

DO YOU HAVE AN OBERLIN CONNECTION?

This question comes up frequently for new residents at Kendal when they are dining with veteran residents. It is not surprising considering that about 35% of Kendal residents do, either having gone to school at or taught at Oberlin College, or have parents, siblings or children who have done so.

When I was first asked the question, I had to answer, “No.” But, on further reflection, I do have a remote Oberlin connection, and it is a distinguished one. Let me explain.

My first boss after I joined General Motors Research Laboratories (GMR) in 1959 was Dr. Lloyd L. Withrow, or “Doc” Withrow as he preferred to be called. Doc was the exemplar of a true research scientist or engineer, and an outstanding supervisor. I and many other followed the examples he set.

Doc was an Ohio farm boy, as he put it, born in 1899. He attended Oberlin College, where he majored in Chemistry. Following graduation in 1922, he went to the University of Wisconsin, where he received a PhD in Physical Chemistry. He was then hired by a famous Ohioan, Charles “Boss” Kettering (the founder of the GM Research Laboratories), to do combustion research at the GM labs in Detroit.

Doc teamed with his co-worker Gerald Rassweiler, a physicist who specialized in optics. They became the first people in the world to take moving pictures of flame progression across the combustion chamber of an operating engine. They developed all of the equipment necessary to do so.

This completely revolutionized engine combustion research, and helped lead to more efficient engines and better fuel economy. Engine combustion research around the globe now uses much more modern technology to study flames, but it all started with Withrow and Rassweiler.

But, Doc also had another distinction. He was part of the most famous athletic team in Oberlin College history, the 1921 football team that beat Ohio State.

Doc loved to tell me the story. He’d proudly say that he played football while at Oberlin. I’d ask, “What position did you play?” He’d respond, “I was a 180 pound lineman.” I’d say, “Offense or defense?” He’d say, rather indignantly, “I played all 60 minutes.”

Thus he was on the field that memorable day, October 8, 1921, in Oberlin college sports history, when tiny Oberlin College rode the bus to Columbus, took the field against the mighty Ohio State Buckeyes, and came away with a thrilling 7-6 victory. The bus ride back to Oberlin must have been a joyous event for the team and its supporters.

The photo below, courtesy of Polly Cotter, shows “doc” Withrow standing at Polly’s father’s right.



Polly Dyck Carroll's ^ Father

The aftermath of the big upset was that the big, bad Ohio State Buckeyes refused to play another school from the State of Ohio for many, many years.

So, yes, to answer the question, I am proud to say that I have an Oberlin connection.

Joe Colucci, 2-20-16