



Derr and Okamoto Family Biographies

Derr Family Biography

The Derr Family played a large role in building Elk Grove and has dedicated many hours of public service to the community for over 100 years. It all started with J.M. Derr who migrated in 1883 from Iowa to start a new life in California. Just like many during this time, J.M. Derr wanted to find out what the West was all about. He settled in Franklin with cousins and began farming. Soon, he realized farming was not for him and he moved to Elk Grove where he quickly accepted a job rebuilding the Sloughhouse Inn, which had been damaged by fire. J.M. became famous for his construction skills as he built many large barns and homes in the area. In 1898, he started the J.M. Derr Lumber Company, which supplied lumber and building material for many decades.

J.M. Derr married Daisy Mae Johnson in 1906 and adopted her two sons, Lawrence Edwin "Brownie," and Homer Martin. Together they had a daughter, Jessie Mae. All children and their children have been influential in the Elk Grove community through the years. Each family member had a part in running the family business. Brownie had two children, Lawrence Derr and Jane Derr (Morse). Homer and his wife, Ida, had one son Gerald. Jessie Mae married Chester Crump and had three children, Richard, Dale and Carol Lynn. After the passing of J.M. and Brownie, Homer became manager of the lumber business and started a partnership with his sister, Jessie. Later, Gerald managed the business until 1971 when he left the managing to his Aunt Jessie and her family.

While Homer was not at the lumber yard, he was always helping the Elk Grove community. During World War II, Homer accepted the responsibility of taking care of three large strawberry ranches that were owned by Japanese-American families who were sent to camps. Homer also played a crucial role in starting the Elk Grove Sanitary District and served as the first chairman of the group. By the end of World War II, the group installed new sewer lines making Elk Grove a much more sanitary place to live.

The Derr family was also involved in the local fire department and other public services. Brownie, Homer, Lawrence and Gerald all volunteered for the fire department. Gerald enjoyed the fire department so much that he was allowed to become a fire fighter at 14 ½ years old. He was promoted to Assistant Chief in 1957 and later accepted a position as Fire Chief in 1969. He served as Fire Chief for 21 years. In 1985, Gerald was instrumental in the formation of the Elk

Grove Community Services District, now known as the Cosumnes Community Services District. He acted as General Manager for the Fire Department as well as the Parks and Recreation Department until 1992. He later served on the CSD Board of Directors for 8 years. In 1999, Fire Station 75 was named in honor of Gerald Derr for his dedication to the fire service in Elk Grove.

Through the years, the Derr Family has been great business leaders and has dedicated their lives to serving the community of Elk Grove. From the beginning, J.M. Derr set the example for hard work, determination, the importance of family and building a community.

Okamoto Family Biography

Peter and Sue Okamoto were both born in the 1920's to Japanese immigrant parents. Both families were hard working and strived to create a good life for themselves in the United States. However, World War II changed the plans for many Japanese-American families including Peter and Sue as their families were forced to leave their land and homes to be interned in war relocation camps. After spending time in Jerome, Arkansas and Tule Lake, California, Peter and Sue's families resettled in Elk Grove following the end of World War II.

Peter and Sue were married in 1952 and purchased a home on the eastern edge of Elk Grove. This is where they would live together for more than 50 years and raise four children. Peter worked as a propane field engineer for 25 years before opening his own business in Elk Grove, AD Gas Meter Service. From 1980 to 2003, Peter employed many Elk Grove residents and served customers across the nation. Sue worked at the Bank of America on Elk Grove Boulevard for 8 years and then spent 10 years as a budget analyst for the Elk Grove Unified School District.

Community service and volunteerism was very important to the Okamotos. Peter was involved in the Elk Grove Lions Club. He served as the Lions Club Institutional Representative to Boy Scouts of America Troop 59, which started his volunteerism with the Boy Scouts. He volunteered for the Boy Scouts for 30 years including two separate terms as the Scoutmaster for Troop 59. During this time Peter made a great impact on many Elk Grove resident scouts and was able to watch all of his sons become scouts with two of them reaching the highest rank of Eagle Scout. Sue was involved in Boy Scouts for 20 years as she started out as a Den Mother and eventually became Den Leader Coach for the Elk Grove Cub Pack 179. She also served on the Troop Committee for Troop 59 where she tirelessly prepared for many camping trips, banquets and parades.

Sue also volunteered for the Ronald McDonald House and organized several groups for the Church World Service CROP Walk for the Hungry. She volunteered at the American Cancer Society Discovery Shop in Elk Grove and annually raised money for the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure as she was a 30 year survivor of breast cancer. A firm believer in the importance of education, Sue served on the Scholarship Committee of the Elk Grove Community Foundation and held office for the Friends of Sacramento Public Library.

In honor of their 50th wedding anniversary in 2002, they started the Peter and Sue Okamoto Scholarship through the Elk Grove Community Foundation. Each year the Okamoto Scholarship endowment funds two \$1,000 scholarships to graduating seniors from Elk Grove area high schools.

Peter is a World War II veteran and is involved with the Elk Grove Veterans of Foreign Wars Post #2073 where he has held many offices, including three terms as Commander. He was instrumental in establishing the annual Elk Grove Veteran's Day Parade and chaired its Buddy Poppy sale to support Veterans.

Sue passed away in 2006, but is still remembered as a longtime resident of Elk Grove who truly was passionate about her community. She was always grateful for what Elk Grove had given her throughout her life. Peter continued to support many Elk Grove organizations until he passed away in January 2016. Together they made a memorable mark on the community through their dedication, volunteerism and their generosity to Elk Grove.

The information within this document was created at the time of park dedication and may not be current.