Local news

It was Barney Hefner Day

SOUTHBURGIDE — Barney Hefner, who left American Optical Corporation last week after 43 years with the company, enjoyed a surprise retirement party last Friday night. More than 250 co-workers, business associates and friends gathered at Edmon's Restaurant to honor him, roast him and wish him well.

Retired along with Hefner was his trademark, a number 21 football jersey, a legacy from his athletic days at Southbridge High School. He put the shirt on obligingly for his audience and said, with remarkable restraint, “I can't believe it. It still fits.”

Donald Maro, athletic director and football coach for the high school, took the mike: “As we all know, Proposition 2½ has cut available monies for most of our athletic programs. We appreciated that a Barney Hefner Fund of $5,500 has been raised by his friends and business associates to carry on his interest in the athletic arena. We will use this in honor of his purchase of three pieces of heavy-duty athletic equipment for the school and new football uniforms for the team.

He pointed out that fund raising for the award was captained successfully by Norman F. Nelson at AO.

“This is one of the greatest gifts we have ever received,” said Edward Desroches, Southbridge High School principal. “Along with accepting the Hefner award, we return the compliment by awarding him the Clair D. Power Memorial Award, a tribute to his continuing interest, and devotion to high school athletics.”

Many of his co-workers and former associates teased Hefner playfully about his Southbridge upbringing and education (on and off the playing field), varylsh from his earlier years and in a serious vein, called attention to his role in the town's burgeoning interest in athletic events. Some of these were stand-up talks and put-down comments from the assembled guests.

Geno Lewis, president of AO, had a few things to say about Hefner: “I'm sure our place will never be the same without you. Assembled guests murmured ‘amn.’” Lewis continued, unperturbed.

I remember your application from August 29, 1938. It said you were short, curly-haired, austere, intelligent. On the basis of the last entry, AO thought you belonged.” Lewis then presented Hefner with a silver platter tin engraved with the date of Hefner's retirement.

A proclamation from the Southbridge Town Council was then read by Rosemary Simmons, an AO employee as well as a council committee member. The proclamation, signed by Donald Jacobs, town manager, declared Saturday, March 6, “Barney Hefner Day.” Several other gifts were offered, including a bronze shoe mounted on a plaque — accompanied by the comment "because the shoe fits, Barney.”

Apologies were accorded Terri Cheeke, Hefner's assistant at AO, for organizing the farewell dinner and for acting as catalyst among Hefner and his friends.

Then Barney Hefner: “The name of my game is people. I've met some nice, wonderful ones, including you out there in the room.” Aside from audiences: “Barney, Barney, but don't forget to check on your pension.”

Hefner was undaunted: “You at American Optical have people of charisma running this company today. I would like to be part of that. But, for now, thanks and good bye.”

Grandfathers unite behind Barney

Benjamin Franklin, aka. Hotey Burnett of American Optical, played the leading role in Barney Hefner's boat-be-retirement ceremony.

“Hey,” said: “I'm one of the grandfathers of this nation and I'm here to honor another grandfather. We have something in common. We both represent the optical industry.”

Ben-Henry was calling attention to the small, oval-shaped metal-framed bifocals he was wearing, which were made especially for the occasion by AO lens specialists, following the originator's design, Ben Franklin, the father of bifocals.

“I am one of the original products of the American system. I like to think of Barney and me as boys together in earlier times, back in Boston in the 18th century,” he said.

“I knew I was a child's devil in my youth, but Barney, at least, was a good man. He's the best.”

Barney Hefner listens as friends praise and roast him at a retirement banquet Friday night.

News Photos — Michael Moore