

D. Osborne Meese and The Richland County Foundation



There are seven founders of the Richland County Foundation: D. Osborne Meese, Paul R. Tappan, Norman L. Wolfe, Scott F. Coffin, George W. Stephens, John H. Finefrock and Robert B. Black.

So, why is D. Osborne Meese considered the founding father of the Foundation?

I asked Osborne's son, Bob Meese this question, fully expecting the answer to be, "He had the most money and wanted to share." That was not the answer I received. What I received was a two-hour lunch date with Bob telling me about what kind of man his father was, some history of Mansfield and the beginning of the Richland County Foundation. Did Osborne have the most money, the most knowledge, the most free time?

Bob laughed, "Well, he certainly didn't have the most money!"

What Osborne Meese had was an admirable business ethic, strong community ties, excellent leadership ability and foresight for Richland County.

D. Osborne Meese was raised by parents who valued education, religion, giving back to their community and helping others. Osborne's father, Rev. David Joseph Meese, was raised on a farm in Pennsylvania, accepted every opportunity for public education available to him and attended Heidelberg College in Tiffin where he met his future wife, Nancy Smythe Hughes.

He later earned a doctor of divinity degree from Wittenberg College in 1892. Rev. Meese enjoyed a very successful ministry at The First Presbyterian Church for 22 years during which time he observed the congregation grow from 206 to 850 members.

Rev. Meese was instrumental in the Mansfield community as well. He was influential in the founding of the Mansfield Hospital in 1898, served as director of the YMCA, trustee of the Richland County Children's Home and a founding member of Westbrook Country Club. He

served as a member and president of the Mansfield Board of Education and, in that capacity, was able to sign the diploma for Osborne in 1905 as a graduate of Mansfield High School.

Three years later Rev. Meese accepted a position as chaplain of The Ohio State Reformatory where he and his wife Nancy occupied a suite of rooms there until his death in 1917. Nancy was the matriarch of The First Presbyterian Church, was lovingly referred to as 'Mother Meese' and her family ensured she attended Sunday service to occupy the 'Meese Family Pew' every week. She enjoyed relatively good health until her death in 1941.

They say, 'the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.' And, in the case of Osborne Meese, that is true. Osborne was an outstanding athlete in high school playing basketball, football and running track where he held the Ohio High School record for the half-mile for approximately 10 years. He was accepted into Princeton University and graduated in 1909. He was the captain of the basketball team, manager of track team, president of his class junior year and master of ceremonies at annual class day events during his senior year.

Osborne's leadership qualifications were established at Mansfield High School, he expanded them at Princeton and he brought them back to Mansfield which ultimately led to the establishment of the Foundation. Osborne did spend a post-graduate year at Princeton during which he was the manager of the track team and studied one class. Bob suspects this was in an effort to remain close to Kathleen Balliett, his future bride, who was studying at Wells College in Aurora, NY.

Upon returning to Mansfield, Osborne maintained his reputation and position as a leader in many areas. He was the president of the board of education when Mansfield Senior High School was dedicated in 1925. He played an integral role in the establishment of the Mansfield Memorial Park and served on the board for years, he helped to establish the Woodland Swim and Tennis Club and Mansfield Memorial Homes. Local politicians encouraged him to run for mayor at one point, but he declined. Osborne also served as president of Rotary Club, was a member of the First United Presbyterian Church and a member of the administrative board of Kingwood Center.

For many years, Osborne worked in sales for The Roderick Lean Manufacturing Company, a farm implement manufacturer. This career allowed him to travel all over the world. When he married Kathleen, their honeymoon was an eight month world tour which included Africa, Europe, the Middle East and Russia. Between stints of relaxing on his honeymoon, Osborne would make sales presentations to individuals about the progress of farm equipment in the United States. He worked for a short time for his grandfather-in-law, Solomon Balliett, who founded the Ohio Suspender Company.

Both Roderick Lean and Ohio Suspender went bankrupt during the Great Depression. He then worked for the Tappan Stove Company. Osborne was responsible for establishing the marketing program for a product to be used on dirigibles, better known today as blimps. Unfortunately, there were only two such dirigibles built and after the crash of the Graf

Zeppelin, “Hindenburg”, not much of a market for the product. He chose to leave Tappan and opted for a career in life insurance. This was during the Great Depression and possibly the worst time in history to begin a new career, especially one in life insurance. This career switch enabled Osborne to spend more time at home with his family which was a decision he never regretted even though he was just “moderately successful” according to Bob.

Osborne’s wife, Kathleen said in her memoir that she “was very fortunate to marry the most patient and durable man in the world, and the only thing I did for him was to give him a son of whom he was very, very proud.”

In 1936 Osborne was chosen to help local philanthropist, Anna Scattergood establish a fund for the Humane Society, which at the time benefitted poverty-stricken elderly and terminally ill residents of Mansfield. Osborne handled the investments for this \$75,000 fund which helped six to eight individuals with a monthly \$25 check. He had no particular desire to handle the money for this task but figured someone had to do it in order to be responsible stewards of Ms. Scattergood’s generous contribution.

The Scattergood Fund is currently held at the Foundation and continues to grow and award grants annually to non-profit organizations to assist low-income elderly people.

“My father was a compassionate individual who used his communication talents to benefit other people in a very unselfish manner,” said Bob.

Manufacturers in Mansfield formed a group during the Great Depression to contribute money to a fund to enable people who were judged deserving to borrow money to buy a house or purchase coal to heat their homes. Osborne thought that this concept was much better than the government’s option of welfare and food stamps. A staunch Republican, Osborne had no use for Roosevelt’s concepts, even though his wife, Kathleen was a Democrat.

Osborne wanted to keep the government out of local affairs and believed that if left to figure it out, local citizens would create a solution to meet the needs of the community. The Foundation was founded on this same concept – utilize volunteer donations and conservative management to meet the needs of the community.

While successfully managing the Scattergood Fund for the Humane Society, in the mid-1940s, Osborne began thinking of ways to expand on this concept. He visited the Cleveland Foundation and Columbus Foundation for research and consulted with a couple local attorneys.

He then began recruiting the founders of the Foundation. He recruited businessmen in the area like Robert Black of Ohio Brass, George Stephens of Mansfield Tire and Rubber, Norman Wolfe the Richland County Auditor, John Finefrock of Finefrock Funeral Home and Paul Tappan of the Tappan Stove Company.

The Great Depression was not kind to any of these businesses but by 1945 Osborne had rallied enough support and money to establish the Richland County Foundation. The basis for

establishing the foundation was to provide all possible advantages, advancements, betterments, facilities and opportunities for the people of Richland County and vicinity, equal and similar to those enjoyed by people in other progressive communities.

In January 1948 the first grant was awarded to the Friendly House to construct a new building on North Mulberry Street for \$145,000.

The Foundation was rumored to be a secret society or an exclusive 'Good Old Boys' Club' and when I asked Bob about this he chuckled and said they probably kept it quiet because they were afraid of receiving too many requests and not having enough money to help everyone in need.

Nevertheless, the business of the Foundation was handled in the Meese Insurance office in the Farmers Bank Building on Park Avenue West and then later by Norman Wolfe in the Richland County Auditor's office. Osborne had first officially suggested in 1950 that the Foundation may need to look for a permanent location and 11 years later that suggestion came to fruition.

In the June 1, 1953 Annual Meeting Report of the President of the Board of Trustees, Osborne wrote the following. "We are now affiliated with the National Committee on Foundations and Trusts. We are constantly getting confirmation of the fact that we are striding along in step with the most enlightened communities in our nation. It is my personal hope that as we progress and are able, through endowment, to create our own staff for the administration of our affairs. At present we are depending largely on those devoted citizens who are willing to give their time and effort gratuitously. Perhaps, when Kingwood Center has its auditorium there will be space for us and a headquarters for our important work."

Osborne worked tirelessly contacting individuals about the opportunities available through giving to the Foundation. He met with individuals around Mansfield but also on vacation he would work in a meeting with those who had ties to the community. He spoke successfully with potential donors about bequests and directed donations and established many funds at the Foundation.

In June 1957 the trustees voted to have Osborne fill the newly-created position of executive director at a salary of \$40 per month. After this change of title from president of the board to executive director, Scott Coffin filled the position of president of the board.

A year later at the 1958 annual meeting Coffin mentioned in his letter, "I need not tell any of you that Osborne Meese was the founder of the Richland County Foundation. He not only worked to get it organized, but ever since has carried the major part of the work involved in its operations."

Unfortunately, on the following April 2, Osborne passed away and Coffin had to report on this information at the annual meeting of 1959. He said, "It is unnecessary for me to remind any of you present here today of our great loss resulting from the sudden death of Osborne Meese. In

talking about the future, I have hesitated to use the expression ‘finding someone to take Osborne’s place.’ I doubt very much if anyone will ever take his place. However, this does not mean that the Foundation will not go on and increase in service to the community. It does mean that everyone interested in the Foundation must put forth a little extra effort and take over some part of the work that Osborne carried on so ably and devotedly.”

After Osborne’s death articles in the News Journal read, “To the highly regarded Meese family, the community extends its deepest sympathy. Theirs is a monumental loss which in some degree touches almost everyone in Mansfield.” He was noted as “one of the city’s best known civic leaders for the past half century” and “known as ‘the father of the Richland County Foundation.’” Mansfield “won’t seem quite the same without the steady smile, the twinkling eye, the measured enthusiasm and the gentlemanly dignity of D. Osborne Meese.”

Osborne held the position of executive director for nearly two years with the help of his longtime secretary, Betty Crawford. Betty worked at Meese Insurance, assisted Osborne in handling the Scattergood Fund and was officially the assistant secretary to Osborne once he was named executive director. After Osborne’s death she served as the executive secretary and after 18 years of the position remaining vacant, Betty served as the second executive director of the Richland County Foundation in 1977.

Bob said, "There is no question that my dad put the Richland County Foundation on the map. He was a talented individual and he applied that talent to rallying the community around the concept of a community foundation.”

This article was written by Richland County Foundation Program Officer Allie Watson. It is based on a meeting with Robert B. Meese, the reading of *Meese (Balliett) Family History: A Narrative Genealogy* printed in 1999, the 60th Anniversary report of the Richland County Foundation, years of Richland County Foundation meeting minutes and articles in the Mansfield News Journal 1959.