

KOGA radio station meets Amherst

Written by Jes-C Brandt

Listeners to KOGA on Dec. 10 who tuned in during the middle of the program may have heard discussion of a “vibrant community,” complete with a paved go-cart track, lighted model airplane flying field, a golf course, grocery and hardware stores, tennis courts, a hotel, bank and full of people. Those listeners may also have been caught off guard when they heard the program was discussing Amherst.

KOGA Radio Station featured Amherst in their monthly Midwest Opinions My Town segment. Josh Mackey travels from town to town where the station is broadcast to explore the present and past of the listening area.

As per the request of a letter sent to the station by the Amherst Coffee Club, Mackey met with three Amherst natives to discuss life in Amherst and the changes they’ve seen throughout their lives.

Ken Oltjenbruns has lived in Amherst nearly his entire life, and is now the fourth generation to be farming his family farm.

He shared some information on how Amherst came to be in 1887. Oltjenbruns said it began as a railroad town, and its name comes from George Hastings. Hastings studied at Harvard and would have been familiar with Amherst and Holyoke, Mass. Furthermore, his daughter married Ted Holyoke, providing an additional connection to the name.

Oltjenbruns continued by sharing some information about Amherst itself. It is, he said, an unincorporated village, under the governance of Phillips County. He estimates the population to be around 50, and noted Amherst depends on the production of grain, corn and wheat.

Mackey questioned Oltjenbruns about life growing up on the farm. He shared that he attended school in Amherst through 8th grade, and graduated from Holyoke High School.

School was a big part of many lives in Amherst. It was a community center, where people gathered to watch basketball and plays. Oltjenbruns said it wasn’t unusual for the whole community to turn out for these events.

Also speaking on the importance of the schools was Mackey’s next guest, Neil Hassler. Born and raised in Amherst, Hassler recalls events at both the Lutheran and public schools. The church was a central part of the town and has always played a large role in the community.

Hassler noted students who wanted to play basketball attended the public school because it had a gym. He also shared that they would ride the train into Holyoke to play the Holyoke basketball team.

When it became easier to travel, he said, people went to Holyoke whenever possible. While there were dances, card parties and games to attend in Amherst, it was still exciting to travel to the “city.”

One big thing about Amherst that can’t go unnoticed are the elevators that tower high above the town. Hassler told Mackey about the days when they were being built. They went up section by section, spanning nearly 30 years. Hassler, as well as many others in Amherst, volunteered when they were constructed.

Amherst is the home to many veterans, said Hassler. One of those veterans was the final guest on the show, Elton Oltjenbruns. As the others, Oltjenbruns was born in Amherst and spent most of his life there. In fact, the only time he didn’t live there was while he was serving in World War II. He and his wife now live in Holyoke.

Oltjenbruns remembered several men at the Lutheran Church served in the war. “Everybody felt they had a duty,” he said.

Mackey and he discussed the difference in attitudes towards war now and then. He also

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commented on how much farming has changed in that time.

Oltjenbruns considers Amherst a great place to have raised his children, and feels that it has been good to him and his family.

Besides growing up in Amherst, the three have another similarity: a love for coffee. Where they all remember the school as the center of their lives before, the Grainland Co-op Station serves a similar role now that they meet there for coffee several times a week.

Fond memories of growing up in Amherst are shared, as well as an attachment to their town. After talking with these men, Mackey shares their appreciation for Amherst, and called it a great community.

“No matter what town you’re driving through, if you stop and you ask some people about it, you’re going to find some interesting things out about the town,” he said, and he certainly did.