

History of the San Angelo Downtown Lions Club

Compiled by Past District Governor John Hancock

This “*Dyamic*” club was organized on September 11, 1923 as the Lions Club of San Angelo with 42 charter members. For most of our existence, we were known as the San Angelo Lions Club, but with the advent of additional clubs in town, the name was changed in 1984 to the San Angelo Downtown Lions Club. We have grown to about 100 members, and San Angelo now has 9 clubs with over 300 members. So, Lionism has prospered in our community for nearly 100 years, and this club has enjoyed growth and a productive existence throughout that time.

The history of an organization can be chronicled by what it does and who does it. For a Lions Club, the “What” is the civic and humanitarian service provided to our fellow man, and the “Who” is its benevolent members. For this club, that history begins with the 42 men whose signatures are shown on our charter and continues through all of the members who have belonged to this club over the years. As you look at our charter, some of the names are blurred and unrecognizable while others are more legible and are names that we recognize. However, all of our members throughout the years have made a contribution to the success of the Club.

As you look at our charter, you’ll recognize the name Alex Collins. He was the Club’s first president and president of the old Central National Bank. H.A. Goodson’s name is also recognized. He was elected 3rd Vice President that first year and was the local Ford dealer. Ed Blanton was in the printing business and was the Club’s first Tail Twister. And, of course, Dean Chenoweth’s name is recognized as the Standard Times’ editor. For many years, he was editor of the Roar, our monthly newsletter, and was the last surviving charter member. He passed way in 1991 after having been a member of the Club for 67 years!

These 42 charter members, and the many that have followed since, shared a concern for their fellow man with the willingness to get involved and do something to help those less fortunate. That care and concern has been directed primarily towards children and sight conservation. In the early 1920s, we began an Easter Egg Hunt for the children of this community which continued through the 1930s when, on one occasion, there were 10,000 children in attendance. That program was held at the old Central Fire Station and, in later years, was continued in Carlsbad for children at the State Hospital. For many years, we also held a Christmas Party for needy children with a dinner and Christmas presents.

Most people are familiar with the Texas Lions Camp in Kerrville, which we support wholeheartedly, both, financially and through sponsorship of children. Our concern for these children goes back to 1930 when we began a Summer Camp program for children in the San Angelo area. The Club acquired property and built a facility at Lake Nasworthy that was used to provide a camping experience. It continued in service until 1968 when we re-directed our support to the Texas Lions Camp. In the early 1950s, we gave our Lake Nasworthy facility to what was then San Angelo Junior College, and today, you would recognize it as the Angelo State University Lake House.

Throughout the years, we've provided eyeglasses for children and the less fortunate right here in the Concho Valley. Our club also supports the Western Texas Lions Eye Bank Alliance and the Leader Dog for the Blind program. Participation in the SightFirst programs are other examples of our involvement in sight conservation as our International Association proceeds to conquer curable and preventable blindness worldwide. Undoubtedly, it would be a crime not to mention San Angelo Lions Charities. This club has been a strong supporter of that citywide effort; recycling thousands of donated eyeglasses, providing eyeglasses to the needy and screening children's vision all over our community, etc. And so, we see what those 42 members initiated has continued throughout our history. Even today, we're still reaching out; touching peoples' lives and making a difference, both, locally and around the world!

Since our inception, we have recognized the importance of club and membership growth in Lionism. This club has proudly sponsored over 20 other clubs in this general area of Texas! And as previously mentioned, San Angelo has grown to 9 distinct Lions Clubs, of which, we're either the parent or grandparent. Membership growth is important to all of us and, most certainly, to this club.

In addition to humanitarian concerns, this club has also been civic-minded; having fun and enjoying fellowship. The most significant civic contribution we made – one that provided entertainment and promoted Lionism – was the Cowboy Band. Most people have heard of the country-western band which began in 1927 and was active until the late 1940s. Under the leadership of Frank Meadows and Louis Hall, they played before audiences here in San Angelo, throughout the state, across the nation and even Canada and Mexico. In 1931, when Julian Hyer from Dallas was elected International President of Lions, they played at his Inaugural Ball. They were such a success that they were asked back the following year for the Los Angeles convention and to Mexico City the year after that. One of their career highlights was playing for the 1933 Inauguration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in Washington, D.C. The Cowboy Band, more than anything else that we've done, made our name known throughout our International Association and the world. Such activities continue today with our pancake breakfasts and support of Old Fort Concho, Habitat for Humanity and the Food Bank. Nowadays, fundraising activities include our annual Clay Bird Shoot and Gold Tournament, etc.

Now, not everything we've done has been successful! Back in 1958, Club President Otto Schertz had the vision that San Angelo needed a zoo. Over the next few years, funds were raised; fences and cages were built; buffalo and prairie dogs were purchased and the beginnings of a zoo were established. Part of said vision was for the City of San Angelo to own and maintain this zoo, but unfortunately, City Council did not share in this vision. What began as a vision turned into a nightmare, and ultimately, the demise of our beloved zoo. If you were to drive out east of Bell Street along the Concho River, the only thing left of that zoo are some prairie dogs which have thrived quite well.

Allow us to diverge for a moment and get into some areas that may be trivia but, hopefully, will be of interest:

1. We were organized as a Thursday noon club and have remained so throughout our history.
2. For the first 41 years, we met at the St. Angelus Hotel which is no longer in existence. Now, it's where the Wells Fargo Bank stands. From there, we moved to the Town House which was the Naylor Hotel. In 1968, we called the Cactus Hotel home until 1983 when we relocated to our present location at Rio Concho Manor.
3. We began publishing a newsletter in 1951 known as The Roar.
4. We have had 5 International Presidents of Lions as speakers on our program. Everyone would recognize Lion Ebb Grindstaff as one of those speakers.
5. We have also had two Presidents of the United States on our program. Both, Lyndon Johnson and George H. Bush, before they were elected President, have spoken to our club.
6. As previously mentioned, H. A. Goodson was a charter member and had the Ford dealership. In 1932, the 20 millionth Ford automobile was manufactured, delivered to Goodson and sold in San Angelo. Henry Ford, himself, came to our city to commemorate the event, and Goodson invited him to the Lions meeting. Being gracious hosts and San Angelo being the wool capital of the world, the Club presented Mr. Ford with a live lamb. According to the newspaper article, Mr. Ford had the lamb shipped back to his farm in Michigan.

As you can see, whether sponsoring a child to the Texas Lions Camp; recycling and providing eyeglasses; being involved in civic activities or any of the many other Lions projects, the San Angelo "*Dynamic*" Downtown Lions Club has demonstrated its commitment to our motto of "*We Serve!*" With nearly 100 years of history, we still see children in need of eyeglasses or a camping experience. Plus, civic and humanitarian needs continue to grow here at home and all over the world. With all that being said, this club has a proud past, and its members, both former and present, have left a legacy for future generations to follow!