



Johnston High School Principal Robert Otto

1-27-82

# Principal's retirement to end Johnston's era of Ottos

By PERRY BEEMAN

Register Staff Writer

When Robert Christian Otto retires in July from his 15-year position as Johnston High School principal, he'll end — at least temporarily — a long tradition.

Otto, better known as "Bob," comes from a long line of Ottos who have overseen the growth of the district, the construction of new facilities and the continuous expansion of courses of study.

Otto's great-grandfather, John Lawson, owned the property on which the district's first building was built.

Otto's grandfather, Nick Otto, was a member of the first Johnston School Board and the father of one of the first six graduates.

Otto's father, Arlie, debated school board issues for four terms. All of Arlie's children and all but one of Bob's children were graduated from Johnston High School.

Now Bob Otto, 59, of 6045 N.W. Sixty-first St. will end a productive term as high school principal.

Superintendent Louis Friestad Jr. said the district has operated smoothly and quietly under Otto's supervision.

"When someone makes a mistake, it always falls back on the superintendent and you can live in apprehension," Friestad said.

"I have 150 percent of the information I need in tight situations. The high school has been a good, calm situation."

Otto's level-headedness was demonstrated during an interview at his office last week.

About midway through the interview, a woman with a disturbed look on her face opened the door and said she needed help.

A student had punched a teacher and was being restrained by school and police officials. Otto calmly strolled out to assist.

The student, who was being restrained, yelled obscenities that could be heard down the halls, along with the sounds of a struggle.

A few minutes later, Otto returned to the office, unruffled and calmly explained that a token system recently instituted in the special class had been an "adjustment" problem for the students, this one in particular.

Otto took it in stride, just as he did the building of a \$2.1 million high school in 1972 that took three bond-issue elections before it passed, a \$1.4 million addition to that building and numerous changes in curricula and administration.

Friestad said he convinced Otto to work this year to help implement a new eight-period schedule at the high school.

Of what is Otto most proud?

"The biggest things would have to be the obvious things — the new buildings," said the former Saydel High School social studies teacher, vice principal and coach.

He remembered other accomplishments. There's the alumni association he founded and plans to continue organizing in his retirement.

Oh yes, and the sports teams.

"Our basketball teams that have gone to state [championship tournaments] and our baseball team and our music programs and certainly a number of students that had some high success" are among his prize memories, he said. So are active booster clubs.

Newspaper stories about the Dragons' 1977 state championship baseball team adorn Otto's office walls, as do black-and-white glossies of Johnston schools and a sign that reads, "If you love something, set it free. If it comes back, it is yours — if it doesn't, it never was."

He said he's also proud of the science camp. Eighth-graders are sent off on a retreat to learn not only science but also archery, fishing and other recreational skills they can "use the rest of their lives."

The junior high exploratory courses, which give previews of high school subjects, are gems, he said.

Why retire now, after 18 years of administration and 14 years of teaching in Iowa schools?

"I remember telling my wife after I completed school that I would work 30 years and quit — I would have been 55.

"Well, I worked until I was 59, but I guess that's inflation," said Otto, who has bachelor's and master's degrees from Drake University.

Friestad said the recent illness of Otto's wife, Betty, Johnston's postmaster for 15 years, may also have pushed Bob toward retirement.

Otto said he's happy to have the chance to pursue his hobbies — golfing, fishing, yard work and home maintenance — and to "enjoy what life the Lord will give me."

He said he'll fondly remember working at Johnston.

"When I came here 15 years ago I was apprehensive about 'home town boy returns' and my first principalship. I've been happy and satisfied.

"We have good, strong buildings and people who understand."

## **ROBERT CHRISTIAN OTTO**

Died: February 8, 2002, Luther Park, Des Moines, IA

1942 Johnston High School graduate  
Undergraduate degree: Northeast Missouri State  
Master's degree: Drake University

World War II veteran – Army Air Forces

1951 - 1954 Taught in Blockton, IA  
1954 - 1955 Taught in Woodbine, IA  
1955 - 1968 Taught in Saydel (high school social studies teacher and coach)  
Saydel High School Vice Principal  
August 1, 1968 – June 30, 1983 Johnston High School Principal

Wife: Elizabeth (Betty)  
Johnston's postmaster for 15 years

Sons: Steve – Mason City, IA  
Nick and Jeff – Urbandale, IA  
Greg – Glen Ellyn, IL

Daughters: Nora Hillyer – Omaha, NE  
Dianne Seaman – Des Moines, IA

Great grandfather: John Lawson  
(owned land where Lawson Elementary was built)

Grandfather: Nick Otto  
(on the first Johnston school board and father to one  
of the first six graduates)

Johnston City Council: January 1984 through January 1988  
Annexation Committee: August 1970  
Library Transition Advisory Committee: January 1992 – May 1992  
Board of Library Trustees: May 1992-1997  
Energy Advisory Board: November 1985 – April 1986  
Finance and Budget Committee (Assistant Chair): March 1970  
Interim Park and Recreation Planning Committee: May 1971  
Johnston (Station) Historical Society: Founding member and past president  
1994 – April 1996

**Maurine Myers**

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**From:** "Donaldson, Jo Ann" <jodonald@desmoine.gannett.com>  
**To:** <myers@johnstonlibrary.com>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, March 19, 2002 4:30 PM  
**Subject:** Obit

Source=DM; Date=Feb. 10, 2002; Section=Metro\_Iowa; Page=8;  
Id=2002021213302966;-----Headline: Obituaries ROBERT OTTO Des  
Moines Robert C. Otto, 77, of Trinity Center at Luther Park died of  
complications of Alzheimer's there Friday. Services will be at 10:30  
a.m. Monday at St. Pius X Catholic Church, with burial at Chapel Hill  
Gardens Cemetery. Mr. Otto was born in Des Moines and had lived here most of his life.  
He was a retired principal at Johnston High School and an Army Air  
Forces veteran of World War II. He had served on the Johnston City  
Council and been a library trustee. He was a past president and founding  
member of Johnston Historical Society and enjoyed golfing, gardening and  
fishing. He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth of Grimes; four sons, Steve of  
Mason City, Nick and Jeff, both of Urbandale, and Greg of Glen Ellyn,  
Ill.; two daughters, Nora Hillyer of Omaha and Dianne Seaman of Des  
Moines; a brother, Donald of Victorville, Calif.; three sisters, Arlene  
Murray of New Braunfels, Texas, and Margaret Beck and Betty Gandy, both  
of Panora; and eight grandchildren. Friends may call from 5 to 7 p.m. today at Merle Hay Funeral  
Home,  
where a prayer service will be held at 7 p.m. Memorial contributions may  
be made to the Mid-Iowa Chapter of the Alzheimer's Associations.

Robert Otto, retired principal of Johnston High School, died on February 8, 2002 at Luther Park in Des Moines. Bob was a Johnston native, and had contributed to his community in many ways in addition to his service with the school district.

At one time Bob served on the City Council; he was chair of the committee which was responsible for the founding of the Johnston Library, and was a library trustee for a number of years.

Robert Otto, was, in a real sense, the "founding father" of the Johnston (Station) Historical Society. In 1993, Bob gathered a few local residents together with the purpose of writing a short history of the area to give to new residents who were asking about Johnston's origins.

And in 1994 Bob invited these and other interested citizens to join in forming and incorporating the Johnston (Station) Historical Society. He served as president of the JSHS until April of 1996, when he resigned because of ill health.

Bob was keenly interested in the history and the welfare of the Johnston community. His efforts and his leadership will be missed.

The JSHS sends sympathy to his wife Betty and children and grandchildren.

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**Maurine Myers**

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**From:** "Vickie Roth" <vroth@ci.johnston.ia.us>  
**To:** "Maureen Myers (E-mail)" <myers@johnstonlibrary.com>  
**Sent:** Thursday, March 21, 2002 1:09 PM  
**Subject:** RE: Bob Otto

Please give this to Pally. Thank you.

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Energy Advisory Board: November, 1985 thru April, 1986  
Finance and Budget Committee (Assistant Chair): March, 1970  
Interim Park and Recreations Planning Committee: May, 1971

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