



FEBRUARY 23, 1905 -- The First Meeting of Rotary

Friday, 23 February 2007 marked the 202nd year since the Thursday, 23 February 1905 when Paul Harris, his friend and client Silvester Schiele, friend Gus Loehr and acquaintance Hiram Shorey met in Gus's office in the Unity Building in Chicago, in Room 711.

Here is the account in Harris's own words.

"On an occasion during the summer of 1900, Paul was invited to dine with a lawyer friend, who lived in Rogers Park, and after dinner he and his friend took a walk, during the course of which they called on several neighborhood stores and shops of various kinds and at each visit his friend introduced him to the proprietor. Paul was deeply impressed with the events of the evening walk. His host had evidently found a good many friends among the business men in his neighborhood.

Paul's clients were business friends but they were not social friends, and he wondered if there were any reason why he could not make social friends of his business friends, at least of some of them. He conceived of a group of business men banded together socially; then he thought that there would be an especial advantage in each member having exclusive representation of his particular trade or profession. The members would be mutually helpful.

He resolved to organize such a club. Who should be asked to join? Of one thing he was certain—they must be friendly men. He thought of his client, Silvester Schiele, the coal man, and Gustavus Loehr, mining engineer, and then he thought of Harry Ruggles, a printer who had been supplying the needs of his office. All these were approachable, friendly men. Then he thought of others who did not seem to pass the test.

He talked matters over with Schiele and also with Gus. [In 1938, 9 years before Paul Harris died; Schiele wrote an article in *The Rotarian* about his early conversations regarding Paul's ideas] He liked them both and thought they would like each other, and on the first convenient occasion he introduced them. They did like each other. There was much in the past lives of the two men to justify the belief that they would understand each other and enjoy each other's companionship. Both had come to Chicago from small communities, Silvester from Clay City, Indiana, and Gus from Carlinville, Illinois. Both were of German parentage and each had worked his way unaided to the establishment of a profitable business in a great city.

On the night of February 23, 1905, the first meeting took place at Gus' office in the Unity Building. Silvester and Paul had dined together at an Italian restaurant on Chicago's near north side. Gus, by prearrangement, had invited a personal friend, Hiram Shorey, a merchant tailor, a native of the village of Litchfield, in the State of Maine, to whom he had previously introduced Paul. The meeting was enlivened by the relation of personal experiences, after which Paul unfolded the general purposes of his plan.

The significant occurrence of the second meeting was the introduction of Harry Ruggles, the printer. Harry was destined to play an important part in the life of the Chicago club, for through his suggestion of club singing his influence has been made felt by the entire movement.

The spirit of the early days of Rotary has frequently been described as selfish. There were certainly many indications to justify the description.

The literature of the period, most of which was the work of Paul, emphasized the business advantage of membership. Prospective members were frequently appealed to directly on the basis of business gain. But even here is a distinction, subtle though it may seem. The prevailing thought was to give-not to receive. Giving was more reconcilable with the other thing that went along with it-friendship.

The net result was that those who came into the club for the sole purpose of getting as much as they could out of it were disappointed and dropped out.

It is true that some actually have realized substantial business benefits from their membership in Rotary, but that may be said of the members of almost any other club. Many have realized no business benefits whatever, and the one class is as well satisfied as the other. Viewed from a financial standpoint Rotary has been a liability to Paul, not an asset. Few would contend that the spirit of the Rotary of today is selfish. No more was it selfish in the first year of the movement. The lure of Rotary has ever been the friendships that have been found there. By none has friendship been more highly valued than by the first group who gathered together in the year of our Lord, 1905.

During the course of one of the early meetings, Paul suggested several possible names for the new club. Among others-Rotary. It met with general favor and was adopted forthwith. The significance of the name becomes apparent on examination of the original plan of the club, which provided for rotation in the place of meeting, in the chairmanship, and even in membership which was to be continued for one year only. The last named provision was an expedient to insure attendance, it being thought that sustained interest in attention to club duties would be assured if continued membership were made to depend upon re-election. Members were fined 50 cents for failure to attend meetings, and no excuses were given consideration. The proceeds of the fines imposed paid all expenses of running the club."

Paul P. Harris Pages 92-96 "The Founder of Rotary", 1928

THE FIRST FOUR and NUMBER FIVE

"There was Silvester, a coal dealer, our first president; he was of German parentage. His was a kindly nature and his face was wont to light up with pleasure on meeting friends.

He told interesting stories of his boyhood home on an Indiana farm, revealing the picture of a log cabin and family group around the fireplace. He told of the hardships of early life; for example, of the snow that used to pelt through the chinks in the roof of the attic in which he slept, forming miniature drifts upon the floor. He treasured the memory of early days. Though his life in Chicago had been a struggle, he had managed to be helpful to the younger members of his family.

He had responded to his country's call in its time of need, serving in Cuba during the Spanish-American war. Clearly he was eligible. Succeeding years have demonstrated the wisdom of the selection; Silvester fills a worthy place, and his life becomes increasingly useful with advancing years. He is the center of community activities and church work, the key man in charitable undertakings. Many young men have him to thank for years of wise counsel. Many crippled children have him to thank for physical rehabilitation. To Silvester every human need is a command. His telephone rings night and day, but he is never too tired to respond although his health is not always the best, and he is very tired at times. During the early days of the depression, and until the charities in his part of the city were put on an organized basis, Silvester's office was made to serve as a clearing-house, and many hundred needy were given relief.

There was another of German parentage; Gustavus, a promoter. His personality challenged attention. His was a rare combination, the good in him easily outweighing the bad. He was a stormy petrel, vehement, impetuous, imperative, domineering, in one breath; then calm, docile, and lovable in the next. He was always thought compelling; his words were spoken with lightning like rapidity, and with such force that men frequently stopped in the street to look at him. His educational advantages had been limited, but his English was classical.

Where he found the vocabulary with which to give his furious thoughts expression, was a quandary. Gus' membership was of brief duration. The feverish ups and downs of business resulted first in his resignation from membership, and a few years later in his death. Requiescat in pace. Dear Gus, you rested little while here.

Hiram, a merchant tailor who hailed from the state of Maine, was of the number. He was an agreeable fellow. He had never quite reconciled himself to life in a large city; in fact, through all the years his thoughts have constantly reverted to the state of his nativity. There he spends his summer vacations, and to the rock-ribbed state of Maine he will eventually return to spend his remaining days.

Hiram, due to circumstances beyond his control, did not retain his membership in the club, though he has frequently manifested interest in the movement and shown that he cherishes the memory of the early days.

These three men and the writer constituted the first group to foregather in the fellowship of Rotary. They were the vanguard of a mighty host, but to mention the four without including the fifth - would be to do an injustice.

Harry, a printer, was number five. He measured up to every requirement, insofar as his business habits were concerned; he was reliable, punctual, and straight-forward; dishonesty was to him incomprehensible. The only question in the minds of the others was, "How does he stand in point of fellowship?" He seemed cold, unemotional, and inexperienced in the ways of men. Harry had been raised on a farm in northern Michigan. His father had been an upright and religious man, whose weakness had been his childish faith in all mankind. As a consequence, his cupboard was so frequently bare that the belief that man was created for the purpose of waging merciless war' fare against poverty was deeply embedded in young Harry's mind."

Paul P. Harris Pages 39-41 "This Rotarian Age," 1935

"This is a changing world; we must be prepared to change with it. The story of Rotary will have to be written again and again!" ~ Paul P. Harris Page 253 "This Rotarian Age"