

Darryl McDaniel

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Could you please state your name?

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How long have you been in Olathe?

I first came to Olathe in 1956 and left from '62 to '71 and then returned and have been here ever since.

What was it like coming to Olathe and what were your first impressions of it?

I was from Ottawa Kansas and I had been through Olathe on the way to Kansas City. It's a town a little smaller than Ottawa I believe when I came to town there was about 8,000 people in the town. I came to town to work at Delco battery, I had just gotten out of school, spent two years in the Army and then was job hunting and luckily got on at the battery plant.

How did you first become employed by Delco at the battery plant?

Well I heard that they were hiring through a friend. And came up and had an interview on a Saturday and was called that afternoon and went to work the next Monday. I knew they made batteries, I wasn't sure what type but found out it was automotive batteries. We were a new plant in '56 we had four other plants in the United States and we were one. We were part of the Delco Remy division which is a division of General Motors.

Obviously the Battery plant was different than it is today, could you describe it please?

Well when we first started we had approx. 400 employees, made around 7,000 or 8,000 batteries a day, hired mostly local help until about the first six months and then we had people in layoff from other General Motors plants in their area and we were obligated to hire them.

What changes did you see at the plant over the years?

Well, some of the automation changed, but pretty well the battery is made like it always has been (storage battery), but a lot of changes in some of the modernization of the equipment. The processes remain basically the same throughout the years.

Do you know how many were employed at any one time?

I think the most employees we ever had was around 600 and then we went to down to around 500 and when I retired we were still around 500 employees.

Do you know why the battery plant shut down eventually?

I surmise it was because of competition. They got General motors makes about 75 % of their parts, all their competitors make about 25% of their own parts, so it's more expensive because

you're paying higher wages, higher benefits so they went to the outside to buy batteries and hopefully to save some money.

What were some changes that you noticed in Olathe in general over the years?

Well the big change was that I went to work for the battery plant in 1956, I was married in 1957 and there were no apartment houses in Olathe at that time. We were lucky, and one of the builders here in town, bought an old house on Cedar Street and made it into an apartment: upstairs and downstairs, and we rented the downstairs apartment. And now I'd hate to say how many thousands of apartments there are in Olathe.

And the battery plant when we first started on Dennis Street was a gravel road, at that time, so we were really out in the country.

You mentioned you were in the army for a while, where were you stationed exactly?

Well, I took my basic training at Fort Riley, Kansas, I was so good I got to take the second six weeks of basic training; and then after the basic training the whole company that I was with was going to go to Korea except any of us that had national guard time or reserve time prior to that. They sent us to Panama, so I spent my two years in the service in the Panama Canal Zone, which I enjoyed.

What was it like raising a family in Olathe?

Well, I guess most of the people that transferred here when the battery plant started were real impressed with the schools; and today the schools still have a number one reputation in the area—or in the country really. So it's just a nice place to raise families. I didn't have a family at the time until our first son was born in 1964, but the children enjoyed school here and I think it was a world class school system.

Where did your son go to school?

He first came to town and went to Ridgeview Elementary School and then transferred over to Havencroft. He went to Santa Fe Trail Junior High until they opened the Indian Trail Junior High, and went to North, for I believe it was over one year, and then they opened Olathe South and since we lived in that area he graduated from Olathe South.

What were the schools like back then?

I really can't say, I don't think the high school, Olathe South I was real familiar with, is much different. This school I noticed when I came in today is a lot different, it's bigger and more modern and I know you have a lot of things here that the other schools don't have. Grade schools I think they are about the same as when my children were in grade school there's more of them, but I don't think they are much different.

What did you think of urban renewal when it came around in the '60s?

Well it happened right before we came to town there was a lot of controversy over it; it didn't last real long. The streets that they put in and stuff deteriorated so they ended up taking them out. I never thought too much about it; it just didn't pan out in the long run.

How do you think urban renewal effected Olathe?

Well, I don't think it really affected them too much. They were trying to revitalize a downtown that still hasn't really happened. Olathe more or less downtown is all government—city/county government buildings which I'm not too sure is a bad idea. They are still trying to revitalize downtown and I guess I have my doubts whether that will really ever work.

What were some of your favorite things to do around Olathe?

Well I can remember going to a drive in movie out north of Olathe. That's one of the things you did at that time. Olathe had two movie theaters. We didn't go to a lot of movies; I guess we played bridge with friends. Eating out, you didn't eat out as often, there weren't as many places to eat out at that time; I think we had one McDonald's when we came to town, of course now there are probably six or seven.

As for the places to eat out, what in your opinion is the best place to eat out in Olathe back then?

Boy, that's a hard question. I really can't think of any place that was special. We ate at the C&C café which was basically for breakfast. If we had been somewhere in the evening: to a dance, or a movie and wanted to go and have a bite before we went home. We'd go to C&C and have breakfast. It was good, but it wasn't anything that was great. If I really wanted to go out I probably drove to Martin City and went to Jess and Jim's and had a steak.

What are some of the things you didn't exactly like about Olathe?

I don't believe there is anything that I didn't like about Olathe, I was pretty easy to please and we enjoyed Olathe at first and we still do.

What are some of the things that made Olathe grow?

Well one thing would be the location; located on two railroads and an interstate highway system and the progressive people in town that did good planning. The city government, the county government planning ahead so Olathe could grow and prosper throughout the years.

What do you think Olathe's future will be like?

Oh, I think it has a great future, like I say, I'm not sure downtown will ever prosper. It'll be more like new centers where the Bass Pro is, and various shopping centers. The need to still attract jobs and they have been in the past and that's you know livelihood; people in high school

graduate and if they don't go to college they need someplace to work and I think Olathe is a good place for that.

Tell us some stories from the battery plant that you remember.

Oh I guess it's just the people that worked there. Most of the people that came in from Indiana, and they were all good people, they all became involved in Olathe. They were members of the chamber, they were presidents of the rotary, the Kiwanis clubs, it was just part of being part of the city and they wanted to show how much they cared for the city. And our employees were good employees and they were local people for the most part and it was just a good atmosphere to work in.

Can you think of any significant events back then that happened in Olathe?

Well, one that was significant that I can remember was 1957 when we had the tornado that actually started in Ottawa and went through Martin City. I was living here at the time and had a bedroom in this lady's house that I rented. And didn't go to the basement, I was in a car and I could see the tornado going through Martin City and there were also a couple of them northwest of Olathe so that was pretty significant.

What were your wages like at the Delco battery plant?

Oh gosh, I'm not sure. I would just almost say probably when we were started, I want to say, in the seven or eight dollars an hour range and when I retired they were probably up more like 17 or 18 dollars an hour. So they increased over the years, but it was one of the better paying jobs in the city; and the city was very glad to get the battery plant, and of course we paid millions of dollars in taxes throughout the year to be here.

Describe downtown Olathe when you lived here.

Well, downtown Olathe was pretty much the square. There were probably three or four restaurants on the square, I believe there were two or three clothing stores, drug store, two banks, Safeway was around the square, and there were service stations. Where the county jail is now that was the Buick Motor Company and that was my first purchase of a car. In 1956, I bought a Buick special, so I would have transportation to and from work. And really the area in downtown hasn't changed all that much. The courthouse was there and of course it wasn't the size that it was today and the county administration building was not there, there were businesses over there along with Patrons Bank. The library was an older library which was north of the current site. But not a whole lot of change, some of the buildings have been modernized some have been torn down to be replaced.

Was the old courthouse still there when you moved to Olathe?

Yes, the old courthouse was there.

Could you describe that please?

Well it was just basically like most courthouses. I came from Ottawa Kansas that had an older courthouse, similar to Olathe's. Then Olathe built the new courthouse and since that time has added on stories to it. But I'd say a pretty typical county courthouse at the time.

What kind of organizations were around that people could join?

They had a Rotary club and most of our upper management belonged to Rotary. They had a Kiwanis club. The one that I was involved in was the Olathe JCs, and at that time if you wanted anything done in Olathe you went to the JCs because we had a habit of getting things done. I know some projects we would carry on fundraisers, we went out to Olathe Lake and built picnic tables (pre-cast cement tables that we erected) but anything that you wanted done, the JCs pretty well were in on it.

Who was the mayor at the time you moved to Olathe?

I think the time the battery plant started in Olathe the mayor was Claude King. I know Mudd Huggins was one of the councilman Owen Brown was on the city council for a while. But I believe Claude King was the mayor at that time. At that time the mayor and the councilman split up the city: one of them would have the police department under them, another one might have the water department, another one the other utilities.

Were there any major conflicts between the city government, city council, or mayor?

No, not really that I remember. They were very instrumental in getting the Delco battery plant in Olathe. Several members of city, including Mr. Osborn from Patrons Bank, went to California and visited a battery plant there and persuaded us to build our plant here in Olathe.

Did you attend Old Settlers while you lived here? Can you describe how that's changed?

Old Settlers is pretty well the same as it was always: had a carnival, always had big crowds, always have had the parade. I think the carnival has gotten better over the years; it's a nice carnival, a clean carnival, but pretty much a focal point during September that everyone enjoyed attending.

Do you remember anything about civil rights in Olathe?

No, I remember when we first came to town that Lincoln school was for the African Americans and later they let the African Americans go to any school of their choice and tore it down. I don't remember any racial problems in Olathe during my time there, everybody seemed to get along and accepted everybody.

The police and fire department, were they consistent and dependable?

Yeah, of course. I'm not sure, but I'm almost positive there was only one fire station at the time. The police station was downtown, I'm not sure how many officers they had but not very

many compared to today. The Johnson county sheriff wasn't as big then as it is now but you felt like you had adequate fire and police protection at the time.

Do you have anything you'd like to add about Olathe?

No, I just have always enjoyed it am glad that I could come back here and finish my career here and retire here. It's just a place that we have always enjoyed and I just can't imagine wanting to live anywhere else. You know you might want to go to Florida or Arizona, but I have no desire to live there. I appreciate it and do like to live in Olathe.

Did you get married here in Olathe?

I was married while I was employed at the battery plant, but I was married in Wellsville, Kansas at the Methodist church.

Were there a lot of churches in Olathe?

Yes, but nothing compared to what there is today. Course you know where you have so many churches now in the grade schools and the high schools you didn't have as much as that. We attended a Methodist church which was on Park Street here in town and it's no longer there. They built out on Harrison Street while we were attending there. The Baptist church was downtown at that time, but just not as many churches as there are today.

What are you hopes for Olathe?

Oh I guess to attract more industry for jobs for the people that live here that want to stay here; that graduate from high school or college whatever the case may be, but they would have a place for employment without having to go elsewhere to seek it. As far as downtown I'd like to see them, probably in my opinion, make that a government center which it pretty well is now. I don't really see anything wrong with that. I don't think you will ever bring business back downtown it would be very costly and I'm just not sure we are suited to that and we have so many outlying areas now that are real nice for the people to shop or entertain themselves.