

# TONGANOXIE COMMUNITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY 1st QUARTER NEWSLETTER, March, 2020

## TCHS IS CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTIFIED!

GEORGE COOPER CELEBRATES 100 GOOD YEARS



Man and woman harvesting rice in Okinawa. Pacific Ocean in background



The Tonganoxie Community Historical Society helped the Cooper family celebrate George's 100th birthday. It was a happy time for all involved. The Cooper family really came to have a good time. It was a good time. George wanted to talk to everyone and I believe he got to do that.

A little more than a year ago the Tonganoxie Historical Society interviewed George. His mind seemed to me to be in excellent condition. I sort of joke about it, because Kathy Stockman only asked him one question, and 2.5 hours later we finished the interview. George had instant recall of his entire life. At least that what I thought !!

George's life begins in the Philippines, but he has Peabody, Kansas connections. His father was from Peabody. His dad attended Kansas University and eventually graduated in 1907. Lots of Americans

were moving to the Philippines about that time—The Spanish/American War was somewhat responsible for this movement. George's father was a school teacher in the Philippines who married the 18 year old superintendent of a school in Manilla. George's father spoke 7 different languages.

George had a brother and sister who were born in the Philippines. George says he was born in the Philippines, but he was conceived in Kansas. In 1917 Georges's family moved from the Philippines to Peabody, Kansas to set up a small town newspaper. Two years later they moved back to the Philippines.

From his very early childhood, George was always interested in flying. Two things contributed to this interest. The first was his older brother took WW I flying magazines which George got to read. The second, his family must have lived very close to an airfield, because there were many airplanes that seemed to regularly fly over his home. Many of them flew so low that George could wave to the men in the plane. Some of the planes flew around 100 mph.

His sister came to the US and became a classical pianist. I believe at one time she played with the San Francisco Symphony. Her education was paid for by her parents, but George and his older brother knew that if they were going to get to college, the cost would be theirs.

To get to the U. S. and a college education, he signed on the Maersk shipping company out of Denmark. He made it to Tokyo, but the Japanese impounded the ship due to WWII. He then signed on with a Japanese ship and made it to Seattle on a Saturday with 50 cents in his pocket. He couldn't get his money from the bank until Monday. He lived for two days on 50 cents and slept in the train station.

He stayed with an uncle in Peabody for several days. A friend of his who lived in Michigan got him a job in Michigan working for a tool making company. In Michigan he met his future wife. While there he thought about joining The Eagle Squadron because he wanted to fly, and it appeared that the US would soon be at war. However, he soon learned of an aviation cadet program. He joined this program, took and passed some tests and eventually became a bomber pilot on a B-25.

**It is my intent to discuss some of what I think are the most significant situations that George accomplished while in the far east. There is not enough space or paper to cover all that George did while in the Army Air Force.**

After his group had picked up the new B-25's in South Carolina, his unit was to fly to a base just north of San Francisco where they were to have some larger fuel tanks placed so they could make the trip to Hawaii. Shortly after leaving South Carolina, near Savannah GA, a large storm front came through where he was flying. It was so rough that he turned around and flew back to the base in South Carolina. It was a good thing that he turned around because both new engines were without much oil. They would never have made it to California.

While his group was landing at Canton Island he damaged a wing slightly. He believed that his plane would fly, but the maintenance people would not approve take off until that wing was fixed.

In the area of New Caledonia the weather was extremely rough. A pilot friend of George was lost and never heard from. They believed he crashed into the ocean.

George was dancing with an Australian girl when she proclaimed that she was "Knocked up". George said he was shocked. After the dance was over, he discovered that the term, "Knocked up" was slang for being exhausted.

The required number of flights one had to make before you could be sent home has varied. Donna Wiley's brother needed 30 flights to be eligible to come home. He got 29 and his plane went down. In George's case one needed 50 flight before one come home. George had 55 flights before he came home. In 1943 he had his first three missions. They were considered bombing missions near Selamaua, but actually his group was dropping supplies to the Australians. All three flights were flown at the same height. The first two flight none of the plane had any hits, The first one the flak was low; the second the flak was high, but the third flight the Japanese now had the correct hight and many planes received some hits. George's plane came through all that, but one of the planes was hit very badly and was going down. George flew close enough to see that one of the men had his eye shot out. It was dangling down his cheek. The wounded airman got out of his seat and went



back to help another soldier. The other person on that same plane had his legs shot so badly that George believed he bled to death while in the water, after the plane crashed. Two men were killed and three made it to shore and were picked up.

The remaining fifty two military missions were all strafing missions. He liked these because it was impossible to have “dog fights” because these strafing missions were 50 to 100 feet off the ground. They were within pistol range from the ground. These raid worked something like this. The B-24 big bombers would come over the Japanese airfield, draw off the fighter planes, bomb the airport/airfield and shoot up the fighter planes. Georges group would fly in shortly after the B-24 and strafe the fields and complete the

destructions.

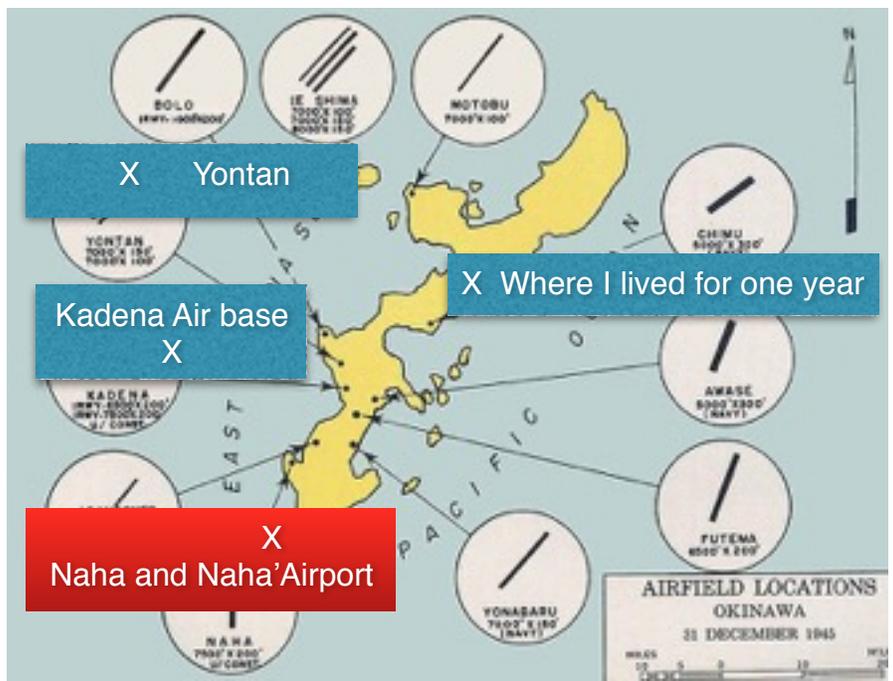
After 55 missions, George went home but he fully intended to be involved in more military action. He wanted to get back into his old unit, but his commander had other plans. It seems his old unit was now in the Philippines and George’s family had been interred in the Philippines. He wanted to help his family if he could. George had a total of 75 mission in his career.

However, this time he went back with a new airplane which was much easier to fly and had much more firepower. It was the A-26 with 8- 50 cal. machine guns in the nose; 3-50 cal. machine guns in each wing; with 6,000 lbs of bombs and 14 rockets.



The longest flight George had to fly was from Mindoro, Philippines to the Inland Sea of Japan. The Inland Sea of Japan was a well protected Naval base where many of the Japanese ships were kept. It was close to the SW tip of Japan. Places that one would recognize that are close to this place would be Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This trip was so long that George knew fuel may be a problem. George told his men that if fuel was a problem, they should go the the secondary target which was Takashima,

The distance was one issue, but the second issue was the weather. It was quite often foggy. On this trip fog was the problem. George attempted to make a run but failed to



hit the target. He then went to Takashima.

How long would the flight have been? Flying in a 4 engine piston driven plane from Kansas City to San Francisco would take about 5 hours with no stops. When you add the return trip plus the time to bomb the place you are probably in the air around 10 -12 hours.

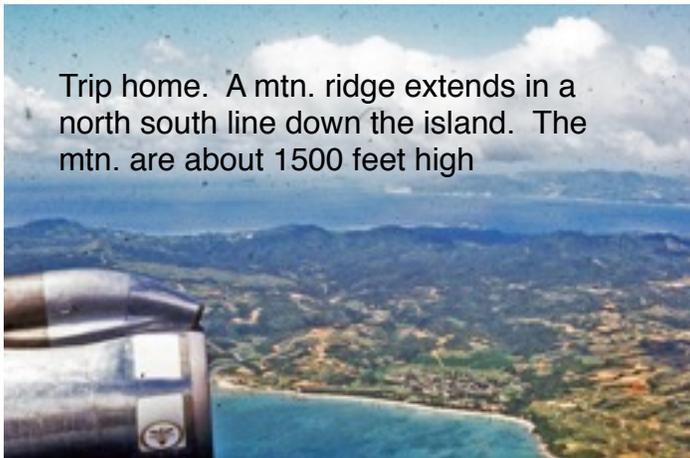
George was stationed on the island of Okinawa for short time. Okinawa was an island belonging to Japan. It is 69 miles long and averages 3 miles wide. The northern 1/3 is very hilly and in 1967 it took most of one day to travel there from Kadena. Roads were terrible. The bulk of the fighting was near the City of Naha which had been flattened by bombing. The airstrip George was on was south of Kadena and north of Naha.

George wasn't sure where he was stationed, but it was near Kadena. He thought it was north of Kadena. Yontan I believe is where he was stationed.'

George had were no military missions that were completed from Okinawa to Japan. One time they started on a military flight. It was on the same day that Nagasaki was bombed; His unit returned to the Okinawa base because the fighting war was over.

Since I was stationed on Okinawa for one year, I thought I would take some editorial privileges and make a few comments about Okinawa.

I landed at Naha just after a Hurricane in a 40 mph crosswind. Those of you who know me are aware of my unusual flying experiences and probably understand. This was my beginning on Okinawa.



Family Tombs. There are lots of military stories about these tombs, but the fact is the entire family cleans these tombs.

**Three major religious events take place pm Okinawa —**

New Year- from from 1st to 4th of Jan.

Shiimii-from late April to early June. It is a tomb visit day with food and prayer

Bon or Obon -August 13-15. tombs cleaned and spirits of their ancestor are invited to their families. Food and Prayer are given.

One year later I left Okinawa ca. 3 PM on a Thursday. Twelve hours later I landed at El Toro, Marine Airbase in Orange Co., Cal. It was 9 AM on Thursday morning. A 200 mph tailwind helped. However, it was fully fogged in at El Toro, but when we were 100 feet from the runway and over Interstate-5 we could see the runway just below

us. While approaching the airbase and in the dense fog, all the passengers were VERY quiet. When the runway was spotted a loud shout occurred. What helped this issue was the knowledge that everyone was aware that two years ago a similar situation happened except this time the plane crashed into a mountain just outside El Toro, killing everyone.

George was part of the occupational force in Japan. He was there less than one year. He went home on a troop ship and landed in Seattle. While in Japan he discovered quickly that the Japanese people were very kind and friendly. Shortly after arriving in Japan, he and a few friends decided to go into Tokyo. On the way the men became concerned for their safety because each time they came by some Japanese, the Japanese turned their backs to them. After a short period of time they decided to turn around and go back to the base. After a few days they learned that the Japanese were showing respect to the Americans.

There are two stories which played a great role moving the Japanese people to trust George and the Americans. The first involves a young Japanese boy eating some cookies which belonged to an American. The Japanese were beating him for doing that. George happened along and suggested that they not be so concerned and suggested that they overlook the cookie incident. George recognized that the Japanese people were starving. The next day the Japanese brought George several presents and they celebrated with tea and boiled bananas.

The second involved a young boy who had managed to drive a large nail through his shoe (thong) deep into his foot. It was very painful. George had the boy taken to an American dispensary to have his foot treated and bandaged. He also saw that the boy received a tetanus shot. The boy was then driven home. The next day the Japanese once again brought George many presents and they celebrated with tea and boiled bananas.

Shortly after these incidences one of the Japanese workers who could speak English told George that the Japanese people were fearful of the Americans because the military had told them the Americans would kill all the men, rape all the women and physically harm the Japanese. Soon the Japanese people learned that these statements made by the Japanese soldiers were not true.

There are several interviews of WW II veterans in our collection. With no exception, all of those who served in Japan said the civilian Japanese were very friendly.

After George finished his education as a mechanical engineer at Kansas University, he got job in Kansas City with Proctor and Gamble. He liked the job, but when he was recalled into military service during the Berlin blockade, thing changed. Although he was certain to get his job back, and he was told that his one year absence would not effect him, he felt that he would not be in a position to advance. He therefore got a headhunter to get him a better position in another company. This company was Puritan-Bennett.

At first he was generally involved with Quality control, especially when it involved the products they were making. Finally George got in a position where he could do some good. Bottom line: he managed to make some change in the process on nitrous gas that increased the production 3 times over.

I don't remember when George came to town, but I do remember the first time I met him. It was in the Congregational Church. When they pointed him out the last part of the sentence was: He's related to Hazel McGee. I liked Hazel all my life, so George must be a good guy.

One of the things I remember about George was he loved to sing. He sang in the choir and eventually-I recognized the choir needed another male voice-I came to sing in the choir. Now. i don't read music, and I don't know if George does, But I do know that George can sing soprano, alto, tenor and baritone. AND HE DOES !! The problem is he does it all within the same song. The thing of it is he was always in tune, but me, I never quite figured out what voice I was singing in. I think he did that just to confuse me. I loved teasing him about that. He never said a word he just smiled—which was a good clue that I was right.

Around the late 1990's, George became very active in TCHS. He served as Chairman of the Board and President and was quite active in having the buildings repaired and made safe to use. Also much cement work was accomplished during his terms. One thing that George seemed to like doing was mowing the grounds. He would do that rain or shine.

Those people who receive water from district #9 owe George a huge thank you. George became involved with that district during a time that one member was extremely disrupting. When this person was on the board, he with the help of one or two other members seemed to plan what they could do to create situations which was jeopardizing the activities of the water district. George became chairman of the board and by good planing and several months of well thought operational plans, George was able to get this man off the board. This finally allowed the board to once again be a well functioning board.

I believe that George's military activities and his civilian activities in understanding management and the operation of large businesses and the varied people who make these work, made George the perfect guy for the water board.

Dear members,

It's history time and everyone's been invited to this virtual Fourth Tuesday program on COVID - 19. There are no treats afterwards, but I recommend a cup of tea or coffee on the side.

Here's how I would explain COVID -19 to the Boy Scouts:

1. COVID-19 is like a fire and we are the wood that fuels it.
2. Forest fires happen because fire can easily spread. Don't be part of the forest.
3. Not all wood burns the same. It's best not to burn at all.
4. Trees support life. Deserts don't.
5. Preventing fire is easier than stopping fire. Don't play with fire.
6. The 1st birthday cake candle is a painful lesson. We get reminders annually to avoid that lesson.

If Tonganoxie Community Historical Society were to do a future exhibit of the COVID-19 story in Tonganoxie what would it say?

Until next we meet, stay safe and as the Scout motto says, "Be Prepared".

Ray Stockman  
Chairman (with way too much chair time now)

#### NEWS IN THE AREA



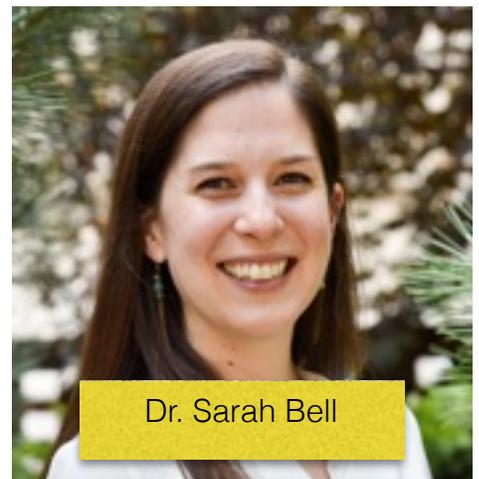
The **Delaware Cemetery** located on County Road 1, just north of the Kansas River, has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Steve and Carolyn Rowe were active in getting this accomplished and shared this photo of a plaque, which will be installed as soon as present circumstances permit. We will let you know when that ceremony will happen.

This is a small cemetery seen on the south side of Co. Rd. 1. A small fence surrounds it. Most of the tombstones have been washed away by flooding of the nearby Kaw River.

#### EVENTS IN THE FIRST QUARTER

Dr. Sarah Bell enchanted all of us at the **Fourth Tuesday** program on January 28, with her program, "A Congress for Women: **Women's Clubs and the Chautauqua Movement.**" The presentation was made possible by Humanities Kansas. The program centered on the Chautauqua movement throughout the United States, but also specifically in Ottawa, Kansas. One of the most interesting facts is that the Chautauqua Institution still exists and is a going concern in New York State.

Chautauqua was a rural movement that focused on moral education and self- improvement. This presentation examines how women's clubs inspired political activism and how this movement laid the groundwork



for contemporary movements of gender equality.

## West Village development

**George Brakjovic, City Manager**, presented the February Fourth Tuesday program, giving our audience a thorough overview of the years-long process that will be the **West Village development**, just east of the historical society site. Mayor David Frese was present to help answer questions. The presentation was very informative.



Jim & Janet Stuke  
and  
Tony Johnson



Theresa Megee  
&  
Marilynn Megee



Pat & Tony  
Johnson

## CHILI SUPPER

The annual **Chili Supper** on the third Thursday of February was successful on all counts. Forty-one volunteers worked together to make this a great event. We served 267 meals and had fun doing it. Many guests lingered for conversations, which is the real reason for events such as this. Special thanks to our supporters who included Boy Scout Troop #357, Brothers Market, Community National Bank, Erin Ellsworth, First State Bank & Trust, Kramer & Associates, Tonganoxie Christian Church, United Methodist Church and White Birch Agency.

## Clenece Hills on Timeline Radio/Podcast

On March 16, Kris Roberts and Joy Lominska were the guests of Clenece Hills on **Timeline Radio**. The topic was **The Spring at the Fairchild Farm**, our newest and nearly complete exhibit. Listen to this podcast to understand the excitement about the new exhibit. You can find the recording at [klwn.org](http://klwn.org) - click on podcasts at the top of the page - click on Timeline Radio.

## Museum Activities

We have been updating the military exhibit and it is close to completion. The wars from the civil war to the cold war and thereafter are in chronological order. We have focused on more complete stories about individuals in our community who have interesting stories to tell. This allows for periodic changes in small sections as new stories come in.

Much of the energy of Joy Lominska, Kris Roberts, and Natalie Vondrack have been focused on preparing the exhibit for the Fairchild Spring... on the grounds around the museum and inside.

We await fair weather to change the south door in the barn so it will become an exit and open to the outside. With this change the west door has been covered and an exhibit will take its wall slot.

Work is in the planning for a temporary license plate display at the entrance of the museum which will tie in with the permanent exhibit in the firehouse. A complete collection of Kansas license plates from 1913 to the present has been donated and is installed.

Plans are also in progress to prepare an exhibit on "Tyson in Tonganoxie"

Hooray!!! We have new shelving. Four huge shelving units have been donated to us from the library. Don & Donna Talbott, Jim Stuke, Lloyd Pearson, Dan Carr, John Walter, and Kris Roberts disassembled three and have reassembled them in our upstairs storage with the fourth shelf installed in our work room. Now we just have to reorganize!!!

We are blessed to have Natalie Vondrack volunteering on Tuesdays and working on projects in her spare time at home. She is a graduate student in the museums program at KU. She is exceptional. She is eager to help, volunteers for the messiest jobs, and has a clear head for verbal organization which is extremely helpful. Thank you Natalie.

Now on to what you can do during our mandated time apart. I have been doing some deep cleaning (which I hate) in drawers I have not visited for some time. If you are in the same boat I ask you to think of the historical society before anything pertaining to our community is tossed. Many of our recent "exciting" stories which we are including in our exhibits arrived to us in personal letters, saved newspaper clippings, and memorabilia. Don't hesitate to jot down what you remember about our community in your lifetime. Although it may not seem monumental it may be the "pearl" to complete a story.

I remember my first trip to Tonganoxie to visit my soon to be "in-laws". This Western Nebraska girl from sandy soils stepped out into mud in the driveway. Thinking I would take the next step and shake it off, I was surprised to learn that Tonganoxie mud grows with each step taken and DOES NOT SHAKE OFF!!!!

## The Spring at Fairchild Farm

We have been working diligently on our new exhibit about the historic spring on the museum grounds. The signs for the outdoor display are complete and ready to be installed on the concrete pad overlooking the spring. They look beautiful! The indoor exhibit is taking shape. We have been working towards an April 25 grand opening celebration, but, sadly, that goal is now not possible given our shelter at home and social distancing situation. With the museum closed, we cannot make much progress on completing the exhibit. So, everything is on hold until the coronavirus situation changes.

## The Mulberry Tree



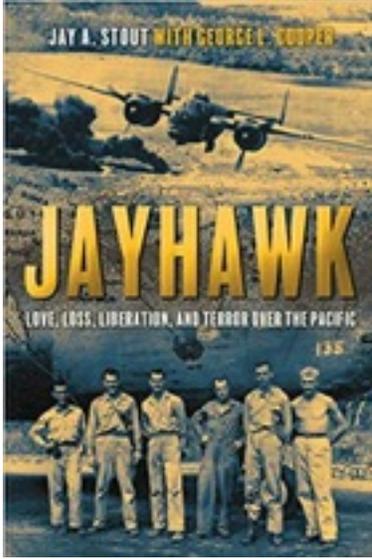
A scraggly mulberry tree marked the site of the spring house south of the museum. Because the tree was dying, one of our first steps in developing the spring exhibit was having the tree removed, leaving just the stump among the stones of the spring house foundation.

Why was the tree in that particular spot? Most likely it grew where farmers could not mow or drive due to the hole and foundation left from the spring house. Once the spring house was no longer used, the spot was probably not tended regularly and the tree took

root.

Mulberries like ample water, not a problem at this location. A red mulberry, like this one, typically lives about 75 years. As part of our indoor exhibit, there will be a section of the tree on display. Visitors can test their skills at counting tree rings to estimate the age of our tree when it was cut down. Hint: it was pretty old for a mulberry.

## George Cooper's Biography



GEORGE COOPER will soon have a book published and for sale about his military life during WW II. The book is available from Amazon for pre purchase. I have been involved with an interview that TCHS accomplished a little more that one year ago. The interview by Kathy Stockman was excellent—George could remember great details about his service during WW II and what he did following his military activities.

Jayhawks was the name of his B-25 bomber. After George was through with this plane, the person who became the pilot kept the name, Jayhawk.

Later while George was serving in occupied Japan, one of the Japanese (who had been in military activities in New Guinea) who was helping George, let it be known that he had seen a plane in New Guinea with those Jayhawk markings. It IS a small world !!!

WOODEN BOWLS MADE FROM MULBERRY TREE WHICH WAS BY THE SPRING.

When TCHS can get back in business, these bowls will be for sale at the museum.

