

A GENERAL HISTORY OF THE FOUNTAIN CITY TOASTMASTERS CLUB #1266

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The Early Years

Impetus for the Fountain City Toastmasters Club came from John McLaughlin, who circulated literature throughout TVA in Knoxville. Those interested met at the Whittle Springs Hotel on November 14, 1952 for a demonstration program conducted by the Knoxville Toastmasters Club. The hotel was probably chosen because several interested TVA employees lived there. After a repeat performance the next week, the club began to arrange and conduct its own programs, still on an organizational basis.

The club was chartered on April 17, 1953 with 24 members. Mark Underwood of the Knoxville Club presented the charter and installed John McLaughlin as the first president before a large gathering of members, their wives, and visitors from the Knoxville Toastmasters and Toastmistress clubs. The club continued to meet at the Whittle Springs Hotel on Friday nights, with the meetings starting at 6:30 PM. The fixed price for dinner was \$0.50, with \$1.25 on ladies night because the hotel had to use two waiters instead of one. The club's weekly newsletter was named "The Fountainhead," and the first use of this designation was in September 1953. Shortly after the club was started, member Wylie Bowmaster built the lectern and "stop light" still in use.

Following the closing of the Hotel in the spring of 1954, the club on April 30 moved its meeting place to Brown's Cafeteria on Gay Street in downtown Knoxville. In November the club meeting nights were moved to Thursdays to suit the convenience of a majority of the members. Later the meeting time was changed to 6:50 PM, which continued as long as the meetings included dinner. On January 13, 1955 the club moved to the Broadway Cafeteria, 2519 Broadway. By February 1955 the club had a full complement of 30 members. On its third anniversary in 1956 the club counted within its membership seven of the original 24 members.

Fountain City and the new District 63

Fountain City was actively involved in planning the District 43 Annual Conference held at the Farragut Hotel on May 10, 1958, the first district conference held in Knoxville. At that time Wylie Bowmaster, Governor of Area 7, was elected Lt. Governor of the district.

The club played a major role in the formation and early administration of newly created District 63. The new district consisted of all of Tennessee east of Kentucky Lake, resulting from dividing then District 43 into two parts. It included 19 clubs and was divided into five official areas. On February 7, 1959 eight members attended the district organization conference in Nashville – Wylie Bowmaster, first District Governor; Bob Buehler, first District Secretary; Burt Hart, Bruce Evans, Bevan Brown, Dave McLean, Marvin Shadel and Bob Henderson. Fourteen club members were in attendance at the first district spring conference in Chattanooga on May 16, 1959.

Fountain City was instrumental in the organization of several other clubs. On September 15, 1959 the club sponsored an organizational meeting for the West Knoxville Club in the Blount Professional Building Cafeteria. It continued to assist the new club until it was chartered.

By May 1960 the club had grown to 37 members. It continued to provide leadership to the district. From July 1960 to June 1961 Bob Buehler served as Administrative Lt. Governor. In January 1961 the club left the Broadway Cafeteria, after meeting there for six years, because the restaurant was changing to a drive-in. It started meeting in Weaver's Cafeteria on Magnolia in Burlington.

A November 1961 program listed 40 members. By the fall of 1962 the club had again changed its meeting place, this time to Wright's Cafeteria in the Broadway Shopping Center. The May 2, 1963 bulletin listed the club's next meeting place as the Trailways Cafeteria. Membership was 37.

In May 1964 Charles Skelton was elected District Lt. Governor East at the Nashville conference. Claude Haws was elected District Treasurer at the 1964 fall conference in Knoxville. He later served as Lt. Governor East in 1966-67 and was elected District Governor for 1968-69.

In January 1965 the club moved its meetings to Bishop's Cafeteria, 2500 N. Central. Membership had shrunk to 26. At the district spring conference in 1965, Lynn Robbins won the serious speech contest and competed in the regional contest. *The Fountainhead* was selected as the best club bulletin in the district. In the 1968-69 term the bulletin was again judged best in the district. Ralph Walton was elected District Secretary for the 1968-69 term and was reelected for 1969-70. Jim Wright, still active in the club, joined on March 14, 1968 and delivered his "Icebreaker" speech on April 4. Jean-Pierre Granju, also still active, joined in March 1970.

In January 1969 the club moved its meeting location to Williamson's Cafeteria. By mid-March it had again moved, this time to the S&W Cafeteria 516 S. Gay Street. It continued to meet on Thursdays, keeping its starting time at 6:50 PM. As the club entered the 1970's it had 22 members. At the 1970 fall conference in Oak Ridge it was recognized as the most outstanding club in District 63.

At the 1971 spring conference, club member Jerry Chapman was elected Lt. Governor East. Again *The Fountainhead* was selected as the best bulletin in the district. At the fall conference, Dewey Easton won the humorous speech contest. At the 1974 spring conference, Al Walls was elected Lt. Governor, Administration.

A New Direction

During its February 20, 1975 meeting the club debated the topic: "Fountain City Toastmasters Should Admit Women." A subsequent motion to allow women to become members failed to achieve the 2/3 majority. In mid-1975 the club had 28 male members. At the 1976 spring conference the club bulletin was again selected as the best in the district.

Starting with the August 11, 1977 meeting the location was moved down the street to the Andrew Johnson Hotel Cafeteria, ending over eight years of meeting at the S&W, which was gradually closing its business. At the end of 1977 the club had 25 members.

Sam Croft became editor of "The Volunteer Blazon," the official publication of District 63 Toastmasters, starting with the 1978-79 period. During early 1979, he and Jim Wright conducted the first of several Youth Leadership Programs over the next few years for the Boy Scouts to assist them in earning the Communications and Public Speaking Merit Badges. Sam later rose in the district hierarchy to Administrative Lt. Governor and likely would have been elected District Governor if he had sought that office.

By 1979 membership had increased to 32. Al Walls became a Distinguished Toastmaster, the first in the club, although decade-earlier District Governor Claude Haws may hold that distinction. Around this time the club was unceremoniously kicked out of its meeting location in the Andrew Johnson Hotel. Arriving for a regular meeting the members were told that the cafeteria had been closed. Those in attendance stood on the street outside for a long time talking and pondering their future. Shortly thereafter, the club resumed its meetings in the basement of the First Tennessee Bank in the Cumberland Plaza Shopping Center. Around the 1982-83 period, Russ Perkins won the District Speech Evaluation Contest during the conference in Nashville.

By May 1984 the membership had dropped to 17 but included its first female member, Attorney Helen C. Trout. Jim Wright became a Distinguished Toastmaster. The bank changed ownership and no longer allowed groups to use their facilities, so by the spring of 1984 the club had moved to the Expo

Inn, built during the 1982 Worlds Fair. The Inn also changed ownership and by mid-1985 the members met for a time in the Medical Arts Building on Main Street. This was one of the low periods of the club and morale was way down. Many members wondered if it would survive.

Biweekly Meetings and an Anniversary

Early in 1985 the club voted to go biweekly, with meetings on the 1st and 3rd Thursdays of each month. This schedule seemed to meet the needs of the membership and has continued from that time. At the end of that year the members loudly and proudly proclaimed to all that they were returning to the “Promised Land,” having secured a room in Dolph’s Restaurant in the Clinton Plaza Shopping Center. This was a return to Fountain City after a three-decade hiatus.

The first meeting was in January 1986. It also returned to being a dinner club for the first time since leaving the Andrew Johnson. It seems the club was able to put a “curse” on the use of meeting facilities. Dolph’s became Smokes Pit Barbecue in January 1987 and Finnelly’s Restaurant by March. By the end of 1987 the private room enjoyed at Finnelly’s was no longer available and the club met briefly at the Central Baptist Church of Bearden.

The following year was a turbulent one. Determined to return to Fountain City, the club likely met in every restaurant on upper Broadway that had a private meeting room – some weren’t so private – including Edwards Seafood, Red Lobster, the Branded Steer, Quincy’s and Arthur’s. By the end of 1988 the club again met at the Central Baptist Church of Bearden. Membership had dropped to 13, the lowest point ever.

In the fall of 1988 the club celebrated its 35th Anniversary, in part as a morale booster, and to get in touch with its heritage. Club rosters dating back to its inception were combed and names checked against telephone listings. Letters were sent to more than 100 former members identified as still living in the Knoxville area. Ten former members attended this special meeting including two charter members, Wylie Bowmaster and Bob Buehler. The meeting was held at Arthur’s Restaurant, which caught the member’s attention as a possible permanent meeting place. The club met there for almost two years, from January 1989 to November 1990.

Get All Fired Up! — And Move

Ken Cory became President in January 1989 and set the theme for the year as “Get All Fired Up!” Club membership grew to 20 by August. In April of that year County Executive Dwight Kessel was the featured guest at our 36th Anniversary. In July 1989 Fountain City hosted two special visitors; Past International President Ted Wood and his wife, and the next week Region VIII International Speech Contest winner Al Dunkelman for a final practice before heading to the International Conference in Palm Desert, California.

But by the same time the next year membership had dropped back to 15. Arthur’s became increasingly dissatisfied with meal attendance, resulting in the loss of the club’s private meeting room on several occasions without prior notice. Finally, the members gathered up their possessions and continued their odyssey. On November 1, 1990 the club began meeting at the Holiday Inn Northwest at Merchants Drive at Central Avenue Pike. Ralph Bradley helped set up a Speechcraft in the fall of 1990 at Philips Consumer Electronics and the club benefited from several new members from Philips. Philips engineer Teri Troemel led a modernization crusade that eventually convinced the membership to abandon the old trophies – which were starting to show considerable wear.

The years at the Holiday Inn on Central marked one of the longest stable periods in the club’s history. After a few years in the somewhat small Bluegrass Room it was “moved up” to the Board Room adjacent to the Lobby. In 1992 Steve Allen also became a Distinguished Toastmaster. In the

early 90's Toastmasters International raised the basic dues, and the club raised its dues accordingly to \$28, which also included increased mailing costs for the bulletin.

On April 17, 1993 the club celebrated its 40th Anniversary at the Holiday Inn in a special meeting with 57 members, spouses, Toastmaster dignitaries (including seven past district governors), Congressman John Duncan (who presented a flag that had flown over the Capitol), and other guests. Special awards were presented to Charter Members Wylie Bowmaster and Bob Buehler, in attendance with their wives.

Through the continuing years at the Holiday Inn the meal changed from a buffet, to a served plate, to a menu choice of burgers and fries, and back to a buffet again. The name eventually changed to Days Inn. By 1996 the motel threatened to charge a room fee so the odyssey began anew. Members crossed over the interstate and met for six meetings at Big O's Family Restaurant behind McDonald's. But on November 7, 1996, with a bit of déjà vu, arriving members were greeted with a 'closed' sign. The club returned to the Days Inn for the rest of 1997, but by then the former Big O's had become the Mandarin House. The membership said its final goodbyes to the northeast corner of I-75 and Merchant's Drive and began a two-year period of meetings with a Chinese buffet.

During 1998 and 1999 the club hosted several area and division events, including the April 19, 1999 International Speech and Tall Tales contest which packed nearly 60 people into its small meeting room and equally small one next door. This may still stand as the record for "Toastmaster density" at a single event. Nearing the end of the century, modern lifestyles had finally caught up with Fountain City. Few people were willing to join a club that required a meal fee of nearly \$10 per meeting. Keith Curtis suggested we move to a room at his church, Wallace Memorial Baptist, and Sandi Shulte joined us as club specialist with a mission to bring us back to full strength.

At Home in the 21st Century

On February 3, 2000, the club moved into a large room at Wallace Memorial and immediately began to grow. Sandi Shulte coordinated a Speechcraft that spring and by the next year Fountain City membership increased again to over 20, and Sandi became a Distinguished Toastmaster. Keith Curtis, who had guided the club for decades to new locations, finally saw it safe and secure in his own church, and in December 2001 he asked to become inactive.

By the end of the 2001-02 club year the club had achieved President's Distinguished Status and had 21 members. Area and division events were regularly hosted at Wallace, and not forgetting its roots, several "Fifth Thursday" meetings were held at selected area restaurants. In the summer of 2002 yet another Speechcraft was conducted and the club gained several new members.

On April 17, 2003 Fountain City celebrated its 50th Anniversary in style at The Foundry on the former World's Fair site. 59 members and guests were present including Congressman John Duncan, who presented another flag to 50th Anniversary president Gerri Bradley. Also attending were Vice-Mayor Jack Sharp and County Commissioner Mary Lou Horner, and both presented proclamations commemorating the club's 50th. Featured speaker was member Bill Korona who again delivered the speech that a few months earlier had won the District 63 Humorous Speech Contest.

Through the following years club members continued to take leading roles in division and district contests, training, and public relations events. Both Jean-Pierre Granju and Robert Pelton were featured speakers at the Speechmasters Advanced Toastmasters Club, and in April 2007 Steve Allen was honored as District 63 Toastmaster of the Year. The club moved smoothly into the modern age with *The Fountainhead* bulletins emailed before each meeting, and with an internet presence through the club website, through Facebook, and with many members connected through LinkedIn.

On April 17, 2008 Fountain City celebrated its 55th Anniversary at Wallace Memorial with a large attendance of current and former members, their families, and guests. The membership was near 20 with about a 50-50 mix of “seasoned members” and fresh and eager young Toastmasters.

A New Brand and Continued Success

As Toastmasters International rebranded itself in 2011, Fountain City members continued to serve the East Tennessee area by hosting several of District 63’s semiannual “TLI” officer training seminars. Ray Weeden and Joe Rookard served as coaches for other clubs, and Stephanie Massey helped form a new club at the local Whirlpool office. In 2012 the club achieved the organization’s highest rating, President’s Distinguished. Karen Sprinkle developed and continues to maintain the Division B website, and in 2013 Karen became a Distinguished Toastmaster. And on April 18, 2013, still in our home at Wallace Memorial, Fountain City celebrated its 60th Anniversary.

Over these past sixty years hundreds of individuals have benefited from being members of the Fountain City Toastmasters Club. We continue to attract and enlist new Toastmasters, to enjoy the participation and leadership of many interesting and lively individuals, and to maintain our high reputation.

Fountain City has had a long and rich history, contributing much to its members and to others, particularly beyond the club. It is a story of many locations, names, and accomplishments. While much of our past story remains untold, members feel that, even at 60, the stories of our future accomplishments will continue to make significant additions to this narrative. This is Fountain City Toastmasters – the oldest continuous club in District 63.

[Compiled from various accounts, including histories prepared in 1960 and 1993, 55 years of club bulletins, including the donated records of Wylie Bowmaster and others, and shared personal experiences]

jmw and sca, April 2013