

Sunday, July 11, 2004

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From the Sunday, July 4, 2004 issue:

Service clubs find attendance declining

BY BETH FORTUNE
THE SEDALIA DEMOCRAT

While a Sedalia Masonic lodge has about 350 dues-paying members, the group can expect about 6 percent attendance at monthly meetings.

"You always try to get more attendance," said John McCormack, worshipful master of Sedalia Lodge 236. "If you're active and have something to offer," then people will be more active in the group.

However, many people who become Masons do not remain active in the Mason lodge; instead they join Shriners or York Rite, but still pay dues to Mason lodges, as required.

While club membership seems to have stayed steady in Sedalia during the past five years, participation may be waning. A look at some Sedalia clubs shows that their membership is fine, but turnout at meetings can be low.

That follows a national trend, outlined by researchers such as Harvard University political scientist Robert Putnam. His book, "Bowling Alone," details the decline of membership in clubs and participation in politics and other social groups.

The practice of paying dues to clubs but not attending meetings is typical, said Theda Skocpol, professor of government and sociology at Harvard University. "But it

WEATHER

Sunday, mostly sunny. Highs in the lower 90s. Southwest winds 10 to 15 mph. Sunday night, partly cloudy in the evening then becoming mostly clear. Lows in the lower 70s. Southwest winds around 10 mph.

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is harder for groups to hold meetings and get people to turn out" now, she said.

"People's schedules are a lot more complicated now," she said. Instead of giving their time, people give money to different clubs and causes, she said in a telephone interview.

But club meetings have advantages. People who don't socialize with their community may become separated or detached from it, leading to an "increasingly passive citizenry," that doesn't work to change local problems, said Ms. Skocpol.

Another Mason lodge in Sedalia, Granite Lodge 272, has 312 members, but between 12 to 15 -- 4 percent -- attend monthly meetings.

"The guys are not interested in freemasonry like they was years ago," said Kenneth "Joe" Wasson, worshipful master.

Lodge meetings once were social events, places to go for entertainment.

But, people now are more inclined to use television and computers to entertain them.

"We're a modern generation," Mr. Wasson said. "People don't have time to do stuff."

"It's always easier to say, 'Well, there's a good movie on, I'll just stay,' " he said. So why pay dues and not participate? "If I had that answer, I could probably be a millionaire," he said.

Mr. Wasson is also the president of the Sedalia Shrine Club, which has almost 300 members, but only sees about 40 people -- 13 percent -- at monthly dinner meetings.

It's not just Masons that see this phenomenon.

The Sedalia Lions club has about 45 members and about 25 -- 55 percent -- attend the weekly lunch meetings, said Bill Howard, immediate past president.

"In any given week, we're going to have some tied up

with other events, and demands on a person's time have grown to the point where people are getting protective of personal time," Mr. Howard said.

"The heart's in the right place, but the demands on time put a lot of constraints on us," he said. "If they're there, the spirit of Lionism is relatively easy to maintain."

The Lions club is a service group that supports research into eyesight and hearing problems, as well as Little League teams and other youth sports events.

Cathy Berlin, former president of the Sorosis club, said that the club tries to have about 200 members, about 40 to 45 go to the regular club meetings, twice a month in the spring and fall.

Sorosis is a women's club that provides scholarships and discussion on many different topics.

"Nowadays, a lot of young mothers have to work to make ends meet," or decide to stay at home with children, Ms. Berlin said.

One of the local Rotary clubs began in 2001 with 21 members and now has 25 members, said Michelle Calder-Drum, secretary/treasurer of the Rotary Club of Pettis County. About 75 percent of them come to meetings.

"We'd like to be about twice our size -- not too much bigger," she said. If the club grew too much, "you kind of feel like you're lost."

"A lot of it is just time constraints; everyone's too busy," she said. "Members believe in Rotary and believe in what it does, and "most of them do their darndest to get to Rotary every week."

Meetings provide friendships, a chance to network and planning fundraisers and events, Ms. Calder-Drum said. "That way we can decide where we're going and what we're doing," she said.

Don Brandes, president of the Sedalia Rotary club, said that it has about 110 members. Five years ago, the club had 123 members, but it lost several when the smaller club began.

"So essentially we've stayed the same," he said.

The club has about 70 to 75 percent of its membership attend weekly meetings, Mr. Brandes said. Since most of the members are in business, and meetings are at lunchtime, "we feel pretty good that we're keeping it (attendance) up."

"If they (people) want to be a positive force in the community, they should belong to a service club," said Ms. Calder-Drum. "We can get a lot more done as a group than as an individual."

The Elks Lodge 125 has 365 members now, and five years ago, probably had 330, said Virgil Kurtz, the exalted ruler.

About 20 people -- 5 percent -- show up regularly for meetings.

"That sounds like a low number, and it is," Mr. Kurtz said. Some members can't come to meetings because they're too old or because they have to care for children, he said. "They've all got a reason" for not coming.

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