

Citizens – Emmett J. Kelly

By Barbara Bedau Brow
White Lake Area Historical Society



1936 Emmett James Kelly – U of M Graduate

Emmett James Kelly was born on 12 July 1908 in Detroit, Michigan, the son of John and Louise (ne Birberick) Kelly. He was a 1936 graduate of the University of Michigan and received a degree in physics.

On 24 July 1937, he married Irene E. Lyons in Whitehall. She was the daughter of Ira J Lyons and his wife Gertrude (ne Kouschur). The wedding took place at the home of the bride's parents known as the Lyons Den. Emmet and Irene had three children: Susan L., Kathleen A. and Thomas M.

Emmett had an extensive military career which included 30 years of active duty with the Michigan Air National Guard, the Army Air Corps, and the United States Air Force. Much of his work involved missile development at White Sands in New Mexico, Redstone Arsenal in Alabama, and in Europe. He also served in England and Korea during his career. He was in charge of the astronaut safety and booster reliability with the Gemini spacecraft program at the time of his retirement. By the time he retired in April, 1963 he had achieved the rank of Colonel.

Emmett was also a member of the Lions Club of Whitehall and American Radio Relay League. His call sign was W8ELM.

After his retirement he became an avid sailor, sailing single-handed until the age of 84. In 2000 he moved to DeLand, Florida, where he died on 5 October 2004. His wife Irene had died in Whitehall on 22 April 1998. They are both buried in Oakhurst Cemetery in Whitehall.