

History of the Aberdeen Maryland Lions Club

Some confusion has long existed as to the exact date on which the Aberdeen Lions club was chartered. Although the Club has always assumed that the charter date was May 27, 1932, the Charter itself is dated May 31, 1932. Lions International records show May 27 as the organization date and June 27 as the date of charter presentation. Notwithstanding, Aberdeen Lions traditionally observe their Charter Night during the month of May.

The number of charter members has also been in question. Although only 20 members actually signed the Charter, Lions International records and, indeed, Club records list 23 charter members. In fact, one of the three additional members was a charter officer of the Club.

The Charter for the Aberdeen Lions Club was presented to Charter President J. Wilmer Cronin by District Governor Richard Simmons of the Frederick Lions Club. At this meeting, held in the Hutner Hotel, Lion Marshall Heaps, President of the sponsoring Mason-Dixon Lions Club, served as toastmaster. The Hutner Hotel was located on the present site of the Cecil Bank parking lot.

The Aberdeen Lions Club is the oldest Lions Club in Harford County and the second oldest in District 22-A (central Maryland). It was the first service club in Aberdeen.

The Aberdeen Club was born in a period of depression, dedicated to meeting the needs of the Aberdeen community. The Club sponsored an 8-team softball league until World War II took away many of the young men who made up the teams. In 1934, The Lions sponsored Boy Scout Troop 350 and later added Cub Scout Pack 350 and an Explorer Post. Within ten years of their formation, the Club's focus changed due to the hordes of construction workers, followed by soldiers, who came to Aberdeen Proving Ground. When it was proposed that a USO building be erected in Aberdeen, the Lions Club lent its support to the Town Commissioners and the military authorities in furthering the project. It was not long before the needed facility was erected at the corner of Parke and Franklin Streets. The present site of City Hall was previously the site of the USO building.

During the 1940's, the Lions assisted with the USO in providing a home away from home for the many service men. They also supported Boy Scout activities and the formation of a Campfire Girl Troop, among other projects. Their fundraisers included card parties, dances, and baseball games. During this hectic period, the Club found time to sponsor Lions clubs in Bel Air (1942), Perryville (1944), Havre de Grace (1945) and Edgewood (1947). In 1944, the Aberdeen Lions Club reached a peak in membership with 84 Lions.

The Aberdeen Lions Club entered the 1950's with the same president that had led it out of the 1940's. Bill Gross, Jr. was the only member to serve as president of the Lions Club for two whole consecutive years. Lion Bill was instrumental in the founding of the Aberdeen Community Council, which was made up of representatives of all the Aberdeen service clubs, schools, and churches. Though active during the '50s and '60's, this council eventually dropped by the wayside.

During this period, Lion Allen Reed founded the "Diaper Club." This "club within a club" recognized new fathers in the Lions Club by presenting them with a "Diaper Award" which was usually a folded miniature diaper with a pacifier attached. The new father was required to wear this award to each meeting until another Lion superseded him as the newest father.

In the 1950's, the USO decided that they no longer needed the USO building on Parke Street. The Lions actively supported the town in purchasing the building for community use. Renamed the Aberdeen Recreation Center or ARC, it served (among many things) as the site for Lions club meetings. Miss Georgia Wagner operated the facility for the town and ran the kitchen when meals were required. More than once, Past President J. Wilmer Cronin arrived late for the Lions meeting and the prepared food was exhausted. No problem! Miss Wagner would retire to the kitchen and fry several eggs for him.

The main fundraisers for the Club continued to be Christmas tree sales, light bulb and broom sales. The funds raised were used for sight conservation, Charities such as the Red Cross and Salvation Army, and support of school educational and athletic programs.

In 1957, the Aberdeen Lions Club celebrated its 25th Anniversary at the ARC building. They were the 6th oldest club in the state of Maryland at

that time. The guest speaker was an International Director from Charleston, NC. Dinner consisted of roast turkey with dressing, mashed potatoes, peas, cranberry sauce and cake and ice cream. Music was provided by Eddie Dwyer and his Clubmen.

During the 1961-1962 Lions year, the Aberdeen club made a determined effort to gain District recognition of their accomplishments. Under the leadership of President Ted Wentka, the Club won first place in District 22-A contests in nearly every category of public service. Activities in the '60s included Christmas baskets, scholarships, and providing eye examinations and eyeglasses. Funds were earned by sales of Christmas trees, brooms, light bulbs, and candy. The annual Spaghetti Supper continued to be a success, not only as a fund raiser, but also as a community social event.

In 1964, the Lions Club supported the formation of the Aberdeen Lions Club Auxiliary. Initially formed as a social group, the Aberdeen Lioness Club was officially certified by Lions International in 1977. In 2003, the club became the Aberdeen Lioness Lions Club.

In 1967, when the town of Aberdeen was celebrating its 75th birthday, citizens and Lions dressed in costumes of the gay nineties. Many Lions served on the town's planning committee for this event. Lions continued this dress when they attended the District Convention in Atlantic City. Needless to say, the men with their beards and the ladies with their long dresses attracted a great deal of attention.

In 1974, the club started a medical loan closet to supply medical equipment on a loan basis to those with a temporary need. For many years, it was housed in the basement of Lion Charlie Brown, then subsequently in the basement of Lion George LeFevre. The club now has a trailer which houses the equipment.

In 1978, the club sponsored Charlie Sellman as a candidate for District Governor. This was the first time that the club attempted to get a member elected to the office of District Governor. Unfortunately, the campaign of "Charlie's Angels" was not successful. (Note: According to a previous Club Historian – deceased member Jack Bender – Lion Jack Finnesy was going to run for District Governor in 1947 but dropped out because of a "deal" made with another club that he would run the next

year. Apparently, the deal fell through and Jack Finnesy never officially ran for the DG position.)

The club celebrated their 50th Anniversary in 1982 with a celebration at the Officers Club at APG. President Charles “Rigor” Mortus welcomed guests. Menu was prime rib, baked potato, green beans almandine, and cake. Entertainment was provided by the “The Paradise Islanders” and dancing music was provided by “The Top Hats.” Lion Jack Bender was Chairman of the Golden Anniversary Planning Committee.

In the mid 1980’s, the club bought and equipped a used trailer to provide a mobile site for vision, hearing, and blood pressure screening. The trailer was also used to keep members warm during cold nights of Christmas tree sales.

The 1980’s also brought diversity to the Aberdeen Lions membership. In the middle of the decade, the first minority member was inducted into the club. At the end of the 80’s decade, the first woman was inducted into the club.

The club’s membership expanded in the 1990’s, partially due to more minorities and women joining the club. Membership reached over 100 members. The club began to experience more married couples in the club, which often brought a family atmosphere to club service projects.

In 1994, Lionism spread to the younger generation as the Aberdeen Leo Club was chartered at Aberdeen High School. The high school service club know as TOTS (Time Out to Serve) had gone out of existence the previous year, and there was a perceived need for such an organization. The Leo Club was chartered on April 12th at the Colonel’s Choice Restaurant with 27 members. Nathan Stewart served as the Charter President. Over the years, there have been several joint projects between the Aberdeen Lions Club and the Leo Club. We are proud of the many service projects sponsored by the Leo Club, such as Community Holiday Dinner, Project Toy, and Relay for Life.

Around 1990, the Aberdeen Lions Club undertook to form an organization that would provide Maryland Sales Tax and Federal Income Tax relief from certain charitable events undertaken by the Aberdeen Lions Club. It took 8 years of meticulous work but the Aberdeen Lions Charities

was officially approved by the IRS for tax exempted status and subsequently sanctioned by Lions International by 1998. Currently, the primary focus of ALCI is to provide scholarships to local students.

Over the years, fundraisers included pit beef sales at New Car Dealer Shows, a community calendar, basket bingos and car washes, which substituted for handing out candy (and requesting donations) for Candy Day. The club currently sponsors Pancake and Spaghetti Suppers, Christmas Trees sales, and Fruit and Nut sales. In addition, the club collects aluminum cans which are recycled for profit.

The Club's service activities have been numerous over the years. Club members have built outdoor classrooms, painted rooms inside the Aberdeen Senior Center, painted storm drains in the city, sponsored local sports teams and youth activities, and supported the City's successful bid to be named one of the USA's Ten "All America Cities". Proceeds from the Pancake and Spaghetti Suppers benefit the High School and Middle School respectively. The Aberdeen Lions also annually give scholarships to graduating seniors from Aberdeen High School and Harford Technical High School. The club continues to provide eye exams, eyeglasses and hearing aids to the needy citizens of Aberdeen.

Perhaps one of the biggest projects that the Aberdeen Lions undertook in the 1990's was the building the Habitat for Humanity house. Applying for and receiving a grant from Lions International and contributing additional monies from the club's account, Lions partnered with Habitat for Humanity to build a house on Moyer Ave in Aberdeen. A huge but very successful project!

At the close of the 20th century, the Aberdeen Lions had its first District Governor of District 22-A, Lion Rowe Haywood, who was also the first African and Native American District Governor of the District. Two years later a second Aberdeen Lion, Lion Ed Mello, became District Governor and two more years after that a third Aberdeen Lion, Lion Tom Baine, became District Governor. In July 2009, Aberdeen Lion Senora Haywood became the first woman District Governor in District 22A. Currently, Aberdeen Lion Skip Hoffman is slated to become District Governor for the Lion year 2012-2013. Not bad for a club that went the first 67 years without any District Governor.

In nearly eight decades of existence, the Aberdeen Lions Club has continued to meet the changing needs of our community and the world. Through the efforts of all the past and present Aberdeen Lions, we honor and preserve for posterity the dreams and aspirations of Melvin Jones, the founder of Lions Club, and those first 23 Aberdeen Lions who pinned the badge of Lionism on their jackets and proudly proclaimed, "It's great to be a Lion."