Meeting Notes – Feb. 14, 2023

The LaFayette Rotary Club met on Valentine's Day, Tuesday, February 14, for its weekly meeting.  We were honored to have two guest speakers this week, Dennis Pinkard who spoke to us about the Titanic, and Katie Whittelsey, executive director of the Community Foundation.

Dennis Pinkard is originally from LaFayette and is an Auburn graduate.  He was a member of the Naval ROTC during his time at Auburn.  He was commissioned on the day of his graduation and served 30 years in Surface Warfare.  He served two tours in Vietnam as a Navy Diver.  He retired from Navy civilian service in San Diego in 2007.  He then moved back to Auburn.  He spoke to us on the tragedy of the sinking of the Titanic.

The Titanic was a Royal Mail Ship (RMS), constructed as an elegant cruise ship.  At the time, it was the only way to get from Europe to America.  The ship was commissioned in September of 1911.  Although the shipping line did not declare the ship to be unsinkable, most considered it to be.  The RMS Titanic was equipped with 20 lifeboats, though it could have held 64.  The captain of the Titanic was Edward Smith, 62 years old.  He was about to retire when he was asked to captain one more voyage.  He had an excellent reputation as a ship's captain and the shipping line, White Star Line, wanted the best for this maiden voyage carrying many wealthy people, including the owner of White Star Line and the designer of RMS Titanic.

A man overboard drill was originally scheduled for the first day at sea but was cancelled by the captain for reasons unknown.  Lookouts were posted on the masts, but they had no binoculars.  The first of at least four ice warnings came in on the afternoon of the first full day at sea, April 12.  There were teletype operators on board, but they were not part of the ship's crew.  They were there for the convenience of the passengers, to send and receive messages for them.  It is not known how any of the ice warnings ever reached the captain.  It is felt that the first few may have, but probably not the last and most critical one.  It is believed that Captain Smith thought it best to try and speed through the iceberg.

On April 14 Captain Smith, who was also a pastor, preached a sermon eerily predictive of the events that were about to occur.  At 11:43 the last warning came in but was thought not have reached the captain.  The iceberg ripped holes in the side of the ship stretching for 200 feet.  The ship only stayed afloat for another 2 hours and 40 minutes.  Runners were sent to alert passengers, but because of the cold many of them did not want to leave their rooms.  The engineers stayed in their stations, trying to keep the ship afloat.  None of them survived.  Some passengers were evacuated in the lifeboats or were rescued from the sea.  Of the 2,208 on board, 705 survived.  The water temperature was 28 degrees.  A person could remain conscious for about 15 minutes under those conditions and would die within 40-45 minutes.  An SOS was sent to and received by a nearby ship, but they were unable to respond.  It would be several hours before the next nearest ship responded.  A total of 328 bodies were recovered, many of which were buried in Nova Scotia.  Survivors included 63% of the first-class passengers, 41% of second-class passengers, and 23% of third-class passengers. Of those surviving, 68% were women and 32% were men.  Ninety-seven (97) percent of first-class women, and three of their lapdogs, survived.

Katie Whittlesey is the executive director of the Community Foundation, based in Opelika.  Katie has an extensive background in entrepreneurship and non-profit organizations. The Community Foundation serves five counties: Lee, Russell, Macon, Tallapoosa and Chambers.  Its goal is to promote philanthropy by connecting people who care with causes that matter in order to serve the charitable needs of our community.  The foundation has a strong presence in Opelika and is wanting to extend its reach into Chambers County.

Katie challenged us to think about what we wanted to leave as our legacy.  The foundation provides a vehicle for giving to the causes that matter most to us.  There are 800 community foundations in the United States and 14 in Alabama.  Part of the responsibility of the foundation is to vet the organizations to which individuals want to donate.  Rotary members were sent a link to an upcoming session on Chambers County Grow Your Nonprofit, to be held February 28 from 8:30-12:30 at the Circle of Care in Valley.  This is being done in conjunction with Auburn University and the Cary Center.

Diane Sheriff