

J. CURTIS LEWIS, JR., AND THE HISTORY OF “THE HUNDRED CLUB OF CHATHAM COUNTY, GEORGIA, INC.”

Following the founding of “The 200 Club of The Coastal Empire” in October of 2000, we subsequently learned that an organization with a similar mission had indeed existed in Savannah some 41-years ago.

This fact was further confirmed by Mr. Ralph Scheu, President of the 100 Club of Chicago and volunteer historian of the “Hundred Clubs” in the United States. But for a number of years, we were unable to find any details about this organization and the people surrounding its creation, existence and activities.

Then, recently, discussions with life-long residents Wistar Lewis, Walter Lewis, and J. Curtis Lewis III, brought forth old memories, newspaper clippings, names and other information about that earlier “Hundred Club” in Chatham County.

And here’s what we found:

Sometime in 1967, Chatham County Sheriff Wilkes S. MacFeeley suggested to the Mayor of Savannah, J. Curtis Lewis, Jr. to undertake the establishment and operation of a “One Hundred Club” in the city.

The concept of these all-volunteer, independent organizations was simple and straight forward. Individual citizens and businesses could become members of the Club by paying annual dues. The dues would then be used to provide significant financial support to the surviving families of Law Enforcement Officers and Firefighters who were killed in the line of duty while protecting their communities.

This concept was first created by a man named Bill Packer. Then the largest Pontiac automobile dealer in the world, Packer was based in Detroit. Packer had established the first “One Hundred Club” in 1950, as a means of expressing significant, tangible community gratitude to the families of these Fallen Heroes. The name “One Hundred” was chosen because Bill Packer got 100 of his business friends to join as members.

By 1967, word of Packer’s caring community initiative had spread to several major U.S. cities and 32 such clubs (all using the name “Hundred”) had been formed across the country. Since then, and right up to the present, 90 more have been created for a total of 122 Clubs nationally.

Then-Savannah Mayor, The Honorable Julius Curtis Lewis Jr., was an accomplished business and civic leader whose business interests included automobile dealerships, broadcasting, commercial real estate, and motels.

Mr. Lewis was also an exceedingly generous man who was never too busy to listen to the needs of others. Over the years, he was the primary financial benefactor and sustainer of numerous Greater Savannah-Area organizations.

Lewis was a very private man who did not like a lot of recognition about how generous he was. A very modest person, he did most of his work behind the scenes (Brooks Stillwell, John Miller).

Once approached about the “One Hundred” effort by Chatham County Sheriff Wilkes MacFeeley, who no doubt learned of the Club concept from other law enforcement executives, J.C. Lewis Jr. was very receptive. So much so that, by August, 1968, several newspaper accounts reported the creation of “The 100 Club” with J.C. Lewis Jr. as President, Jack Middleton Vice President, John Miller Secretary and Alderman Edward Perkins Treasurer.

The organization was incorporated in Georgia on November 20th, 1968 as “THE HUNDRED CLUB OF CHATHAM COUNTY, GEORGIA, INC.” by J. Curtis Lewis, John B. Miller and Robert F. Lovett.

Under Mr. Lewis’ leadership, the club raised \$25,000 (about \$150,000 in today’s money) from area businesses. Additionally, fifty charter members paid annual dues of \$150 per year (that would be about \$900 today). Back then, the “One Hundred’s” coverage area for financially-assisting the families of fallen, was of necessity limited to Chatham County. In April of 1969, the Board included:

John R. Riley	Ralston E. Mingledorff	Malcolm Bell
R.M. Wilkes	Richard L. Kattel	Barney F. Diamond
George E. Patterson	Robert F. Lovett	James R. Lientz
B.I. Friedman	Halmer L. Baker	Lawton M. Calhoun
Fred J. Eckert	Christopher F. Hammond Jr.	Clarence B. Reinschmidt
Andrew G. Labrot	Waldo Bradley	Schley Knight
Harben Daniel	Charles Morris	Richard Franklin
Frank W. Spencer		

From 1968 until 1976, with the inspiration and leadership of J.C. Lewis, Jr., the Club responded to the following line-of-duty deaths with upwards of \$150,000 (in 2009 dollars) in financial support for families:

Officer Frank W. Mobley, SPD	1968
Officer Robert D. Watford, SPD	1969
Officer Dennis E. Witherington, CCPD	1969
Officer George Singelton, USC	1975
Officer Daniel A. Hodgson, CCPD	1976
Officer Jim Marchbanks, SPD	1976

Some time prior to 1976, Mr. Lewis stepped down as President of the “One Hundred,” and was succeeded by Jack Middleton.

Ralph Scheu of Chicago reports that, as of 1994 (the year he started keeping records about all the Clubs in the U.S.), the One Hundred Club of Chatham County, Georgia, Inc. had been inactive for about fifteen years. The Secretary of State records show that the Club was administratively dissolved on May 1st 1981.

The founders of The 200 Club of the Coastal Empire (est. in 2000) were unaware of this legacy until now. The history of the 100 Club of Chatham County, interwoven as it is with that of the Lewis Family, is an important part of the history of the various “Hundred” Clubs (NOTE: Historically, Clubs have been formed using the “100”, “200” or even “300” designation), that have done so much for the families of those who, through the years, have gone forward to protect property and lives, regardless of the risk to their own. There can be no greater heroes.

This brief re-cap of Chatham County’s original “One Hundred Club” is a tribute to a great visionary, a great leader, and a truly great man, Mr. J.C. Lewis Jr. It is indeed an honor for today’s 200 Club of the Coastal Empire members to follow in his footsteps.

P.A.”Tak” Argentinis