

Dean Schmidt and Sherri Wedel work together for Potwin and serve together as Lions.



# Back from the Brink

## Small Club, Tiny Town Rebound Together

by Jay Copp

Walking to the post office in tiny Potwin, Sherri Wedel ran into Glen Crawford, who had taught at her high school. Crawford, nearing 90, had been an industrial arts teacher. He brooked no nonsense in class—a student could lose a finger to a power saw if not paying attention. But the teenagers respected him and knew he cared about them. Wedel, in her 40s now and the city clerk, was distressed to see him crying openly.

“What’s wrong, Mr. Crawford?”

“We’re turning in our charter. Tonight.”

A Lion since 1954, Crawford was one of just six active members in Potwin, Kansas, population 500. Besides himself, there was his wife, June, and then Dean Schmidt, the longtime town mayor, and his wife, Vera and a couple others. Members had grown older and then died or dropped out. For Crawford, losing the club was losing part of his identity. “To have it just die like that was a serious matter,” he said later.

Wedel chatted with Crawford for a few minutes and then hustled off, her mind spinning with an idea.

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Twenty miles north of Wichita, Potwin has no stop lights and a single four-way stop sign. Nearly the whole town comes into view by driving a few blocks down its main street and peering left and right. On the main street or just off of it are a bank, a post office, a grocery store, a bar, a gas station, a library, a lawyer’s office, two churches and the unimposing city building, where Schmidt and Wedel occupy a cramped office adjacent to a dimly lit garage with the town’s fire trucks.

Not much ever happens in Potwin that makes the newspapers in Wichita or beyond. Pressed to recall a significant event, residents recount a natural event such as the 2005 ice storm, the 1998 wind storm or, from old timers, the epic 14 inches of rain in 1958 that flooded roads. The references to nature make sense, considering that vast swaths of farmland surround the Potwin and the land and the sky seem to be the overarching reality.

Potwin remains tied to the land. Maybe in Chicago or Los Angeles stock prices or the scores of ball games connect people. Here people are attuned to the fate of local farmers. “This might be the best wheat harvest in 20 years—maybe 60 bushels an acre unless a hail storm hits,” says Schmidt. “What’s good for farmers is good for everyone else.”

A few generations ago farmers shared the main stage with industry. Potwin’s heyday was in the 1950s when Vickers Refinery employed hundreds. Trucks, tank cars and pipelines carried the plant’s products across the United States, and the 265-foot refinery tower was both a landmark and symbol of prosperity. But after nearly 50 years of operation the refinery closed in 1964, and restaurants and stores shut their doors not long after.

Measured by population, Potwin is stable today. The head count had dwindled to about 400 from nearly 700 decades ago. In the last decade three new houses were built. Schmidt calls it a “bedroom community.” Residents who

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work in El Dorado, the county seat, or Wichita like the quiet, the clean air and the absence of crime. The water and schools are good. “When we do our survey, people say they want two things: good streets, and, secondly, a good dog catcher,” says Schmidt.

In some ways, Potwin is a Kansas version of Mayberry. People look after one another, and adults admonish children, even if they aren’t their own. New to town, June Crawford once

gently corrected Glen for hollering at children roughhousing in a park. “I said, “You can’t do that,”” she recalls. “He said, ‘Yes, you can.’”

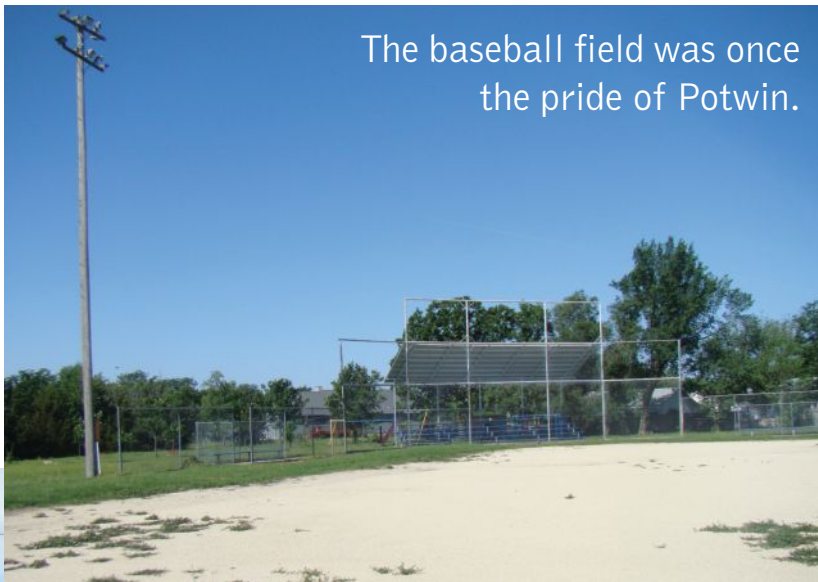
When Wedel drives around town, she knows the names of the children in the yards or on their bikes and yells out a friendly hello to each. The formal boundaries that normally separate people often melt away. When the ATM machine outside Emprise Bank is on the fritz, customers don’t think

twice about walking over to the home of Marcie Macy, a bank employee, to tell her of the problem.

Yet Potwin defies easy stereotypes. While it’s true that everyone knows everyone, it’s also true that some people are decidedly less social than others. The Methodist Church has 19 active members. The Scout troops disbanded when no one stepped forward to lead them. Baseball was once such a staple that the town’s centennial book in 1985 declared that “Potwin and baseball are inseparable.” But the ball diamond at the edge of town has not been used for years. Weeds mar the rutted infield.

“Most people in town are not joiners,” says June Crawford, who is quite familiar with small towns. She raised her five children in Alton, Illinois, and then worked in Athens, Georgia, as the secretary to the president of the University of Georgia.

The community impulse in Potwin



The baseball field was once the pride of Potwin.



Potwin has no street lights and a single four-way stop sign.

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swells at times and then subsides. In the early 1970s Potwin joined PRIDE, an initiative of the state's Department of Economic Development and Kansas State University to help towns stay strong. The town quickly won an award from PRIDE for its community cleanup and recreational programs. The town dropped out of PRIDE after three years but joined again a decade later. Interest has waned once more. Twenty-five residents once belonged to PRIDE but that's down to five. Schmidt is president and other Lions are involved.

The most visible sign of PRIDE is the 50-by-140-foot community garden. This year it's expected to yield 6,000 pounds of corn, tomatoes, potatoes, squash and other produce for the needy via the Salvation Army.

The Crawfords live a block or so from the community garden in a tidy frame home with an American flag flapping in the wind. During World

War II, Glen was in the Navy in Okinawa when the bullets were flying. A tuft of white hair sits atop his head. He gazes earnestly from wire-rimmed glasses and speaks forcefully when making a point. "She's been really good to me," he says of June.

They met serendipitously, neither having a clue at the time they would end up as a married couple. They were with their respective spouses in 1988 when the two couples met at the airport in New York on the way to Europe. The couples hit it off and became fast friends. June's husband died not much later, and Glen's wife passed away in 1992 after an agonizing illness.

Crawford taught at Frederic Remington High School in nearby White-water. The famed Old West artist once lived in the area. The Crawfords have first-rate copies of two Remington prints hanging in their living room.

Crawford is not exactly famous himself, but people in Potwin pay him

due respect. "Soon as they call me Mr. Crawford I know it's one of my students. I don't know half of them," he says with a smile.

Crawford, who grew up on a farm, has good memories of his long life in Potwin. He remembers the nifty community play called "Screen Door," an endearing tribute to Potwin written by a woman who had moved into town. Schmidt had a lead role. Crawford's first wife, Alta, directed the play. Crawford played an elderly man who carried a live piglet in one scene. "There was a sophisticated lady from Wichita [in the audience] who wanted to touch it," he recalls.

The Lions have been part of his routine decade after decade. He faithfully attended the meetings, worked the functions and cherished the friendships. "I really enjoyed the camaraderie," he says.

Schmidt, who lives on the other side of main street from Crawford, has



June and Glen Crawford have fashioned a good life together after their first spouses died.

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been mayor since 1987. “He quit running about 20 years ago. He’s not even on the ballot. People just write his name in,” says June Crawford.

In a small town, Schmidt is especially valued for his general know-how and can-do spirit. He is a throwback to the resourceful pioneers of the plains who could make do. For 42 years he worked for the Haw Ranch Feedlot including as operations manager. He oversaw 25,000 head of

cattle and once worked 72 hours without a break when a technical problem disrupted the feeding of the cattle. The ranch is “a lot like a hospital. It runs 24 hours a day. Cattle don’t care if you are sick or tired,” says Schmidt, who projects confidence.

Schmidt also serves as Potwin’s unofficial—and unpaid—mechanic. In his basement is a wide assortment of tools and machine parts. “He’s the town’s handyman,” says June Craw-

ford. “If he’s fixing something and needs a part in El Dorado, I’ll say, ‘I’ll get it.’ He’ll say, ‘I’m going there anyway.’ You try to pay him and he says to make a donation to the church.”

Schmidt served as district governor in 1998-99. His front porch displays a small sign that says Lions Den. The club meets in his basement; a Lions’ bell sits on a long folding table and the club banner hangs on the wall. The walls of a spare bedroom are blanketed with Lions’ plaques and awards.

Lions are a family matter for the Schmidts. A local newspaper lauded Vera and Dean as “everyday heroes” for personally recycling a half million eyeglasses at their home (though Dean insists Vera did most of the work). For years Dean returned from district meetings with the trunk of his Crown Vic filled with boxes of eyeglasses, and Vera, who suffers from various eye maladies, meticulously sorted and washed them.

Schmidt is a person of many talents. He makes lures at his work table in the basement. The 100 pounds of croppie he catches over dozens of fishing trips make possible the club’s fish fry. In his backyard is a vineyard, where 180 pounds of grapes will eventually help keep Lions’ meetings light and lively. His backyard is a testament to his green thumb—row after row or clumps of corn, potatoes, raspberries, blueberries and pear and cherry trees.

But the one thing Schmidt could not grow was new Lions.

Membership dwindled. There were too few Lions for too much work. “This stuff turns white,” says Schmidt, grabbing the hair on his head. “We got too old. You’ve got to be visible.”

It’s not that Schmidt hadn’t tried to build membership. “I thought I had asked everyone in town,” he says.



Schmidt and Lions are woven into the fabric of community life.



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Chartered in 1952 with 38 members, the Potwin Lions Club was typically active. It sponsored baseball teams. It sent students to the Kansas Lions Band. It installed street signs, rattled cans on Candy Day and held a variety show and a free watermelon feed.

Lions took a paternalistic interest in the town affairs. They successfully lobbied government officials to extend Highway 196 north into Potwin, and Lions made a number of renovations to Potwin Community House, the town's focal point. Built in 1917, the white-sided, stately building hosts school functions, community plays and meetings.

The official history of the town probably would have not changed much if the Potwin Lions Club had never chartered. But Lions enriched Potwin in a subtle way. The club succeeded in getting people out of their homes to interact, to identify with one another as members of the same small community. For a while, the Lions showed movies at Community House. Each year, children enjoyed visits from Santa Claus and the Easter bunny thanks to Lions. "The Lions offered something to do in the community. There's not much going on," says June Crawford.

The dearth of activities for youths was problematic. "There's nothing for them to do. You know what happens then. They do a lot of things they shouldn't," she adds.

Yet, curiously, the town seemed indifferent to the fate of the club. "Lions have done a lot for this town. People don't know about it. They say, 'What have the Lions ever done?'" says Glen Crawford.

The Lions once met at Community House, which they had painstakingly maintained. But they switched to Schmidt's basement after the town council asked for a \$50 meeting fee.

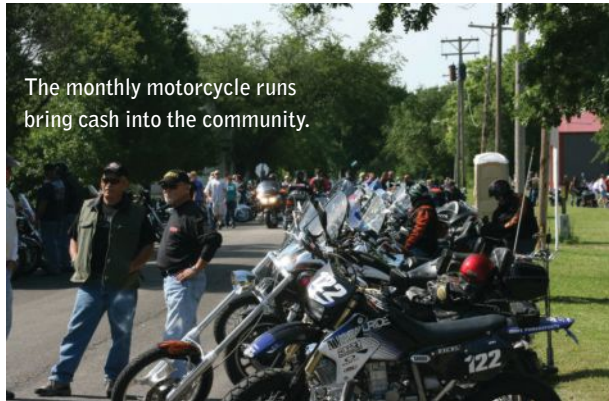
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The day after Wedel talked to a brokenhearted Crawford, the handful of remaining Lions glumly gathered at a restaurant to turn in their charter. Wedel showed up. She had been on the phone or met her friends in person since talking to Crawford. With her was Robert Spencer, the owner of the town's bar. There was Jimmy Howell, a mason, and his wife, Amber, the librarian. Samantha Smith, who was in sales, made it as did a farmer and refinery worker and others.

Most of Wedel's friends had children still at home, and she knew they wanted a strong Potwin for the sake of their children. "Let's do this for the future of the children," she told them.

Wedel dangled a proposition to the Lions. Sixteen of her friends, most of them in their 30s and 40s, would join on the spot if the club agreed to fix up the baseball diamond. Repairing the ball diamond was no easy task. The lights would cost \$80,000 or so.

But saving the club was paramount. Glen Crawford let out a loud whoop when he realized the club would continue. "I think he scared the other people in the restaurant," says June. Crawford cried when the 16 new Lions took the oath, and this time Dean Schmidt cried along with him.



The club was saved May 3, 2010. Since then, Lions have stepped up their activity and visibility. Their signature event now is the monthly motorcycle run. Bikers from hundreds of miles away converge around Community House the second Sunday of the month. A steady succession of loud rumbles, they ride into Potwin to hook up

with friends, buy motorcycle products from vendors and enjoy the ambience of a small town. Exact numbers are not kept but on some Sundays thousands of bikers show up.

The biggest day was Sept. 11, 2011. At least 3,000 bikers roared into town, which hosted a 9-11 commemoration. A nurse who was in one of the towers and a firefighter who hurried to ground zero from Kansas spoke movingly of their experiences. Tiny Potwin staged the largest 9-11 commemoration in Kansas, says Schmidt.

The visitors generate cash for the town and its businesses. Each biker spends about \$5, and 40 percent of that comes back to Potwin, says Schmidt. The No Fences bar is the biggest beneficiary. On a typical Sunday a dozen customers wander in. More than 1,000 crowd into No Fences on the day of the runs. Owner Robert Spencer, one of the 16 new Lions, hires a half dozen people to serve the throngs.

Outside the Community House, Lions sell biscuits and gravy to the motorcyclists. The Crawfords show up for duty at 6:30 a.m. June makes the coffee, and Glen runs back and forth from the Community House with provisions.



Among the new Lions who helped save the club were bar owner Robert Spencer (from left), Bobby Mayberry Jr. and Sammy Jo Smith.



Besides offering breakfast, the club puts out a large jar for donations for the baseball field. It's not unusual to find \$10 and \$20 bills in the jar. The club has raised \$18,000 for the lights so far. The magic number is \$25,000, a threshold needed to secure grants.

Other towns have hosted the motorcycle runs, not always to positive effect. The riders are not disheveled rebels. Many earn a good living as doctors, attorneys and business owners. They drink little, buying mostly soft drinks at the bar. But a sea of humanity descending on a quiet rural spot can be disruptive. "They've yet to leave a piece of trash," says Schmidt. "We have what's needed: seating, trees, shelter, a family atmosphere."

Schmidt and Wedel built 21 sturdy picnic tables to accommodate the visitors. "She learned to weld and drill press," says Schmidt admiringly of Wedel.

That's what the new Lions brought to the club: a solid work ethic. The club had a year's worth of cans that needed to be sorted and bagged for recycling. The new members tackled the task with gusto, quickly filling 98 55-gallon bags. "I thought it would take them two days to sort. It took three hours. They had fun. You should have heard

them. They want to do it again," says Schmidt. Adds Glen Crawford of new members, "They back it up. They don't give lip service—they give labor service."

Spencer, a large, bearish man, hosts the fish fry at his bar and came up with the idea to raffle off a hunting rifle for the club. He donated the rifle. When he won a rifle in a later auction, he donated it back to the club for yet another raffle. Being a Lion is a "good way to give back," he says.

The new members offered new ideas. Bobby Mayberry, who recently opened an auto repair shop, directs the mud run Lions hold at the edge of the baseball field.

The new members meant a new way of doing business for the club. In the past, attendance was required. That's why Wedel never joined, even though her mother, Lion Shirley Moore, had asked her to join. "Young people are too busy," says Schmidt. "Before you had to attend every meeting. Now it's attend the functions where you are needed."

The club adapted to survive. "When you have kids you have a vested interest in the community. That's what makes a good Lion," adds Schmidt.