

History of Sanger Rotary Club

Chartered June 16, 1953

1953. Sanger was a different place. The population was about 6,000; second largest town in Fresno County. There were seven fresh fruit packing houses along Academy Avenue. On L St. Downtown were a JC Penny, Federated, two drug stores, three groceries, two hardware stores, an electric appliance store, two furniture businesses, three auto dealerships, a bakery, post office, newspaper, some bars and restaurants, men's store, two or three women's shops, a children's clothing shop, two jewelry stores and an assortment of dentists, doctors, accountants, one bank, plus other retail outlets; and two movie theaters.

There was a very active Lions Club, Y's Men's Club, Kiwanis Club, various lodges, and the Sanger Women's Business and Professional Club as well as the Sanger Women's Club. Women didn't join the men's clubs and men didn't join the women's clubs. There was also a short-lived Exchange Club.

On to this scene, came Dinuba Rotarians intent on sponsoring a Rotary Club. Charles "Stubby" Mathis was Dinuba's president. Rotary was not as well-known nationally and internationally as it is now. Many had never heard of the organization. Most of the business and professional people, large farmers and packers already belonged to one of these other organizations.

My earliest remembrance was Dr. Fred Burg inviting me to lunch with a fledgling group of "possibles". Belonging to another service club eliminated a large number of potential good members. Although the standard minimum for a newly chartered Rotary Club was 25, we were allowed to begin with 21.

Our charter members were a disparate group. Fred Burg, family physician; Dave Camp, operator of a radio station in Centerville; Max Day, Day's Furniture; Dr. Walter Barnhart, veterinarian; Wes Craven, cattle rancher; Eldred Crutchfield,

Pacific Gas & Electric Co; Jim De Ciero, Prescott Lumber Manager; Dalton Dodson, Sanger Telephone Co; Walter Gilgert, Sanger Herald Editor; Harold Hickman, service station owner-operator; William "Bill" Jasper, cotton farmer; Robert Kanagawa, citrus farmer; Leonard 'Bud' Leach, Sanger Laundry and Dry Cleaning; William 'Bill' Pennington, Mid-Valley Fire District Chief; Lewis Segura, grocery store owner; Linn Moore, Moore's Radio & TV Repair; Duane Hickey, packing house manager at United Packing; Phil Marino, Manager Bayley Clothing Factory; Wayne Walker, pastor of Presbyterian Church; Ernie Anderson, sales manager at Eckle-Starnes Chevrolet; Steve Crawford, Grain Distributor and almond farmer.

Hickey moved to Dinuba at the end of July 1953, and dropped his membership. The first member to be taken into the Sanger Rotary following its chartering was Clark Grafft, Sanger High School teacher, September 18, 1953.

District 519 was huge, running from here to Santa Barbara. The District Governor in 1952-53 was Floyd Bohnett, mayor of Santa Barbara. Two years later, reorganization put Sanger in District 522 covering Stockton, Lodi, and Tracy, to the southern Fresno County boundary and from Castroville to King City on the Pacific Coast. A later reorganization now has us in District 5230.

Fred Burg was the first President with Max Day as Vice President. Lewis Segura was Secretary-Treasurer and Leonard 'Bud' Leach was Sergeant-at-Arms. Then, Jim De Ciero took over and handled sergeant-at-arms duties until his death. An early problem facing the club was increasing the membership. Despite the fact Sanger in those years was more agriculture related; we never had a lot of agri-business members; unlike Dinuba and Reedley which had four or five sub-divisions of grape, tree fruit and packing house people. In ten years, we still only had 26 members, including nine Charters with only one, Walter Gilgert, still a member in 2009. In 1965, there were 36 members; 1966 – 43; 1967 – 38; 1968 – 42; 1969 – 44, and in 1973 – 54.

In 1973, twenty years after chartering, three charter members were still on the rolls; Bob Kanagawa, Bill Pennington and Walter Gilgert. Charlie Wallin was president. Current members who were in the club in 1973 are Wallin, Paul

Cheney, Walter Gilgert, Bill Gong, Ron Sterling and Steve Padilla. In 1986 we had 49 members, 16 of whom still are on the rolls. Over the years, Sanger Rotary had hundreds of members, but a big turnover. Now we have members with 20 and 30 years behind them.

Once the Sanger Rotary Club became the dominant service club in Sanger, another problem arose. People were resigning from the Kiwanis and Lions Clubs and immediately joining Rotary. That created enough hard feelings that we adopted a non-written policy that a person had to be out of another service club for two to three months before their name could be submitted to Rotary.

Despite a rocky beginning, Rotary has outlasted the Lions, Exchange, Y's Men and one or two other quasi-service clubs. The Kiwanis Club is a shadow of what it once was.

Sanger Rotary Club needed to become well known in the area. The first activity that brought recognition was in 1954 when we packed the Washington Multipurpose room with a chicken dinner honoring Huntley Dayton, who was retiring from baseball coaching to become athletic director at Sanger High. He had been a coach there since 1926 coming from Parlier. Walter Gilgert wrote a "This is Your Life Huntley Dayton." Wes Craven narrated the program with twelve former athletes and coaches from all over California coming to the event and surprising Dayton.

The Club made a name for itself through sheer volume with little programs and a few big ones. We were a founding participant in Camp Royal. We gave an award to the best retailer and the safest driver of the month; sponsored a Four-Way Test essay at the high school with prizes; built the barbecue pit and drinking fountain at the east end of Lincoln Park; put up traffic signs and benches; and annually set up a crèche on the lawn of the Carnegie Library building at Seventh and O Streets until grinchers in the name of early political correctness put an end to that. Our little joke was every year, Rotary made a scene on the library lawn. With the Frank Livingston endowment, Rotary became a major player in high school graduate scholarships.

Rotary had a sandwich booth at the opening ceremonies at the Pine Flat Dam. What a disaster! We were told 5,000 would attend at the dam and I'll be damned if there were 400. We froze the sandwiches in veterinarian Barney Barnhart's freezer with a lot of other unnamed stuff and had sandwiches for Friday lunch for a month.

Rotarians participated in parades, International Day activities at the high school and dozens of other community events. They served on school boards and city councils.

Some membership trivia: two sets of brothers were members at the same time – Jim and Don Case, Roy and Jack Sanders. Brothers who were members but in different years: Rodger and Ron Sterling and Vernon and Bob Baird. Fathers and sons separately: Lonnie Case and sons Jim and Don; Harold Hickman and son Harley, Wayne Simpson and son Tom.

Now for the biggies: In the summer of 1958, in order to raise some money for the American Field Service foreign student exchange program, Walter Gilgert suggested a deep pit barbecue. That was not received with a great deal of enthusiasm by either the board or the club members. The goal was \$250, which with fines of 25 and 50 cents and a \$25 annual cap, was a lot of money. For his audacity to suggest something like that, after a great deal of jawing on both sides, Gilgert was made chairman. We charged \$2.50 a person and netted \$500. We made our own beans, cut up our own salad, and made our meat sauce for years. The Rotary Deep Pit Barbecue dominated the Sanger Grape Bowl Festival, drawing over 2,000 persons for years. Charlie Wallin remembers 2,700 his presidency year and Paul Cheney says 3,000 attended when he was president. We had aggressive marketing programs. Gilgert was vice-president that year and the custom of having the incoming president chair the BBQ was born.

The BBQ always made money and was held continuously with the exception of a couple years without the event and a couple years of grilled tri-tip. The event was held at the Wonder Valley Ranch for three or four years before moving it back to Sanger.

Sanger Rotary was a founding participant in 1958 with the Little League activities. The teams played all over town and games had to be over by dark as there were no lighted fields.

In 1966 members John Walker, Bruce Farmer, Olin Mosher and Phil Bertelsen presented the club with a plan to build a Little League baseball park for community use. The scope and expense were staggering for that time and discussions pro and con dragged on for months before a go-ahead plan was reached. The Rotary Field, now James De Ciero Rotary Field, was dedicated June 9, 1969. Lighting was dedicated on July 6, 1971. Jim Baun had been a part of this. After he became a Rotary member in 1970, Baun became a major factor in construction. Among others who carried through expansion and maintenance were Charlie Wallin, Stan Lovegren, Ron Sterling, Domingo Valdez, Bill Gong and Ken Sieve, who negotiated the concession stand contract with the City of Sanger. It would be safe to say that the entire membership of Sanger Rotary on any given year since 1966 has made the expanded complex a success.

In 1979, plans were being discussed with the City for the building of a permanent rest room facility at the field. In 2002, 23 years later, the facility was built.

Sanger had its first District Governor in 1974-1975, Robert Kanagawa. Mike Hannigan, 2002-2003, was the second District Governor from Sanger. The number of Paul Harris Fellows, the numerous District and International Awards are evidence of the ongoing vitality and accomplishments of the members. There have been hundreds of positive impacts on the community by Sanger Rotarians. Among later community events are the Senior Citizens Christmas lunch and the Jensen Avenue cleanup programs.

In 1994, Sanger Rotary sponsored a club in Parlier. The Parlier Rotary Club did not grow and gave up its charter in 1998. Sanger was chartered before Kingsburg and Reedley.

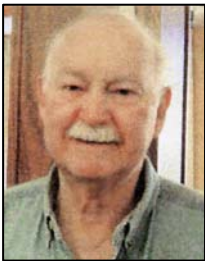
Sanger Rotary met at the Star Restaurant on L Street, operated by Barbara and Masami Arita. When they closed and retired we became gypsies meeting at the Dog House, Larry's (under two or three different names), Sanger Women's Club,

American Legion Hall, the Gourmet House, Eagles Hall and Sanger Community Center. In 1965 Irene Schleiser from Dinuba became the club's cook. The meals were wonderful and the attendance expanded along with members' waistlines. The first thought on Friday was not about the program but about what the menu would be. Served family style, the meals were famous enough to draw visiting Rotarians.

In 1991-92, the year of Gene Branch's presidency, women were finally admitted to Sanger Rotary Club membership. Our women members have been positive, influential leaders in the organization.

The outstanding success of the number of club Paul Harris Fellows and Benefactors is due to Joe Cole's dedicated efforts.

There are many, many other stories about Sanger Rotary, but this is supposed to be history, not current events. Many people, too numerous to mention, have been major factors in the excellence of the club and service to the community. The club has always had members who were willing and gracious enough to donate their time and talent to community and club services. Rotarians were in so many facets of the life in the Sanger area that almost everyone recognized "Rotary". That was accomplished by members being up front and the Sanger Rotary Club being recognized as the group who would and could do what was needed. And that level of accomplishment continues to this day.



*Written by Walter Gilgert and presented as a club program on October 30, 2009.
Program presented by Pete Wallace. Typing by Marjean Webster.*

*Walter Gilgert
Charter Member*