

## **HISTORY OF THE LOS GATES LIONS CLUB**

The year was 1946. World War II had just ended and the country was in the process of demobilization. President Truman had recently declared an end to rationing and coffee was now available for .31 cents a pound. Meanwhile, at the foot of the Santa Cruz Mountains stood the Town of Los Gatos with a population of 3,500 centered in a small downtown consisting of business's fronting the Santa Cruz Highway (now N. Santa Cruz Ave.) and Main Street, all of which was surrounded by bountiful fruit orchards.

Los Gatos already had a well organized business community with most of its more active participants serving as members of the well established Kiwanis Club or Rotary Club. Some younger members of the community, discouraged by the high fines and assessments of these Clubs, began to meet informally on Wednesday nights at the Hotel Lyndon with the goal of starting a new type of local service club.

Spearheaded by Le Roy H. Halverson, Jim Thompson, Harry Lincoln, George C. Gianola, John L. Sublett and Dr. Ed Kilbourne Jr., this group grew to over 38 members, and under the sponsorship of the San Jose Host Lions Club, proceeded to form a Los Gatos Lions Club.

On February 23, 1946, over 200 members and guests attended a Charter Dinner at the recently refurbished La Rinconada Golf and Country Club for the newly organized Los Gatos Lions Club. Thereafter, the Club met every Wednesday night at the Hotel Lyndon.. Examples of initial Club activities included the installation of Lions Club signs at the highways entering town, sponsorship of a local Sea Scout youth organization and support of a local "pet parade." Initial fundraising efforts were also limited in scope. For example, Club records show that in August, 1947, the Club held a "ladies night barbecue" wherein they "sold beer and had a chuck-o-luck game" all of which netted \$107.00. The

following month the Club held a “Street Dance” for which the Secretary merely commented that the Club “made a profit.” Early on, funds were raised primarily from the members themselves, most of which were put right back into the community as evidenced by a \$1,500 donation by the Lions in 1947 to help build the Los Gatos War Memorial Building (now the Recreation Department Building).

The spring of 1947 saw the Los Gatos Club send a contingent of Lions to the annual “Spring Conference” held by the District Lions at Hobergs in Lake County. The annual District Convention in Hobergs continued for over 30 years and tales of fun and frolic engaged in at this annual gathering continue to this day. When Hobergs was sold, the District Convention was held at Clear Lake for two years before finally settling in at the Rancho Tropicana in Santa Rosa. It was here that the Los Gatos Lions continued their tradition as chief rabble rousers by “allegedly” engaging in such acts as dropping another Club’s boat into the swimming pool, surreptitiously painting another Club’s prized red fire engine “white”, and generally ensuring that nobody would escape the annual gathering without a good-time. The convention has now left Santa Rosa for Sacramento but Los Gatos continues to send a large group each year that remains committed to carrying on the tradition of prank and merriment.

Instrumental in early fundraising efforts was the recruitment of local car dealer Jim Countryman into the Club in 1949. After joining Lion Countryman made annual donations to the Club in excess of \$1,000 which was used to support ongoing club activities such as providing transportation for the blind, hosting student speaker contests and participating in the town’s recreation fund. From its inception, the Lion’s Club took a special interest in the youth of Los Gatos. In 1949, the Club purchased an electric scoreboard for the sports field and during the summer of 1949 treated over 600 kids to a free movie and candy at the local theater. This same year a

few Lions members had the audacity to propose a softball tournament with the other local service Clubs. The upstart Lions walked away with the first place trophy in a tradition that continues to this day.

In 1949, the Lions first participated in the annual town Christmas Parade by entering a float and winning first prize. The town Christmas Parade first began as an event sponsored by the Recreation Department and involved a night time gathering where a few children could walk down Main Street while their parents shopped. After a year, the parade was moved to Saturday morning, and with the support of the Chamber of Commerce, the parade grew each year. Under the guidance of Lion Gene Goldberg, the Lions Club was asked to lend a hand and did so with the leadership of Lion Dick Wall Jr., and then Lion Frank Bonacorsi and Lion Reed Graham. The Lions now sponsor the parade, along with the Recreation Department, and have been instrumental in continuing the tradition of an annual Children's Parade. Today, it's officially known as the Los Gatos Children's Christmas/Holiday Parade that now includes over 3000 participants each year, the vast majority of whom are children. The Los Gatos Christmas Foundation was created and dinner dances have been held for many years to raise over \$150,000 which is invested to ensure that the Parade will continue indefinitely.

The Lions support of local youth continued in November of 1951, when the Club first sponsored local Boy Scout Troop #39 (now Troop #539). The Lions Club has continued to sponsor this troop up to the present including installation, refurbishment, and support of the Lions Scout building at the Youth Park on New York Avenue adjacent to the High School.

In June of 1957, the first Los Gatos Lions Horse Show was held in conjunction with the "Guadeloupe Red Shirts" Horse Association. While the men handled the horses, the wives

decided to set up a barbecue and sell hot dogs and hamburgers. It soon became clear that the ladies' barbecue earned more money than the horse show, so eventually the men took over the barbecue, discontinued the horse show, and moved the whole gathering downtown, first to University Avenue School, and then to its last home at Oak Meadow Park. The Annual Town Barbecue was and Car Drawing remains one of this Club's primary sources of revenue and goes a long way towards supporting the Club's numerous activities and charitable contributions. In 1997, the Club started a Cioppino Dinner, held at St. Mary's Hall, where it continues to raise approximately \$20,000 annually. This is a fun event open to the public and includes a dinner, live and silent auction and a raffle.

In 2000, the BBQ was replaced by the Los Gatos High School Snack Shack at the football field, headed up by Lions Joe Zanardi and Gary Stern. Lions Club members "man" all events at the field, both Football and Track and Field. Revenues from the snack shack, in excess of \$30,000 annually are all donated to youth activities and high school projects at Los Gatos High School

The other traditional fund-raiser of the Club is its participation in the annual "White Cane" drive. The Los Gatos Lions first joined this effort in September of 1956, with total funds raised amounting to \$352.00 The Club continues to participate in this event each year and now raises in excess of \$8,000.00 annually, most all of which is used to aid the visually challenged, including substantial annual support of the Lions Santa Clara Valley Blind Center and Diabetes Society. Funds from this event are also used to finance the Club's participation in the regional Lion's Eye Foundation and Ear of The Lion Foundation, which many club members have joined and actively support.

In addition to raising funds and supporting financially many needy individuals and charities, Los Gatos Lions have

historically committed themselves to providing “hands-on” improvements of the town as the need arises. In conjunction with its annual use of Oak Meadow Park, the Lions Club members have built the stationary barbecues, constructed the bandstand (1962), donated the Red Fire engine (1961) and most all of the playground equipment, and supported with time and money the Billy Jones Railroad and Carousel all of which remain fixtures in the Town Park to this day. In 1984, many Lions worked long days to complete the construction of K- Cat, the local public access TV Station. Over the years, Los Gatos Lions Club members have helped paint and repair virtually all of the schools in town and have donated hours of time and money constructing and improving the Town’s youth athletic facilities. In addition, the Los Gatos Lions Club has used its resources to assist victims of disasters throughout the world. Emblematic of this was a 1965 “Mercy Mission to Pleiku, Vietnam” wherein, under the direction of President John Lochner, over the course of a year, the Club gathered a warehouse full of clothing and medical supplies and shipped them to the destitute of Pleiku in response to an urgent plea for help.

In 1957, Lion Bus Benson became President and the Club moved to weekly noon meetings at the Live Oak Inn at the corner of N. Santa Cruz Avenue and Highway 9. Unwilling to sit on the sidelines, Lion Bus’ wife Ruby gathered most of the other Lion’s wives together and formed an auxiliary known as the “Ellionettes” which was named in honor of Lion Harry Richard’s deceased wife Ellen. In 1988, the Lions welcomed women into its membership, the first being Carol Musser, who went on to become President in 2004. The first woman President was Jan Morris in 2001. The Club now counts many women as its most active members.

While community service remains the foundation upon which the Los Gatos Lions Club has built its reputation, no history of this Club would be complete without mention of service provided by the Club to its own members. A few examples

bear noting. In 1970, long time member Lion Dick Wall injured his back at convention. At the time he was in the process of remodeling his home. Under the leadership of Lion John Lochner, over 40 Lions and their wives unexpectedly showed up at Lion Dick's house with lumber, supplies and tools, and in one weekend closed the house up with roof and all. Likewise, in 1974 Past President Bill Zilliox was stricken with cancer. In an effort to help Lion Bill, over 50 Lions showed up at Lion Bill's door one Saturday morning and completely stripped and repainted both the inside and outside of his home and completely re-landscaped his yard. In 1978, Lion John Lochner's son, Jeff (now a Lion himself), was paralyzed in a diving accident. Soon thereafter, the Lions helped raise funds for Lion Jeff's medical expenses, and over the course of three days many Lions participated in a work party wherein a new, handicapped accessible room was added to the Lochner household. These are just a few examples where the Lions "helped their own." This tradition is ongoing, leaving all Lions with the comfort of knowing that if in need, they can turn to their Club for help.

In 2009, Lions International created Branch Clubs to take advantage of those people who wanted to be members of the Los Gatos Lions Club but preferred to hold Breakfast Meetings. On November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2009, the Branch Club was started with five original members. The Los Gatos Lions now counts more than 98 people as members. It has received numerous District awards and has been named the District "Best Club" on several occasions. Over the years its members have included three District Governors, and in 1979, Lion Joe DiDuca was elected to the position of International Director, one of the highest positions in Lionism. The Club also counts among its members four past Mayors of the town and many other Lions active in community affairs.

The Club continues to support youth, the visually challenged and the needy of the Town of Los Gatos. Over \$65,000 has

been donated over the years to local schools to support their “Quest” drug awareness programs and similar funds have been donated to the Lions Santa Clara Valley Blind Center as well as members of the community in need. The Club sponsors an active youth group known as the Leo’s, provides youth scholarships, and continually provides local civic improvements. In 2010, at the District 4-C6 Convention, the Los Gatos Lions Club was awarded the Frank Granito Award, the most prestigious award given by the District, for the Clubs contribution to Lions and the Community. One of the most notable was the remodel and reconstruction of the Lion Ted Simonson Fitness Center at Los Gatos High School. When not conducting business, weekly Club meetings are known for their raucous spiritedness all of which has made the Los Gatos Lions Club the most productive and lively community service organization in Santa Clara County.