

Natalie Jostenski

Oral History

2011

“I was born in Bayonne, NJ in 1921, and that makes me 91 years old. I graduated from a nursing school, and married a military man in 1941. We would have been married 67 years now. The war was going on, and I traveled with him (even though I wasn't supposed to). He was a pilot and spent twenty years in the air force. We traveled by car or truck, and everything that we owned fit into the vehicle. He was stationed at Amsted [Scott] Air Force Base [IL]. Whenever he was sent away, I would go home and stay with my family.”

“He was a comptroller, and had an offer to come back as a civilian because he was very good at book keeping. He had his Masters [degree]. So we moved to Harrisburg. We liked the country, and it was very convenient because our family in NJ was only a few miles away, and we didn't want to live in the New York metropolitan area. He retired here in Harrisburg. My neighbor invited me to join [the Civic Club] and I've stayed a member for the last 43 years. She [the neighbor] was the President back then. I was just really excited to be a member.”

Are your sponsors still living?

“No, no there aren't too many of us...let me go down the line here... [She says matter-of-factly and with a slight tone of humor as she picks up the book. She just looked at the book and back up to me, and reiterated] No, not too many...”

What type of volunteer activities did you and your family do?

“I was on the Board of the Colonial Park Country Club, Women's End Club. I was their Board President. I also worked at the library and was on the Friends Library Board. I volunteered at the Harrisburg Hospital for years. I am also a member of a local military wives club, and a major one down in DC. So there are a lot of clubs that I have been involved with.”

What were you passionate about that made you stay with the Civic Club for all these years?

“I enjoyed the comradery. The women were tremendous. You just couldn't find a nicer group of women. They were all interested in the club, and we did everything for the club and for the city. [Back] when we joined, the club met every Monday, and we had four different groups (like departments) within the club. Each group had it's own set of officers: President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer. Each group reported

at the general meeting, or on their designated Monday. We also had an annual meeting, and did volunteer work, and we were very big on our bridge clubs. We would have dinners in the evenings with the men. It was just a wonderful social group of women.”

“The Civic Club started as a ‘civic’ club. They were the ones who put the garbage cans on the streets...everything was for the city. That is how it started.”

What leadership roles did you hold over the years?

“I have been on the Board and off the Board so many times! [Laughs]”

What did the Civic Club do back then that continues today?

“The donation, the money that they give to community organizations, such as the fire department. That is the main, if not the only thing that remains the same. When I was there, I was able to get the club to donate to the families of men who had passed away in the line of duty. We would donate fifty dollar Giant gift certificates at Christmas time.”

What changes have you seen in the Civic Club over the years?

“They [past members] were hard working women and they knew how to keep an interest. I joined when Mrs. William Bridge was President. She was a native here, and there were a number of women who followed who were retired teachers or just knowledgeable women. They did a great job. Everyone was proud to be [a part of] the Civic Club. You had to be sponsored by three women. You didn’t get into the club by just saying, ‘I want to be a member, and here are my dues’. It was an honorable thing to be a member back then.”

“I think that [newer members] hated me because I kept saying, ‘I remember when...’ and I would talk about how [before] we would never come to a meeting unless we were fully dressed: hat, gloves, it was like going to church. You made an effort to look nice. A friend of mine (who is a member now) used to sit across the street (across from the YMCA), and she would see us leaving [the club], and she would say, ‘Oh don’t they all look nice!...It must be wonderful to be [a member] with all of these women who care, and they all look so nice!’. Now she is a member, and says, ‘Things have changed. You don’t see hats, and you don’t see gloves.’ It’s been quite a while. Now they wear casual clothes –slacks.”

Is it because the Civic Club is not as prominent as it once was that the members no longer dress for it?

“Well, the prominent women are still working. Now when they come (they still look very nice but) the elegance with the hat and gloves, and your nice pocket book, dress, stockings and heels [is gone]. It was getting ‘ready for the club’, is what it [once] was.”

“[Now] they just don’t have the volunteerism. Back when I joined, women didn’t work, they stayed at home. The club was an outlet for them. Now the majority work, and they don’t have time for this. That is mainly what I see. I know that my daughter-in-laws work, and I couldn’t get them to join the Civic Club. They don’t have the time – like you.”

I would love to join the Civic Club. I am involved with Manners Matter, and I wrote the script and performed last Thanksgiving.

“Oh I took my granddaughter to the first one [Manners Matter] and she is twenty-one, and getting married next month. So it has been a few years.”

How many children do you have?

“I have two sons. Both are married. I have three grandchildren, and I am a great-grandma a couple of times.”

Did you ever personally host an event for your friends or family at the Civic Club?

“Yes, I hosted a bridge party there. Couples used to have bridge and a dinner at night. The rule was that if you were invited to [a given number] of bridge parties, then you had to reciprocate. So you would have a lunch and bridge... They discontinued that within the last three or four years.”

Tell me a great story about the club.

“One of the nice things that we did was with Rhea Reese, her husband was with Reese’s Chocolate in Hershey. She was such a volunteer; she did all kinds of things. She was a member, and she was just full of great fundraising ideas. She started the selling of daffodils for hospitals and cancer centers and what not. She would have little [events] in Hershey. She had a farm, and in the summer we would all go out there and we swam and ate, and the women were just such good friends. Good friends to each other. It was really just wonderful. We had a dinner...oh what did they name it?...I would have to think...but we all had to dress up and serve the food. At that time [‘Williamsburg dinners’] were popular, and Rhea had attended one, and thought that it was pretty good. So she got us all on a committee and each member had to make a dish. The lady next door and I had to make a blintz – a sweet, thin pancake like a crepe, and we filled it with cherries. She and I made about 100 of them. We really sold out. It was a full house. It was great! We all looked like we were from the colonial

days, and we served [colonial food]. We all brought our husbands and we had so much fun eating and laughing. That is what really stays in my mind...how much we used to enjoy each other.”

Are the friendships that you have made here some of the best you have had?

“Yes.” [As of late, Natalie’s friends have been passing away with great frequency.]

What is the most remarkable club event that you can remember?

“I think [that was] when we had the 75th anniversary. They really went out of their way with decorations and cleaning up the club. It was beautiful with all of the flowers. The club was founded in 1889, so that was in 1964. That makes the club 122 years old. That wasn’t too long ago. We sent out invitations to people who worked for the city and county, but the President sent out the invitations, so I don’t remember who was invited. I just took the reservations, so I got to see all of the names of the people who were coming. We had tea, and invited everyone to tour the club. We were selling commemorative plates, note cards, and stationary at the time; little things as tokens and mementos. I think that was one of the nicest things that we had at the club.”

How do you think that the Civic Club fits into Harrisburg today?

“Well [now] you say ‘Civic Club’ and people don’t know where it is. You have an event, and people come to the gate and say, ‘I have passed this thing and I always wondered what it was. It’s great that we can go and see [the building]. It’s beautiful, we just didn’t know what it was.’ It’s Historical, but even with the sign out front there, it still isn’t a known building like the Art Association or the hospitals. You know where all of those things are, and it’s the only house on the [east shore] river, but people don’t know that.”

Are there any plans to remodel the building?

“It’s listed as a Historical building, so we can’t change anything. We can keep it repaired (which we do), but it is constantly falling apart.”

Are there other events, not related to Civic Club hosted there?

“[There are] weddings. Karen, the caterer is in charge of booking and planning those events. That’s what keeps us going-the things that she brings in, weddings, bar mitzvahs, and whatever anybody wants to hold there. Some people love it. The gardens and location are pretty. Our biggest problem is parking. Back in the day the mayor would place bags over the [parking] meters, and we [were given] cards to place on our

dashboards so that they could tell that we were privileged to use those meters without being charged. We had blocks -from State St. all the way up. They did that so that we had parking. [Now] because [riverfront park] is right next to us, they only give us twelve parking spots right on that side. We are restricted to having those spaces only on Mondays. What can you hold [with that]? We don't have anyone bagging anything for us anymore. So there are [multiple] reasons why the club is not having as much interest as it used to."

About how many members do you have right now?

"Oh, not too many. About one hundred and something I think. At its peak the book used to be this thick [she gestures with her fingers to show about one and one half inches thick]. Now the book is [she shows the yellow membership book that is roughly one half inch thick], you see? A lot of [the book] is not even printed [with] members [she says as she flips through the pages of bylaws and various other information for the club members]."

Do you think that you will stay a member of the Civic Club?

"Oh yeah, well I'm in the category where I paid a sum of money and I am forever a member. Rhea Reese started that. She died of Alzheimer's. Isn't it a shame that all of these intelligent people come down with that? She was quite a gal."

What do you see for the future of the Civic Club?

"The women are working very hard, and I wish them well because I have been a member for so long. But they need to get more young people to get involved to bring new ideas and stir up enthusiasm to come and do things for the club. I was the only (well up until this year - for four years) older member on the Board. The rest were all younger, so it's their job now."

"[I hope] that they continue, and that the mayor [Reid] takes an interest in this building and in the city. We were begging him to [help with the parking] and that never developed. He just never cared. They never helped us to keep the building. It was the women who have been doing it all these years. Years ago they used to send out two policemen to help us cross the street. Now they don't get any attention at all. I think that the city should be proud of the building, but they are not."

How do you think that the club could showcase the building in order to get more media and more revenue?

"I think that [the club] is doing that now by getting other organizations to use the building and to get involved."

“The club also holds seminars, like the Senior Crime Prevention seminar, and I am going to that.”

“I think that [these actions] are opening the eyes of the public to let them know that the building is here (you can use it) and it is sending the message that they can join us.”

- Original interview edited by Taavi Lehtimäki 2013