

## **Jack Klee**

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## Jack Klee

[DVD started after the interview had begun]

The population?

**Yes**

The 1960's census in Olathe I think was around 10,000 and I think in '61 it was maybe 11,000 people.

**How do you think that's changed Olathe?**

Oh, just tremendously. At that time I-35 was out here, but there was nothing on the east side of I-35, it was all farmlands. Then gradually they added, oh the Havencroft area, I think was the first, and probably toward the end of the '60s. I'm not sure when that opened, and later then came the Havencroft grade school, but the housing got out there first. Clairborne Road was not there, Mur-Len Road was not there. Like I say, just nothing on the other side of I-35

**What about the community? Do you feel like ....?**

Oh for sure, you know at the time we moved out here, Olathe was mainly made up of old time Olathe people—you know that were born and raised in this area. And we were outsiders, you know it took us a while to connect through the church and social things. And there are still a bit of Olathe, old Olathe people around that are slowly dying off and moving away. But still, like old settlers, brings out you have to be here like 45 years, I think to be classified as an old settler and register for the celebration in September.

**So are you registered?**

This was the first year that I could, and I didn't because I was working on a project with our optimist club that had a booth at old settlers, so I was up there all the time. But that and mainly we were a small town. It was a toll call to call Kansas City. I know when I moved to Olathe from Kansas City, where I was born, and raised my folks and everybody thought we were moving to the ends of the earth. It was 25-30 miles out there. I-35 was there, but there were no really, you know 135<sup>th</sup> street was just a two lane small state road and there wasn't a 119<sup>th</sup> Street, there wasn't 127<sup>th</sup> or 151<sup>st</sup>. There were dirt roads or small roads at that time but none of it was developed. You came out State Line maybe, and came across 135<sup>th</sup> Street which was actually faster then because there wasn't a stop light at every corner and there were no businesses there, so there wasn't much traffic. You could actually get from State Line to Olathe quicker then, than you can now. Even though you can go 45 mph now, and then I think at the time it was 55 or 60 but there weren't any stop signs or stoplights.

**When you moved you said you moved from Kansas City. Was it complete and total culture shock?**

Somewhat, somewhat. I had just graduated from college when I moved out here. We had one child when we moved out here, so the wife was a little isolated. I was at work. So she was a little isolated except for some of the neighbors that she finally got to know. Like I say, we joined the church. She got into the bridge game, bridge parties were the big thing back then and still are quite a bit. But I worked six days a week, so she had the one son. Our second son was born about a year after we got here. But it took a little while, but we finally got to know people and got into some social things. At the time when you have little children you don't party too much and socialize a whole lot. It's a matter of the neighbors were good and they'd get together and have coffee. None of them worked at that time, most of the women didn't work in addition to their husbands. So the women were usually around, if you needed a babysitter they babysat, and vice versa. If somebody's kid was sick you took care of the others while they took them to the doctor.

Doctors were another thing there were no specialist in town everybody was a general practitioners, and they are now called family practice. But they were general practitioners, and did everything from delivering babies to taking care of the old people. It was a number of years before we received any kind of specialized doctors, heart doctors or obstetricians, gynecologists and all that it was probably ten years later in the 70's sometime probably before we had any medical specialties.

**Did that come with the hospital?**

Well, we had the Olathe hospital, it was here then. It was up on Santa Fe and Cooper Street, just a small 25 bed hospital. They treated a lot of emergencies and some surgeries but a lot of that would be transferred into Kansas City if it was some major surgery because they didn't have the surgeons or heart specialist or anything like that. But it later progressed, they moved from up there on Santa Fe they moved up on Clairborne for 20 years or whatever and then out to where they are now. It's a super big modern medical facility now, but it wasn't always that way. For the time it was very acceptable.

**You said your child was one when you moved right?**

We had one child, he was born while we were living in Kansas City and when we moved out to Olathe he was like a year and a half old.

**So when he was little, what would he do (and I asked about the rest of your children) for fun?**

We lived on a block that had 21 or 22 kids at one time, all very close in age. Rick was born in 1960 and then I think in the next five or six years, there were, next door we had three kids, and four kids on one side, three kids on the other. Four across the street, several on down the street. So there were 21 or 22 kids, and the kids spent a lot of time at that time they were outdoors playing all day before they started school.

**You said you were a pharmacist, where did you work? Was it in Olathe?**

I worked at Craig Drugstore was up on the square right strait in front of the old courthouse, or the courthouse that is still there. Right in the middle of the square on the north side of the square. There were two drugstores, actually three. George Burns was down on the corner of Kansas and Park and Craig's was in the middle of the block and then on down the street there was an older drugstore that had a fountain called Snapp's, so there were three pharmacies in town at that time.

**Can you tell me a little bit more about the square before urban renewal?**

Well, like I say, it was a square, so people could park right out in front of your store. There was a park bench out there. Saturdays were big days because the farmers came in. We were surrounded by farm community and Saturday afternoon the doctors usually worked until noon and then in the afternoon people gathered on the square. They had several benches where they would sit around and visit. We had a bus service at that time, *Continental Trailways*, I think it was that. It served Olathe and went to Lenexa and on into Kansas City. I know my mother, when she'd come out to visit, she'd get on the bus in Kansas City and come out and Craig Drugstore was the bus station. They sold tickets there and the bus stopped there twice a day. I think there was one going back and forth and it went onto Wichita if you wanted to go south you could catch that bus to Wichita and going the other direction it went into Kansas City.

**So what kind of stores were there? There were three drugstores...**

Like I say, really two drug stores and the other one was more of a soda fountain and pharmacy further down. Right next to Craig's was Rendleman Office Supply, which had a complete office like modern one too. They sold stationary and envelopes and all the sorts of things for stationary. And there was a Ben Franklin on the other side of Craig's, a Ben Franklin store which was like a, nowadays it's more like a TG&Y or something that had a multiple of things. Down the street a little further was a Western Auto Store. Miller Department Store was on another side towards the east from our store that sold clothes, and jeans and shoes and stuff. There was a shoe store down the road. There was a theater down there on Park Street that was busy mainly just in the evenings and on the weekends. And a couple of little variety stores and there was a very small grocery down there. Hyer Boots was right down on the corner, the original Hyer Boots was right down on the corner there on Chestnut and Park. There was a funeral home down there across the street from the boot factory and there was jeweler or two on the square. Several small restaurants; cafes and restaurants there. There was a hotel up on the square on the north side, Olathe hotel I think it was. In fact I think there was another one down east. There were actually two furniture stores down there, Frye had a furniture store down there that turned into the funeral home. And Julien Flaming had a furniture store down close to that area too on Park Street. So you could buy most anything you wanted on the square. It didn't have lots of variety, but that was before Metcalf South, and before Oak Park; the plaza was really the only big shopping center in KC at that time. If you needed to really buy

something particular maybe you went into town to JcPenney, and we had a Sears catalog store right there off the square and a wards catalog store. That you could order one week and then they'd come back to town the next Saturday and pick it up. Anything from clothes to refrigerators to freezers or tires. So it was pretty self-sufficient; it was right there handy, but once the outlying shopping areas improved, the shopping centers: the big Penney's store, the big Macy's, any of those came in, then the shop in Olathe deteriorated.

**If you were going to take your wife out to a nice dinner, where would you take her?**

Well, there wasn't a nice...at that time when we came to town actually there was one right across from Olathe North High School there was a Redwood Inn. There was a Pizza Hut there for a while, in their building, I think. But, it was a Redwood Inn and it was kind of a sit down restaurant. But there were some hamburger joints, a lot of times when we went out to eat we would go into 95<sup>th</sup> street or somewhere to find a nice restaurant. There used to be one, I can't even remember the name of it; right underneath the water tower there on 95<sup>th</sup> and I-35. But out there where, on the corner of Ridgeview and Santa Fe there was a little drive in Custer's Last stand they put in after a while. Like I say, [Clairborne really] Ridgeview wasn't much, Ridgeview was just kind of a dirt road when you went North of Santa Fe and it eventually developed into a better road; and then as they developed housing on the east side of I-35, those roads improved and they had a few places out there too—restaurants and all. But, as far as a nice restaurant, the Oxford House, out on the west side on 56 highway, was out there I think there by that time. Around that time they had very good steaks and have had for a long time until they closed recently, but that was where you could go get a nice steak, was at the Oxford House.

**So how did this all change when urban renewal came?**

Well, urban renewal, the first thing that I knew about, they closed off Park Street, there in front of the courthouse in between Cherry and Kansas Avenue was all closed off, so the traffic couldn't park in front of your business; and I think that hurt businesses because it wasn't convenient. Parking became a problem because it took up that many more parking places. They built a big fountain there on the corner (where we had two banks First National Bank and Patrons bank) First National was right on the square, they put a big 'ole concrete brick fountain in front of it and took up more parking places and it just kind of killed the downtown area. It hurt a lot of businesses there.

And then the hospital moved out on Clairborne, after a period of time, so a lot of the doctors moved out that way. There were doctors on the square, Dr. McCann and Dr. Paren were right there on the square. And Dr. Matthew joined them there. Dr. Delphi and Reir were up a little bit east of the square.

So as the outlying areas developed the people moved away from that and that hurt downtown even further. But it, just been a lot more change, you know it's really, I hate the term, I think, bedroom community, but that's what it amounts too. There are so many people that live out

here to get away from the city and commute to Kansas City or some I think other directions too, but. So they don't have, they're not here to support the businesses like they used to be.

The restaurants have really boomed since then of course. There is a restaurant, you know: two Applebee's, and I don't know how many Pizza Huts, six or seven McDonald's now and we had a couple of little hamburger joints back then, but nothing like that. So the restaurant business has boomed here, drugstore business too with all the CVS and Walgreens and Grocery stores that have drugstores in them now.

That's changed, all the little mom and pop stores have gone. Craig's closed, and Burns closed and Kramer had a store for a while, and Kerr had a store. I had my own pharmacy for 20 some odd years out by the hospital on Clairborne, but as the new hospital built on 151<sup>st</sup> the doctors moved out there, so I sold out and virtually all the locally owned pharmacies are gone. Where I am now at Price Chopper we are a conglomerate of four different individual drug stores that joined up there. The pharmacy business is all big time stuff now. You can still go to the corner store, but it's a little different than when it was a corner drug store, where everybody knew your name and the employees were the same time after time. Up at Craig's, for example, the people that had worked there had worked there for 20 years and they knew everybody and you called everybody by name. If somebody had a problem they would come in and take care of it. But, now it's mass production now, so everybody's in a hurry, and doesn't have time to necessarily pay that much attention to an individual. So the businesses have changed, I hate to say for the better, but I suppose it's for the better.

You've got more variety here as far as shopping, and restaurants and medical facilities are excellent now with any specialty you want you can go out to the hospital area and find them.

**I'm going to change gears just a little bit. All three sons went to Olathe North right?**

No, they went to Olathe High School. My youngest son graduated in '81, the last year that it was Olathe High School. In fact, they were low on diplomas for their graduating class so they thought, well were just going to order the new ones that'll say Olathe North. Well, their class was very active they had very good leadership and they got together and said no we are not taking any Olathe North diplomas, we want Olathe high school diplomas—so they had to order more that said Olathe High school.

**I think one of our science teachers I think graduated that year Mrs. Rice, Rhonda Rice. Didn't she brag about that a lot?**

Our oldest son graduated in '78, our middle son graduated in '80 and youngest in '81. Before you were born. In those days, there was one high school. When we came to town I think there was just, I'm saying, one junior high. Millbrooke was up where the old high school was up right by the square—was Millbrooke junior high and then Santa Fe was built before any of our boys went to junior high; which would have been in early 70's I guess. And then Oregon Trail opened

out west and now I'm not sure how many there are? 10 or 12 or something like that, junior highs?

### **There's 11**

But all of our boys went to the same grade school all the way through—at Ridgeview grade school, and they all went to Santa Fe Trail junior high and they all graduated from Olathe High School. And like I say, when I walked in here today it's changed a little bit too. We may have been back for a sporting event once or twice after that, but we were up here all the time when the boys were in school to wrestling meets, and basketball games and football games. Football for example, they didn't have a football field in 1961, it was the field that was at Washington junior high school, I guess there was, Washington was a junior high in those days; and it was where the Dillon's store is now on Santa Fe. And there was a football field behind that grade school and that is where Olathe High school played football and junior highs and everybody else because they didn't have their own field.

### **Did they ever get kicked off the field by the junior high kids?**

Right? Well, soccer; There wasn't any soccer in those days, none of my kids were exposed to soccer because there weren't soccer teams.

### **Did they all practice on the same football field as well or did they practice somewhere else?**

Yeah, I think they had practice fields close to the schools, but then Friday nights when they played football it was down on Santa Fe there and that went on quite a while before Olathe built a field out here of course.

### **So how much smaller was that field than Olathe ODAC?**

You know when you had, when it was built maybe Olathe had 20,000 people and you'd have four or five hundred at the football games; and so they've just over the time expanded bleachers and then of course built new stadiums too so that changed a lot. Again if you weren't there at the football game Friday night, and you saw somebody the next day they would know you weren't there because the crowd wasn't that big.

### **It's so big now and it's fun to be with all the kids but it would be kind of fun to actually know everyone.**

You know your classmates and all but there's a lot of kids that go through here that you don't know. It used to be I couldn't even tell you what their class sizes were, but it's nothing like it was now.

### **So are you happy with the education in Olathe?**

I think the education that they received in Olathe was great. They all went onto college. Our oldest son, Rick that graduated in '78 was a valedictorian. But there were 11 of them, I think in

his class, 11 valedictorians. All of them had perfect 4.0s all the way. Rick did it all the way through junior high and high school. My other sons could have, but they didn't see the importance. And Rick liked to study and it was important to him to make good grades. The others had good grades, Bs and some As but it wasn't that important to them. They were in sports more, Rick played football and basketball and wrestled; did some theater, I think, he was in theater for a year or two. Mark, our middle one, was on the track team, he was a pole vaulter, and he played some baseball in the summertime. Ted, our youngest, he was state wrestling champion his junior year and he played football and wrestled and played baseball. So we thought we'd miss having nothing to do on Friday nights when they left home but something else has replaced it, because we were doing something. Summertime we had usually three games a week. Each one of them would have a game or two. Almost five nights a week there was a baseball game somewhere to go to. But after, like I say, we thought: man we are really gonna miss that, but now we do what we want to do on Friday nights rather than what we had to do. So we miss that part. And they've all moved away due to their good educations here, Rick went to Drake up in Des Moines and so he broke his roots off, so to speak, and ended up out in Montana. The other one's in Atlanta, he got a scholarship at Arkansas so that broke his roots off. And Ted went to K State and got an engineering degree and so he's moved around a lot. But I think they all received excellent education because they all did very well in college, prepared them for college.

**Was there anything particular you wanted to talk about?**

Not, you know I've covered the medical changes in Olathe which are for the better for sure. And I'm not sure, you know the traffic problem is a big thing here, I think once they get the trains up over the railroad crossings on the east side of town anyway that's going to improve a lot of things. With 127<sup>th</sup> street, the problem is they open up these new roads and all, they build more houses out there for people to move out there and you got that much more traffic. So the traffic is a problem. We live in the same house we've lived in for 45 years now and so it's a neighborhood where most of the people were there before we were, and so it's not a traffic situation or anything but to go in or out of town or right now just to get up to the square to go to the post office is a challenge because of all the railroad crossings that are close. But that's going to improve dramatically when they get the overpasses and the underpasses done.

And in general its progress, and its moving south you know Gardner was a little farm community and Edgerton and all that and its moving that way and they're getting the growth that Olathe did 20 or 30 years ago. I think when they grow that way and bring in industry it improves your tax base for schools and community things, hospitals and medical facilities. So growth in that way is good. And there are drawbacks due to traffic and you can go out to eat now and never see anybody you know and things like that. It used to be everywhere you went you knew somebody. With that many people around it's just rare to run into somebody that you know, and I miss that part of it. But, as I get older I do enjoy the better medical facilities and all.

### **What about the civil rights movement in Olathe, because you would have been around?**

Yeah, it was a...our kids...you know, at North, I'm not sure what...it was blending in back in the late 60's of course and there were a few skirmishes and all, but we really didn't see a lot of...or my kids didn't complain or voice a lot of problems. They had some real good athletes, like I say, my boys were all in sports, so anybody that was good at what they liked to do and all they were readily accepted and didn't socially or anything...they weren't raised, I think when they were in grade school there wasn't much in Ridgeview school anyway; there weren't too many minorities but so they didn't really have any prejudices or anything going into junior high and high school they got along with them and I think everything blended in pretty smooth. You know Kansas City had a lot of big problems in riots and fights and whatever and still do have as far as that goes. But there wasn't much problem in Olathe.

### **What about Vietnam? Was that a big deal here?**

No, that was in...Vietnam...I kind of grew up between wars. I was too young for the Korean War, I graduated from high school in '55 and the Korean War was over with and went to college, moved to Olathe in '61 and that was kind of when the Vietnam War was going on. That's what the wife and I look back on some of these things and think, well, where were we when the Vietnam fiasco was and the music movements and all that? But then we stop to realize we were working 50 hours a week and the wives were raising three kids or more and you didn't have time to read the newspaper and there wasn't the television coverage we had then either so we kind of grew up through that before the Vietnam war was over. And of course our boys, again were matured, acquired their age of 18 or whatever and they registered for the draft. But about that time is when the end of the draft and it was all volunteer and they went into college and got their own families going. And it didn't affect us directly so we didn't...none of our neighbors or anything were in the military at that time.

### **What would your boys do for fun like on a Friday night?**

Cruising the Fe was big you know and I guess still is. Like I say, every Friday night during school, there was a sporting event of some sort. Football season—all fall they were having either practices or games on Friday night and then the parental group would get together and they'd come over to one of the houses; and after the game they'd meet at one of the houses and the parents usually were there and they would have soft drinks and popcorn and a get together.

And as they got older, then they got into the farm parties I guess...or whatever they call them. And our boys did it, they all had curfews and we always thought we knew where they were all the time but as they get older and start telling tales on each other when our family gets together they'll..."well, you didn't know that Rick snuck out after you guys went to bed" or that "Mark came home later than he was supposed to" and things like that so they did it and they got into the field parties. I don't know what they call it, there were so many farms out here and

the farm kids would arrange to have a party out in one of their fields, literally at/out in the middle of the field and maybe have a bonfire, and soft drinks supposedly (but I think sometimes it was a little more than soft drinks). But they'd gather out there, and our boys all had to be home by midnight when they were in high school and usually made it by midnight.

So, they were very active in sports and I think that's the salvation of a lot of kids is to be so busy that you didn't have time to get in too much trouble. So if they didn't come home right after school we knew where they were; or they either had practice and one of us would pick them up or the parents had carpools and football practice. Maybe it was over at five or six or whatever, and one of the parents would pick up the neighbor kids and bring them home. And the parents all went to the football games on Friday nights so they knew where they were. They worked hard enough at the practices they were a little bit too tired to do a whole lot after they got home anyway.

I've got seven grandkids and the fathers of all of them are realizing what sports did for them, so they have all them active in sports. The girls in basketball and soccer. The boys in baseball and soccer. So they admit after they were raised that they liked having us to blame that they had to be home at midnight. "Well, I can't go with you because I've got to be home tonight. I've got to be home by midnight or I'll get in trouble." Maybe they didn't want to go anyway, but peer pressure—you didn't want to admit you didn't want to go, you blamed your parents because you had to be home. I think some of that's been lost in the big city too as far as the kids being out until two or three o'clock in the morning and getting in trouble. And that always has been and always will be.

**If you could change one thing right now about Olathe what would it be?**

Oh golly!

**Or if it's perfect you can say...**

Well it's far from perfect, you know I think the things that I'd like to change and which I've complained about a just a minute ago, is the traffic and I think that's improving. With all these trains on both sides, I think we have 120 trains a day go through Olathe, so with getting these tracks elevated on the east side it's going to eliminate a lot of the traffic. 127<sup>th</sup> street that they just got opened across I-35 has been a big help. Like I say, I think the traffic and the congestion is a big thing that probably bothers me more than anything. You used to be able to drive from one end of town in ten minutes and now it's a 30 minute thing. If you want to go from the hospital out to 119<sup>th</sup> street you either get on I-35 and risk your life, or if you go the roundabout way and it takes 20-25 minutes maybe to get there. But the good thing is that we have that nice hospital out there and nursing homes have really expanded. We had two nursing homes in town when we came. The Johnson county nursing home was about where it is now, but it was out in the country at that time, and there was a little nursing home up on Park Street so those facilities the senior assisted living now that we have everywhere in Olathe and apartments for seniors. As I get older, I think that's been a good thing too.

**What about church life in Olathe you said you were very involved in your church?**

Yeah, the wife and I both came from different churches in Kansas City, so we were looking for kind of a neutral ground and we ended up at the Methodist church. They've changed the names, they've incorporated, but it was Olathe Methodist church, I think originally. And they combined with United Brethren, so then it became the United Methodist church and then they combined with the Grace United Methodist church up north and now it's Grace United Methodist church. But we had the Christian church up on the square where it still is; and there was a Baptist church right there on the square where there is a public garden there I think now, there on Loula Street that was a Baptist church. Well, the Methodist church was on one of those corners right there too, when we joined the church it was out on Harrison, which is now just a community center that they operate. But those have expanded a lot—built new churches around town some new one come in too.

**So was that more of a social thing back then, now not everyone knows everyone in their church?**

Yeah, it wasn't a social event as much as where you met people. You know you met people from all over Olathe rather than the ones that lived in your neighborhood or the ones you did business with. You'd meet people from all the way around Olathe or out in the farm areas even too—so you met a big variety of people by attending church; that as Olathe grew, the church grew of course, and again the people were more of a cross section of Olathe rather than one area so it was still a way of meeting new people that came to town.

**Do you know much about the Mid-America College?**

Right, it was not there. It was founded...I opened my pharmacy up on Clairborne by the hospital when it was up there in 1969. And I think that's the first year that mid America graduated a class...was '69. Something like that, close to it. I think they opened for business in '65 or '66, something like that. Those dates are a little fuzzy, but it was not there at all. Like I say, there was literally nothing on the other side of I-35, no duplexes, no nothing but dirt roads and farms. So the college...that land was donated by Mr. Osborne who was quite a philanthropist around Olathe and donated hospital land and college land and a bunch of other things. It started out small, it was a two year college, I think, when it first opened and as the class progressed they progressed up to four year university.

**Were there more people in Olathe after that opened?**

It brought in a lot of people, yeah a lot of people a lot of families moved here for that reason. Dr. Seaman was a family practice doctor that came to Olathe because of the college. He was a doctor in Olathe for 20/25 years, I guess something like that. But there were just a lot of people kind of like the deaf school, you know a lot of people moved to Olathe because their kids were

deaf. And they moved to Olathe so they could go to the college there. So that brought in as did Mid-American brought in a very large amount of people.

**I just remembered a story I read in one of our books, Hyer Boot Company burned down, do you know anything about that?**

Yeah several times, I don't think it really suffered from urban renewal it didn't effect it. But it was down just east of the square in an old original building, I think there on the corner of Chestnut and across the street from where the post office is now. There was a TG&Y across the street from that...kind of in the middle of the block and they had a big fire there in the middle 60's somewhere, burned a lot of that block out and it was rebuilt after that. Hyer boot for a while moved down on south Kansas in a little warehouse building or something and then they moved up where the Grass Pad is now. That is why the boot ended up up there, is because it was the last home of Hyer boot.

Hyer boot hired a lot of deaf people too to run their machinery, the noise didn't bother them. As they went out, then the deaf people had to find other employment. But they were there, I'm not sure how long they have been gone, but 10 or 15 years maybe. Olathe boot branched off of that I think somebody that had worked for Hyer boot opened Olathe boot, it was out on Santa Fe and First Street for a while, and it's gone.

**Were they competitors?**

Somewhat, yeah. Hyer family got out of the boot business and some of their employees opened other...there was another one at one time I can't remember, Bulcher I think was an old employee that opened his own business. It was in business for a while. Orscheln family was here and I think he is the one that started Olathe boot, Orscheln boys went to school with my boys, played football and all that with them but I think they are all scattered around now.

Like I say, I'm very happy. We were both from Kansas City and Olathe is now our home and probably always will be. Probably be buried here. It's not a matter of wanting to move, I think I'd miss the changes in the climate even though the cold weather is a pain. You wouldn't have anything to look forward to for spring if it was spring all the time.