

A History of Rotary

This history was initially compiled by Past President Lloyd Harris, CBE PHF, of the Rotary Club of Burnie and was presented by Lloyd at a combined Rotary Club meeting on the occasion of the 100th Birthday of Rotary International in 2005. Some updating was done in 2008 by PP Allan Jamieson, PHF.

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The history of Rotary has been highlighted by its rapid and wide growth from small beginnings in Chicago in 1905. The first Club, formed on 23rd March 1905 with a membership of 15, led to the growth of the organization in its subsequent 100 years. In 2008, there were 32,000 Clubs in 170 countries with a total membership of 1.2 million members.

Founder: Paul Harris

As a three year-old boy in 1871, Paul Percy Harris was separated from his mother; together with his elder brother Cecil, he was taken by his failed father from his home in Racine on Lake Michigan to live with his grandparents hundreds of kilometres away in the very small town of Wallingford, Vermont. His father moved on and Paul later, by sheer coincidence, met his mother and sister Nina in the street in Wallingford after they arrived by train to try to reunite the family. Paul, however, continued to live with his grandparents while his mother and father went to live in Denver, Colorado with his sister and three other brothers.

Paul's grandfather, conscious of his own son's failure, was determined his grandson was going to be given every chance to make a good life and sent his teenage grandson to Black River Academy in Ludlow, Vermont. The grandfather soon learned that Paul had a penchant for pranks; he was expelled by the Principal for being "not worthy of salvage."

Paul was then enrolled in the Vermont Military Academy and at the age of 18 earned admission to the University of Vermont. Eighteen months later he was wrongfully expelled for misconduct. [The University later absolved him and awarded him a B.A. in 1919 and in 1933, an Honorary PhD. He never used the title.]

He then moved on to the prestigious Princeton University in New Jersey. His grandfather died when he was only 21 and he suddenly felt his life had no direction. He took a job as a cleaner at a marble factory but always remembered his grandfather's advice to seek a career in law. He decided to do just that by enrolling at the University of Iowa, where he graduated in 1891.

Instead of going straight into legal practice, he decided to first "discover the world". He went on a hunting and fishing foray in NW United States till his money ran out, then he headed for San Francisco where he got a job as a journalist at the Chronicle.

Paul then spent time fruit picking in the area, as a teacher at a Business College in Los Angeles, an actor in Colorado, again as a reporter and later as a

cowboy in the nearby ranges. Next came Florida as a night clerk in a hotel and as a marble salesman, later moving on to Washington, Kentucky and Pennsylvania doing whatever jobs came his way.

In Philadelphia he decided to join a cattle boat headed for England – which he described as “ the land of his dreams”. The ship was filthy and the conditions no better for the crew than for the cattle. After only a few hours ashore in the grimy docklands of Liverpool, he had to re-board for the return journey.

In spite of that unfortunate experience, he then sought another cattle ship with much better conditions bound for his dream city, London, and eventually spent a few of what he described as the happiest days of his life in that city. On arrival back in the States, after a short visit to Chicago, he moved on to New Orleans picking oranges and thence back to his former job as a marble salesman with his friend in Jacksonville, Florida, which led to his travel as a buyer to the UK, France, Spain and Italy and in the Caribbean.

Paul rejected an offer of partnership in his friend’s marble and granite company saying he was returning to Chicago, not to make money but to make a life. He returned to Chicago at the age of 28, after what he described as his vagabond five years, during which he discovered that there were a lot of lonely people out there and a lot more who needed help and he made a commitment to do something to change that. He wrote of that time in his life: *“As the train thundered westwards from New York City, I mused back over the twenty eight years of my life, and how the vagaries of fate had dictated my upbringing. It could have all been so very different. Had my father not been compelled to sell his business and break up our home, I would not, at the impressionable age of three, have been deprived of what should have been the controlling influence of my natural guardian, my father.”*

He secured a license to practice Law, opened his office near Dearborn Street and built up a practice specializing in victims of fraud, bankruptcy and embezzlement.

Rotary Starts

And so it transpired that the 37 year-old Paul Harris, on Thursday 23rd February, 1905, invited three of his few friends – coal dealer Sylvester Schiele, mining engineer Gus Loehr and merchant tailor Hiram Shorey – all with small town backgrounds to meet him that evening to discuss his idea of overcoming the loneliness of the big city and of establishing an association with other businessmen by forming a friendship club.

They met in Gus’s modest engineering works office but they could never have guessed that in three short years, Paul’s proposed Club would grow to 200 members. At their second meeting a fortnight later in Paul’s office, the original four were joined by a real estate broker and an organ manufacturer

At the third meeting, in Sylvester’s coal yard office, the number had grown to 15 and the main topic was what they should call their proposed new Club.

Suggestions tossed around were Chicago Fellowship, Windy City Roundup, Chicago Circle, the Lake Club, Friends in Business and the Trade and Talk Club. Paul's suggestion was that because they planned to rotate meetings around member's offices, why not call it the Rotation Club. They knew they were on to something but decided that shortening it to Rotary sounded better. That was it!

They decided that their Club would have only one representative of each profession or business in the community to enhance and enrich the quality and diversity of their fellowship. In sharing their experiences and problems, they soon discovered the notion of service to each other and to their customers, their employees and their children and to the community and thus was born the concept of a Service Club.

A Board of Directors was elected at that third meeting and although Paul Harris was the obvious choice for President, he declined the position and nominated his good friend Sylvester Schiele. However he did accept the Presidency in 1907 and by the end of his two-year term, membership stood at 150.

The fledgling Club's first community service project was prompted by the fact that a nearby itinerant preacher's horse died and because he was poor, he couldn't replace it and consequently couldn't make the rounds of his country churches and parishioners. The Club responded quickly and within two weeks, the preacher had a new horse. The second service scheme came a few months later when the Club decided to build men's and women's comfort stations outside the new Chicago City Hall.

Little did Paul Harris dream that in five short years, by 1910, he would become the first President of the Association of Rotary Clubs of America with 18 Clubs across the United States with 1800 members, and that the idea would gradually grow and spread into other countries where the name and ideals of Rotary became recognized as filling a need in the lives of those who had a desire to serve their communities.

Rotary International

Rotary became an international reality in 1911 when, following the establishment of a Club in Canada, it quickly spread to England, Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Rotary's growth from that point was nothing less than phenomenal. By 1913, it had grown to 10,000 members in 74 Clubs in six countries. Within 11 more years it had grown to 100,000 members, within 22 more years, to 250,000 members, in 15 more years, to 500,000 members and 25 years later, at the rate of 60 new Rotarians every day in each of those 25 years it hit the jackpot in 1986 with 1,000,000 members in 22,400 clubs spread across 160 countries.

[In 1987, the United States Supreme Court ruled 7-0 against Rotary International in its case against the Rotary Club of Duarte, in California, which club – contrary to the constitution – had admitted female members and had consequently had its charter withdrawn. Following the Court's decision, Rotary International removed the word 'male' from its constitution in 1989.

Currently 15% of Rotarians worldwide are women and close to four out of every five Rotary clubs have women members.]

Rotary spread around the world [arriving in Melbourne in 1921, Hobart and Launceston in 1924 and Devonport in 1928] and this naturally gave the organisation a truly international character; it is perhaps not too surprising to discover that, over the first 100 years, the role of International President has been held by Rotarians from 22 countries – 57 Americans, 4 Australians*, 4 Canadians, 4 Brits, 4 Mexicans, 3 Brazilians, 3 Indians, 3 Italians, 2 Japanese, 2 Thais and one each from France, Peru, Uruguay, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Sweden, Bermuda, the Philippines, Switzerland, Argentina, Nigeria and last but by no means least, Northern Ireland.

* AUSTRALIAN PRESIDENTS OF ROTARY INTERNATIONAL:

1948-49	Angus Mitchell	Rotary Club of Melbourne, Victoria
1978-79	Clem Renouf	Rotary Club of Nambour, Queensland
1988-89	Royce Abbey	Rotary Club of Essendon, Victoria
1997-98	Glen Kinross	Rotary Club of Hamilton, Queensland.

But of course, just as Rotary grew in size, it also grew in stature and in scope and the early modest ideals and service activities grew to embrace national and international programmes to better the lot of communities in member countries across the world.

Perhaps the acme of community service schemes, conceived by Rotary, was a scheme to enhance the quality and life expectancy of all children right around the world – the notion of completely eradicating the crippling and deadly disease of poliomyelitis from the face of the earth.

Rotary's PolioPlus project

Ever since the early 1920's, Rotary Clubs in the States had been active in seeking to relieve the effects of polio in the community but it was not till the arrival of Albert Sabin's oral vaccine in 1960 and its use on 77 million children in USSR and 23 million in Eastern Block countries, resulting in the disappearance of polio in those countries, that the possibility of eradicating the disease from the earth seemed feasible.

The disease was still rife in underdeveloped countries and the world's most populace countries, India and China, and in 1969, the year of the landing on the moon, 60 million children were born without protection from polio. During the 1960's and 1970's, each hour of every day, polio struck 30 children, condemning three of them to death and the rest to lifelong disablement.

Rotary in America two-and-fro'd on the polio issue until in 1973, Pennsylvania Rotarians funded the immunization of 1 million children in Guatemala. In 1980, Albert Sabin, an honorary Rotarian, in a speech to the Chicago Rotary International Convention, urged Rotary to become involved in mass immunization of polio.

At the Rotary Conference in Tokyo in 1978, RI President from Australia, Clem Renouf, suggested to the 39,834 delegates that Rotary Clubs be invited to join

his new Health, Hunger and Humanity programme, or 3H programme as it was dubbed, as a vehicle for establishing international programmes. His plan led to the establishment, at the 1984 Convention of a programme to form international Committees to raise money to undertake immunization of the world's newborn children against polio for a period of five years at an estimated cost of \$US120 million.

The many plans came together with an extensive international money raising programme called PolioPlus** and, at the 1988 RI convention, some forty-four international Committees based in various countries around the world reported that they had jointly raised US\$220 million. With this, the programme kicked off.

** THE "PLUS" IN POLIOPLUS

When the RI Directors made their pledge to eradicate polio, they saw the pledge as being about more than solely polio. Polio was the "catch cry" but the Directors believed that the campaign would bring with it a dramatic increase in immunisation against other vaccine-preventable diseases targeted by the World Health Organisation: Measles, tuberculosis, diphtheria, whooping cough and tetanus – diseases that cause vastly more sickness and higher mortality than what results from polio. The Directors encapsulated this belief in the word "Plus."

The "Plus" in PolioPlus is paying off. Annual deaths from measles dropped from 750,000 in 2000 to under 200,000 in 2007; worldwide deaths from measles could soon be just 10% of what they were in 1999. The prospect is real of eradicating measles altogether – some "Plus"!

Civil wars in Congo, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Afghanistan were put on hold while a total of over 20 million children in those countries were immunized in a series of National Immunisation Days – called NID's. In the early 1990's, in the course of an NID organized in Peru, the Shining Path guerrillas temporarily laid down their arms so Rotarians could work at 2,300 vaccination stations, making 28,000 lunches for the health-care workers and volunteers and donating the use of more than 800 vehicles to transport the vaccine around the country. Once the NID's were over though, the fighting unfortunately resumed.

Around the world, huge teams of doctors and helpers, with UN support, joined Rotarians in the mammoth task of completing immunization programs, not in weeks or months, but days. In December 1995 in India, two million health workers and volunteers manned 600,000 immunisation posts throughout the country to inoculate 90 million children under three years of age in a single day. With the inclusion of four- and five-year olds the following year, that number rose to 127 million and another 152 million received the precious two drops of vaccine in a single NID in 2000. Can you believe it, 152 million children in one day! But the largest campaign ever undertaken took place, again in India, home of the world's largest child population, in 2003 when 165 million children under the age of five were immunised over a period of six days, bringing Rotary's contribution in India alone to \$46 million and its vaccination score to more than 500 million.

The Americas were declared polio-free in 1994, China and the whole western Pacific region in 2000 and Europe and the former Soviet block by 2002. In 1988 – the year the campaign started – there were 350,000 new cases of polio

in a total of 125 countries. In the early years of this 21st Century, small pockets of the disease remained in Africa and South Asia. For instance, in 2008 – just 20 years after Rotary’s PolioPlus project started – there were only 1,572 cases worldwide and Polio remained endemic in just four countries: Nigeria (781 cases), India (535), Pakistan (106) and Afghanistan (30). The remaining cases (120) arose from virus accidentally “imported” from these endemic countries into other countries by the movement of people.

The project continues, with massive support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which donated US\$100 million towards the final eradication of polio in the world. Rotary has committed, in total, over \$US600 million to this, the world’s largest and most successful community service programme. But as PolioPlus Director Walter Maddocks reminded Rotarians, PolioPlus was not about raising money, it was about saving children – it was about 2 billion children saved from iron lungs and early deaths and lifetimes in leg braces. And that must surely be Rotary at its best. But for the “average” Rotarian, Rotary is simply getting together to enjoy each others fellowship while striving to make the world about us a better place.

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