

Businessmen join in quest for knowledge

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ABOUT 10 YEARS after the turn of the century, several Fort Wayne businessmen realized they could strengthen their common goals for the community and help one another by sharing information. They decided to form a club and, because they were seeking knowledge to enrich their business lives, they named it Quest Club.

Today, a decade before the next century begins, the club they started in 1911 still flourishes. But the membership long ago expanded to include professional as well as business leaders, and the quest has grown to encompass economic, political, social, cultural, historical, and international matters.

In the early years, papers presented by members had titles such as "Courtesy in Business," "Office Management," and "How to Get Products into Foreign Markets."

Today, the range of subjects boggles the mind — from "Genetic Engineering" to "Reincarnation"; from "Professional Football" to "Bird Watching"; from "Beethoven" to "Big Bands of the '30s and '40s"; from "The Mafia" to "God."

But certain themes have recurred throughout Quest Club's 80 years as the members sought to better understand or to offer solutions for local problems. Issues

such as quality of education, public transportation, pollution, urban blight, traffic, stability of business and industry, resurrecting downtown, and merging city-county government have been club topics numerous times over the years.

For example, in 1958, the late Edward D. Auer, who was a senior vice president at Lincoln National Life Insurance Co. and an officer and board member of several other businesses and institutions, wrote a paper titled "Municipal Problems and Suggested Solutions."

He talked of intolerable traffic, a central business district in decline, financial problems of the public transportation system and lack of housing, among other concerns. He proposed downtown parking garages, a new jail and city hall, a new industrial park on the city's north side and a Fort Wayne Forward committee whose purpose would be "to organize a team of leaders to ensure stable growth" in Fort Wayne.

In 1978, Ian Rolland, president and chief executive officer of Lincoln National Corporation, wrote a paper titled "Resurrecting Downtown Fort Wayne: Is it Worth It?" He thought it was.

Since its start, the Quest Club membership roster has included many of the city's most influential civic, business and government leaders. Yet, club president William A. Macomber says he does not

believe that cachet is what makes people want to join.

"One thing we really guard against in Quest Club is trying to bring in members who are prominent but who may not be participants. Certainly, there is prestige in association with this group ... but for me, and I think most members, (the attraction) is the camaraderie, the intellectual stimulation and the challenge of preparing papers," Macomber says.

"I enjoy the process of doing the research and of preparing the paper: I derive a great deal of satisfaction from it. I've done three papers on topics totally foreign to my own experience, which is the objective of the club. By and large, we try to assign papers that have no relation to the member."

Because members rotate giving papers and the objective is to participate with some regularity, membership is limited to 110 active members. Only 24 members can present papers in one year — the club meets weekly from October through April.

"We go through the roster about every four years," says Macomber, a member since 1977.

Topics are chosen by the program committee from members' suggestions and are assigned by the committee. Macomber estimates most members start their research about three months before they're scheduled to present. Papers are

read after Friday noon luncheons at the Fort Wayne Woman's Club, where the club moved a few years ago after meeting for most of its existence at the Chamber of Commerce.

The 35- to 40-minute presentations end at 1:15, leaving 15 minutes for questions and comments before prompt adjournment at 1:30.

"Normally, there is something at least as important in the question-and-answer period as in listening to the paper," Macomber says.

Fred J. Reynolds, a Quest Club member for 30 years, remembers a time when some men did not write their own papers. He knows because he wrote some of them. The former head librarian of Allen County Public Library says, "I was reading a lot in those days."

This is a considerable understatement on the part of a man whose life has revolved around books. Reynolds, 79, retired in 1979 after 49 years at the library. Among many accomplishments there, he almost single-handedly built the library's highly respected genealogy department.

"Yes, members sometimes asked for help and for a time you could give a paper or not. I remember, Nelson Snider (former South Side High School principal) and I had a meeting; we thought we ought to do something about that. So we suggested that all members must give

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at least three papers before they could stop," Reynolds says.

That requirement now is in the by-laws. Active members must have given at least three papers before they can move to honorary membership status, where they retain their relationship with the club but are not required to prepare papers.

Many members choose to retain active status and prepare numerous papers. Reynolds says he gave nine papers, and his first — on the history of grave robbing — turned out to be quite popular.

"I gave it some 300 times, all around the state and once in Ontario."

Quest Club has had only male members from the start, but

Macomber says it has been because of tradition.

"We surveyed the members a few years ago and the majority thought the club should definitely be opened to women. I believe one of our proposed applicants now is a woman. We've got six or eight people on the waiting list.

"The problem is we let the membership get up to 120 at one time, so it has been several years since anyone new has come in. We've been trying to work the membership down to 110 (specified in the by-laws), and the normal attrition is two or three a year."

Membership is by invitation.

The club roster includes judges, lawyers, bank presidents, doctors, dentists, architects, pastors, engi-

neers, educators, business owners and CEOs, and several are second- and third-generation Questors. Mayor Paul Helmke is a member, as is his father, attorney Walter P. Helmke, who followed his father, the late Walter E. Helmke, into the club. There have been three generations of Barretts — James M., James M. Jr. and James M. III.

"Quest members are the type of people who bring their own intellectual curiosity to a subject and want to hear the other side, too," says the Rev. George Mather, the club's executive secretary, and a member since 1974. "They look forward to giving a paper and work on it very, very hard. ... Expectations are high but it's looked upon as a real opportunity to say something new."