a washtub base. You have seen these hillbilly bases with a string on it, made out of a washtub. He got an awful kick out of it. Bill said to me Monday night, he came over and he said, "I understand you are going to talk to this committee this afternoon." He said, "When you do, tell them about the orchestra."

Q: He mentioned that.

A: . . . a lot of those guys, you know, were interested in the thing. Of course, now Zeke Worthington can't play. He is in a wheelchair and is in bad shape. Wendell Kennedy is in Arizona. Herb Wiley is dead and Freeman Butts is dead. Bill Montague is still around, but that is about the size of it. I played drums with them and I was an oldtime drummer because I used to play professionally and that is the way I got through school. I didn't have a nickel. So, I started playing. I played before I went over there. I didn't go over there and start playing. I got in a good band over there.

Q: What happened to that idea?

A: Well, the main thing was that Wendell couldn't make it anymore. Zeke couldn't make it anymore. Who have you got in the club now that can do it? I don't know.

Q: I don't either.

A: A guy has to practice a little bit once in a while if he wants to play an instrument. He can't just walk in there on Monday night and play. It takes a little work. It takes a little work every day to

keep up on it. I don't think there is anybody in there anymore that is interested in that type of thing. The interest has dropped. But I thought we used to have a good time and everybody enjoyed it.

Q: Did you just play for the club?

A: Yes, just for the club. We played before meetings or sometime on a club assembly or something like that, we would play. If we had a district meeting here, we would play. Things of that kind. Once in a while they would bring in a few singers. I knew a lot of professionals around town. You get a couple of those guys come along and they would really puff it up. It was a nice band while it lasted. I don't think there is anybody now down there that would be willing to do it. Maybe I would, but I don't think there is anybody else.

Q: Anything else about the club that I haven't asked you about?

A: No, I don't think so. I think that is about the size of it.

Q: Joe, I want to thank you.

End of Tape One, Side One