

**Rotary – Its History, Purpose and Accomplishments  
(The Who, What, When, Where, How & Why about the Worldwide  
Club known as Rotary)**

by  
PDG Walt Sickles, D7300



On February 23, 2023, Rotary celebrated its 118th birthday. The club, the first of its kind in the world, was started in Chicago on Feb. 23, 1905, by Paul Harris, a 36 year old single attorney.

Just to put that in perspective, Rotary was started the same year that the first motion picture was shown to a public audience (this happened at the Nickelodeon Theatre in Pittsburgh), 8 years before the first public gas station was opened (again in Pittsburgh), 15 years before the first commercial radio station (Pittsburgh's own KDKA), went on the air, 22 years before the first talking movie, "The Jazz Singer", hit the silver screen and 34 years before the first trans-Atlantic passenger airplane flight took place.

Paul Harris has an interesting story. He was born on April 19, 1868, in Racine, WI, and at the age of three his family "fell on hard times". Paul and his five year old brother, Cecil, went to live with their paternal grandparents in Wallingford, Vermont. They grew up there and after high school Paul had short stints at both the University of Vermont and Princeton University. He later attended the University of Iowa where he received a law degree.

After graduation Paul had a wanderlust and he just wasn't ready to settle down. He wanted to see the world, so, he did just that. For almost five years Paul traveled all around the world, by himself, (by boat as there were no planes yet) doing odd jobs while also selling granite and marble from Vermont to pay his way.

Upon returning from his "trip of a lifetime" Paul settled down in Chicago and opened a private law practice. After a couple of years Paul, still single, felt like he wanted more friends and more fellowship so he came up with an idea. He invited three business acquaintances, in different professions (a Mining Engineer, a Coal Dealer and a Tailor) , to a get-together. They met at the office of one of the other fellows and, at Paul's suggestion, they decided to start a club. They then set the ground rules. They decided to meet once a week, and to keep it interesting, they also decided to rotate their meetings from one member's office to the other. That, of course, is how the club's name, "Rotary", came about.

A fifth person (a Printer) joined the club a week later but retention was a problem, even back then, as two of the original founding members left the club not too long after it was started. The club did grow, however, and began to flourish.

After the club had been in existence for a while it was suggested that they should do some kind of a service project in order to give back to the community. First they bought a horse for a country doctor whose horse had died. Next, they bought a warm suit of clothes for a newsboy. Then they found a more involved project that they could handle and, as a result, provided the people of Chicago with their first public toilet facility, in City Hall. It actually resembled a wooden version of what we know today as a Porta-John.

It took several years before another club was started. In 1908, through friends and acquaintances, the second club was formed in San Francisco. The downtown Pittsburgh Club, the Great-Granddaddy of most of the clubs in Western Pennsylvania, was started in late 1910 as the 20th Rotary Club in the world and in 1912 clubs were started in Canada and Great Britain making Rotary an International organization.

In 1914, Rotary held its first International Convention. It took place in Chicago and had 60 attendees. Recent RI Conventions have attracted up to 50,000 attendees from 150 countries.

In 1917, at the Rotary International Convention in Atlanta, when Rotary was just 12 years old, outgoing President, Arch Klumph, proposed that Rotary set up an endowment fund “for the purpose of doing good in the world”. A year later the Kansas City Club hosted the RI Convention and donated the proceeds, as the first contribution to this fund, in the amount of \$26.50. In 1928 the fund was renamed, “The Rotary Foundation” and the following year, 1929, the Foundation gave its first gift, \$500, to the International Society for Crippled Children, created by Rotarian, Edgar Allen. Later the society became known as “The Easter Seal Society”.

Paul passed away in 1947 and through the many contributions to the Foundation, given in his memory, the first scholarship program for foreign graduate study was begun. In the mid-60's, three additional programs were added to support high school aged students to study abroad, technical training and education studies, and matching grants for clubs to use for community service projects.

In 1943 Rotary adopted the “Four Way Test”, (see below) a simple ethical guideline, authored by Rotarian, Herbert Taylor, and used by him to help rejuvenate a dying company. In 1955, during Taylor’s year as RI President, he transferred the “Four Way Test” copyright to Rotary International.

Also, in 1955, in Pittsburgh, Dr. Jonas Salk’s dead virus, injectable, Polio Vaccine discovery was certified as being safe and effective. In 1956, Oakland Rotarian, Dr. Robert “Bob” Hingson, invented the “Jet Gun for Peace”, an air pressure gun which was a method of giving inoculations without the use of a needle. In 1958 Bob started the “Brother's Brother Foundation” in Pittsburgh which his son, Luke, a member of the Moon Township Club, headed until his recent retirement. In 1962, Dr. Albert Sabin, introduced his live virus, oral Polio Vaccine.

In 1978 Rotary began their “Health, Hunger & Humanity” (3H) Grants Program with a project to immunize 6 million children in the Philippines against Polio. Due to the success of that project, the Rotary “Polio Plus Campaign” was launched in 1985.

Another milestone occurred in 1987 when women were, for the first time, invited to join Rotary.

At the Philadelphia Rotary International Convention in 1988, three years after the launch of the “Polio Plus Campaign”, outgoing President, Charles “Chuck” Keller of California, PA, announced that Rotary had exceeded its original \$120,000,000 goal for “Polio Plus” by more than \$100,000,000.

Several years later, Rotary held its first “Peace Forum” which led to the establishment of Rotary Peace Fellowships. Of the many other projects that Rotary works on, a few are - providing clean water in developing countries, promoting literacy, and providing disaster relief throughout the world.

Rotary has grown over the past 115 years to the point where there are nearly 1.25 million members in over 35,000 clubs in over 200 countries and geographical locations.

The “Polio Plus” project has been extremely successful in that the total number of new wild virus polio cases in 2014 was 359; in 2015, 74; in 2016, 37; in 2017, 22 and in 2018 it was 33. The past two years the number has risen slightly into the low 3 digits but because there are only 2 countries



left that are endemic, Afghanistan & Pakistan, we are truly “This Close” to the complete eradication of Polio, a goal and dream that we have had for more than three decades. From January thru September, 2021, only 2 new cases were reported (both in January), 1 in Afghanistan and 1 in Pakistan. When our goal and dream has been accomplished it will be the first disease that will have been eradicated in the world by a non-governmental organization.

Rotary also sponsors several youth organizations, “Interact”, “Rotaract” and “EarlyAct” being three of them. The total membership of these youth programs is over 900,000 worldwide, thereby making the entire family of Rotary more than two million strong. If we then add to our “Official” Rotary Family, all of the people throughout the world that we have served in one way or another over the past 100+ years, our Rotary Family numbers in the billions and continues to grow every day.

Rotary is truly a worldwide family of folks who all have the same desire, to be of service to our fellowmen and to do our best to help make our world a better place in which to live and work. With that in mind, we strive to follow our motto, “Service Above Self”, as we go about our daily activities while also striving to practice our “Four Way Test”:

Of the Things We Think, Say and Do -

- 1/ Is it the Truth?
  - 2/ Is it Fair to All Concerned?
  - 3/ Will it build Goodwill and Better Friendships?
  - 4/ Will it be Beneficial to All Concerned?
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