

## **Tom B. Eaton, Jr.** **Owner, Eaton Manufacturing Company**



Today we talk about Tom Eaton, a member of the Rotary Club of Houston for forty three years, all with perfect attendance. Tom's father was a member of the Club since the 1930's, also with perfect attendance. Tom said that maintaining perfect attendance hasn't been all that difficult. However, it's required some "inventive makeups," such as seven Rotarians getting together once a week and declaring it a meeting – while they were on a tour of China in 1987.

Tom joined the Club at the urging of his father. In the years since, he's participated in every committee of the Club. He's noticed that at the heart of every committee there are one or two members who have a great passion for the work of that committee. The appeal of Rotary for Tom has been its ability to have such a significant impact on the community – much more so than most individuals could accomplish. For example, at the local level there is the Rotary House, while at the international level there is Polio Plus.

Tom was born in Houston, a fifth generation Texan. He grew up on South Macgregor, close enough to the zoo to "hear the lions roar". His father graduated from Rice U. in 1922, and spent the next five years as a barnstorming pilot and aerial photographer. In 1927 he quit flying and founded the Eaton Manufacturing Company (now in its 80th year). The company's first product was paper garment bags. Later it shifted to the printing business, leading to a specialization in the printing of plastics in the 1960's. (The Rotary banners you see draped across the front of the head table at our meetings were done by Tom's company.)

But we left Tom listening to the lions roar. After high school Tom attended Rice U. and graduated from The U. of Houston. He joined the USAF, earned his pilot wings, and spent the rest of his six years in the Air Force in Texas! Clearly, he inherited his father's love of flying. About his Air Force flying, Tom said, "I got paid to do something I'd wanted to do since I was a child." That something included flying the North American Sabre F-86D fighter, a radar interceptor being used for research into thunderstorms. He routinely flew into tornadic storms to test the aircraft's radar capability. (It helps to be young and foolish when asked to do this kind of flying..)

After his stint in the Air Force, Tom worked for his father for awhile in the Company, and then spent the next seventeen years as a plastic manufacturers' sales representative, traveling mostly around the southern half of the country. In the meantime, his father died in 1972, and his mother took over running the Company. At the urging of the family banker (Ben Love), Tom returned to the Company and ran it from 1985 until his sort-of retirement in 2002.

Eaton Manufacturing Company now is led by a Chief Executive Officer and Tom's daughter. So, Tom's job is to "sit around and offer help and advice, when asked" – and to stay out of the way otherwise. The Company is located in an old industrial area near downtown, and is surrounded by such historical buildings as the original Jefferson Davis Hospital. Ask Tom to give you a tour of the Company's printing operations. You will be amazed – and Tom has the time..

Speaking of Tom's mother: Lucia Eaton was responsible for starting the Special Education program in the public schools of Texas. Tom's brother had cerebral palsy. When the boy was six years old, his mother took him to enroll in school, only to be told that "we don't accept handicapped kids here." That was not a good thing to say to Lucia Eaton. She had been a teacher, librarian, and truant officer in the Houston ISD, and had some interesting connections: Her father was the Houston city attorney, a great uncle-in-law was the Harris County tax collector, and Lucia's college roommate was Oveda Culp (who you know as the wife of William P. Hobby, a Texas governor and founder of the Houston Post.) So, off to Austin went Lucia. She pointed out to the members of the Texas Legislature that the State Constitution guaranteed free education for all students between 6 and 14, with no mention of any exceptions. In spite of the fact that it was 1942, and the country was at war – and not doing all that well, the Legislature authorized the formation of a Special Education program for Texas public schools. The first Special Ed. Classes were in Houston – at Eastwood and Lincoln Elementary Schools. Lucia went on to form a Special Children's Committee that now takes over 9,000 special needs children and adults to performances of the Houston Rodeo and Stock show every year.

Back to Tom, who reported that he was a disappointment to his mother: Tom's great aunt won the international piano competition at the World's Fair in 1896. Tom's mother, Lucia, has a master's degree in music. And Tom? "I'm tone deaf." However, his life is not bereft of musical accomplishment: While in USAF pilot training, he got drafted to be the leader of the unit's drum and bugle corps. He was told, "Just stand out there in front with your baton. We'll tell you what to do."

And Tom's claim to musical fame? "I'm the only Rice Alum. who led the Aggie band in a parade." The time was Armed Forces Day, April, 1957, the last month before Tom received his USAF pilot's wings. The occasion was a parade in Bryan in which both the Aggie band and Tom's drum and bugle corps were going to march. The colonels decided to switch the cadet commanders of the two units (for reasons we can only imagine). So, Tom led the Aggie band in the parade. He tried to get them to play, "I've Been Marching on the Railroad", but they refused. For some reason..

There's much more to report about Tom, but we're running out of space. Some examples:

1. Tom is the creator of the idea of young kids playing baseball with a pitching machine. He wrote the original rules, which are now used on every continent except Antarctica. (Probably very little youth baseball there.)
2. Tom is a contributor to and supporter of the tall ship Elissa in Galveston. He has a strong family connection to sailing ships. "My distant grandfather was a ship's captain who sailed around the world twice, and settled in Galveston in 1848." Tom has been on outings on the Elissa and said, "I get a bigger thrill out of being on the Elissa at 8 knots than I ever did at flying faster than the speed of sound."
3. Tom is the Chair Emeritas of the Museum of Printing History. He has played a large role in the creation and development of that museum since its inception in 1979.
4. Tom is a member of an advisory board for the Harris County Extension Service. He meets with the board every other month to review the service's work in the county, including fire ant control, environmental remediation, loss of beach front, and prenatal care.
5. At one time Tom could perform all the aerobatic maneuvers in the USAF book – while relying only on his flight instruments. An old WWII bomber pilot told him that couldn't be done..

The first time I chatted with Tom at a Club meeting, I thought, "This sounds like a really interesting guy." I was right.