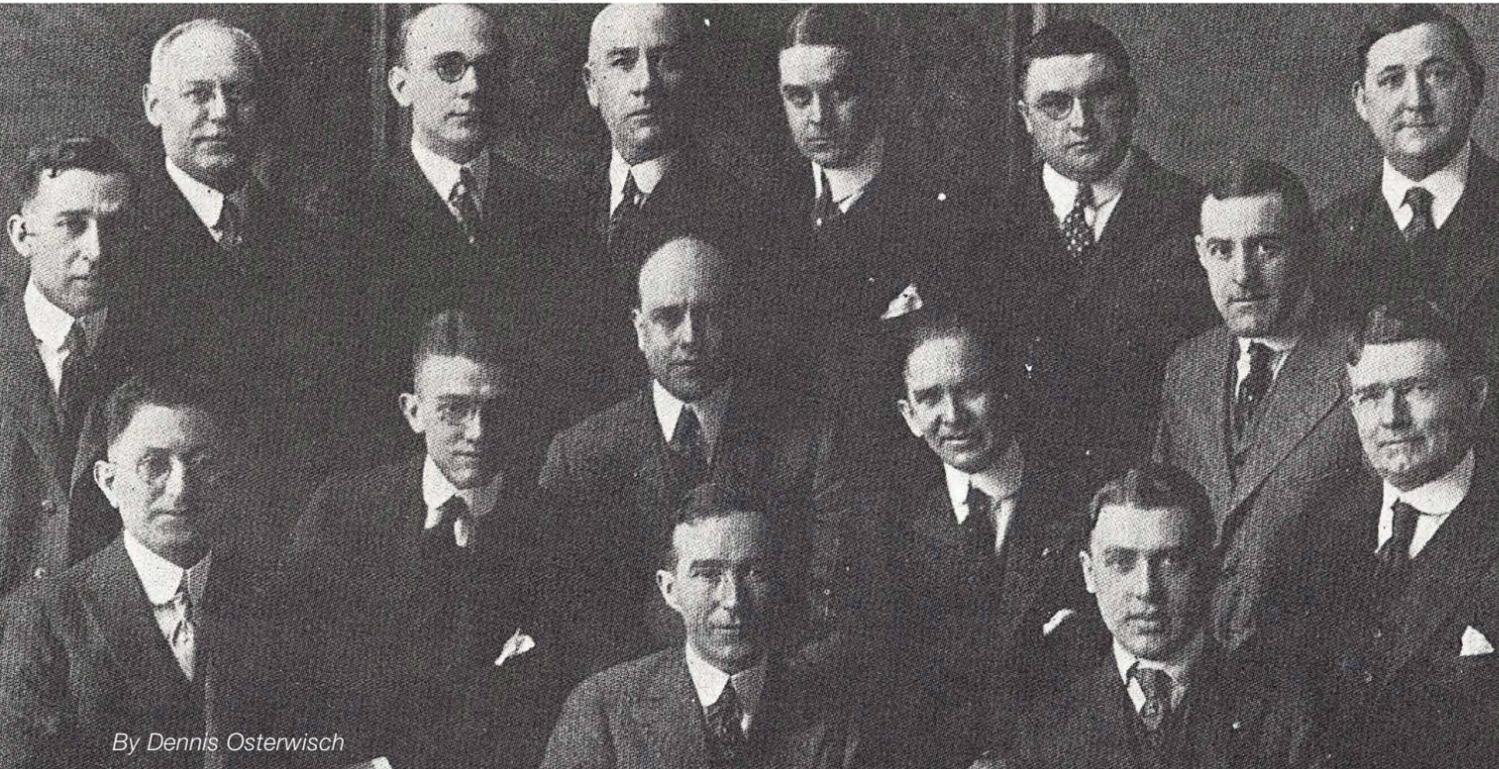


100 YEARS AGO: THE SEEDS

OF OPTIMISM ARE PLANTED



By Dennis Osterwisch

[The 15 Original Members of the Optimist Club of Indianapolis: 1916.]

While Optimist International looks forward to celebrating its 100th anniversary in just four more years, the seeds that would become our organization were planted several years earlier. Early historical records indicate there were diverse community organizations calling themselves Optimist Clubs in the United States and Canada even before 1900. One was in California. Its Members were young men of the Methodist Episcopal church who selected "Optimist Club" to identify their group-within-a-group.

One of the earliest and apparently most successful among those isolated Optimist Clubs was organized in Cincinnati in 1895 as the Queen City Optimists Club. Its Members included men who figured prominently in the civic life of that city before the turn of the century.

On November 11, 1905, the 129 Members of the Optimists Club of Chicago held their first annual banquet. Little is known about that group other than it consisted of men both affluent and capable of enjoying the good things of life for theirs was a lavish banquet even by today's standards. Their six course feast featured "Roast Filet of Beef Aux Champignons."

They also must have had an admirable capacity for oratory, too, for the program lists no less than 14 speakers. And that does not include the campaign remarks of six men who had announced themselves as "candidates for the directorate."

If this long ago Chicago group celebrated its second annual banquet the following year, the event is lost in history.

In 1911, a group of five young businessmen in Buffalo, New York, organized what they called the Optimist Club of Buffalo.

The Club's historian reported in 1915 that the Club "has become strong because it is modern. The day of cooperation is at hand and an organization founded on principles of mutual benefit and cooperation is following the lines of true efficiency. Today, the mother organization in Buffalo has two offspring, one in Rochester and one in Syracuse. To become a national organization is merely to go on as we are in these three cities, as our momentum is not to be denied."

Those three Clubs believed that it was most difficult for them to operate independently. Soon after building the Rochester Club they incorporated as The Optimist Clubs of New York State. This was the first attempt toward any unification of Optimist Clubs.

Meanwhile, in Indianapolis, Indiana, another group of businessmen sat down to a lunch at a local hotel for the purpose of giving birth to what they thought would be the first Optimist Club in the world. None of them had ever heard of the Optimist Clubs in New York or anywhere else. So far as they knew, this was entirely original with them. But it was through publicity given the efforts to get the Indianapolis organization off the ground that the Indiana group and the New York Clubs learned of each other's existence.

In April, 1916, the Optimist Club of Indianapolis came into being. It was planned as a dual movement: a local Club and a national governing body,

The American Optimists Clubs, with headquarters in Indianapolis.

Before the year was out at least a half dozen other Optimists Clubs (as they called themselves) across the U.S. came to the attention of the Indiana group. Clubs were reported in Washington, D.C.; St. Louis, Missouri; Louisville, Kentucky; Springfield, Illinois; Denver, Colorado; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Acceptance of the new service Clubs in those cities was so warm that within a year or two after their founding most of them consisted of between 100 and 200 Members.

In May of 1917, the first conference of the American Optimists Clubs was held at the "national headquarters" in Indianapolis. Although delegates to the conference came without authority to act on behalf of their Clubs, the sessions did generate a new feeling of unity within the group and the men returned home filled for the first time with an awareness of the potential within their grasp.

But time was against them. In that spring of 1917, the United States was preparing to enter World War I. The cost of living bounced upward 17%, rationing of sugar and other commodities was in effect. An influenza epidemic swept the nation killing tens of thousands.

Few were thinking optimistically that year and few were giving much serious thought to belonging to an Optimist Club. The financial obligations imposed upon the Clubs by the national organization and those required for professional organizers became more difficult for

the existing Clubs to meet.

Here and there were murmurings of discontent. There was talk in several of the largest Clubs of secession from the American Optimists Clubs and the creation of a national organization of their own. When the talk of secession reached a dangerous point, the Indianapolis Club took its first stand in the controversy. Invitations were sent to all Clubs, disgruntled and satisfied, to come to Indianapolis for a second "conference."

Eleven Clubs were represented at that meeting in March of 1919, where an attempt was made to reinvigorate the idea of a national organization that would satisfy all. The representatives first of all changed the name of their organization to International Optimist Club and incorporated under that name in the State of Indiana.

Next, a full complement of temporary officers and committees was selected and empowered to act until replaced by duly elected authorities.

Finally, and probably the most significant step, dates were set and a site named for the organization's first national convention. The seed of Optimist International was now in the ground and the first results would bear fruit on June 19 and 20, 1919, at the first convention in Louisville.

For more about the history of Optimist International read "Of Dreams & Deeds" available online at www.ofdreamsanddeeds.org.