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NEWS RELEASE

August 15, 2016

McPherson Celebrates Gold

McPherson – While athletes representing the United States dominate the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio by setting world records and claiming more than 26 gold medals thus far, the City of McPherson celebrates Olympic success of its own. On August 13, family members representing the 1936 Olympic basketball team gathered at the McPherson Museum to celebrate Olympic gold.

Why McPherson? In the midst of the Great Depression 80 years ago, six members of the McPherson Globe Refiners team crossed the Atlantic Ocean on a ship to join in the Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany. Sponsored by the McPherson Globe Oil and Refinery, the players joined members from the Hollywood Universal team to establish the roster for the first-ever USA Olympic basketball team. McPherson team members included Joe Fortenberry, Tex Gibbons, Francis Johnson, Jack Ragland, Willard Schmidt and Bill Wheatley.

“Every four years the McPherson Museum should be the center of American Olympic basketball,” said Bob Kling, nephew of Globe Refiner player Gibbons. “I always thought the team was a bunch of farm boys from Kansas, but they were all ringers that were recruited to play.” Kling who described the celebration as “one golden weekend,” was moved by the personal history shared by family members. “It was their opportunity to tell the story,” said Kling.

Connie Schweer, daughter of the tallest player Schmidt, shared details about her father exchanging his basketball uniform with a Nazi soldier for a raincoat. Siblings Sally Nibelink and Joe Fortenberry reminisced about their father keeping his gold medal in a shoebox in the closet. And Jerry Johnson, whose father was the shortest player and whose uncle coached the team, reminded others about the Globe Refiners success in “breaking ground” with innovative techniques such as the full-court press, the fast break and the slam dunk.

Memorabilia strengthened the stories shared and included portraits, newspaper clippings, a straw hat and commemorative watches. Don Gibbons, son of “Tex,” was the first to arrive at the celebration with his father’s gold medal tucked in his pocket. Three medals were placed on display for the weekend courtesy of the Gibbons, Fortenberry and Schmidt families. All items whispered the stories of the past. Team USA won the first game over Spain in a forfeit and then defeated Estonia and Mexico in the semifinals. The championship game against Canada was play on outdoor clay courts during a rainstorm. Despite the muddy court and low-50s temperature, team USA prevailed with a final score of 19-8 earning the first-ever gold medal in their sport.

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