

## Rogers Rotary Club History By Mark Curtis

Sometime late in 1916, Charley Baltzell, Division Superintendent of the Frisco Railway Company in Fort Smith, Arkansas, walked into a meeting of Rogers men consisting of Erwin Funk, editor of the "Rogers Democrat," Perry Clark, a banker, and Morgan McMichael, a hardware store owner, Baltzell greeted them by saying, "Just the three men I want to see. What do you know about Rotary clubs?" They confessed that they knew very little, but were willing to learn – and learn they did? Not long after that meeting, Rogers, Arkansas became the smallest city in the world to have its own Rotary club. The date was April 1917 – over 100 years ago. Rogers and Rotary have never been the same.

Baltzell's meet was preceded in 1916 when Rev. Jack Kirkpatrick, formerly a Presbyterian minister in Rogers and then President of the Fort Smith Rotary Club, began discussing with Charley Baltzell the possibility of sponsoring a club in NW Arkansas. Baltzell suggested that if 30 or 40 Rogers businessmen would become charter members of a club, they could initially run it as a local chamber of commerce, which Rogers lacked in those days. The District Governor of Rotary's 6<sup>th</sup> district, which at the time included 20 clubs in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Arkansas, was a friend of Baltzell's. When approached about the possible NWA club, he was 100% in favor of it. However, Rotary headquarters in Chicago was not as enthusiastic because they did not encourage the organizing of Rotary clubs in cities with populations of less than 5,000. Rogers had a population of less than 3,000 then. But, with the blessing of the District Governor and the support of Rev. Kirkpatrick and the Ft. Smith club, an effort was made to contact prospective members to fill the classifications and get a club underway in Rogers.

Records show that the first organizational meeting was held January 23, 1917, at the Presbyterian church, then located on the NW corner of Walnut and 4<sup>th</sup> Street, where the 1<sup>st</sup> Western Bank stands today and very appropriately across the street from where the Chamber of Commerce building stands today. A dinner was held at the Commercial Hotel – located at Elm and South 1<sup>st</sup> Street (The hotel building was torn down in the 1970's.).

The first business meeting was held Tuesday night, January 30, 1917, in the Mutual Aid Union Building. The club's constitution was adopted, and 36 charter members enrolled. Officers were elected on February 6<sup>th</sup> and the first luncheon meeting was held at the Commercial Hotel on February 13<sup>th</sup>. The charter was granted by Rotary International on April 1, 1917, and Rogers became Rotary Club no. 289, the 5<sup>th</sup> club in Arkansas. Little Rock's club started in 1914, Ft. Smith in 1916, Hot Springs in 1916, and Helena in 1917. At the time, Missouri had 4 clubs, Oklahoma had 6, and Kansas 10.

Convincing Rotary International to accept the club was a great accomplishment, not only for Rogers, but for other small towns, as well – paving their way into Rotary in the future. It is interesting to note that the initiation fee to join in 1917 was \$5.00 and yearly dues were \$11.00. Lunch cost 35 cents with the hotel giving a 5-cent rebate back to the club. A Tuesday night meeting was held once a month, usually at a local church. Our club is now a member of Rotary

District No. 6110, which includes a part of NW Arkansas, NE Oklahoma, SE Kansas, and SW Missouri.

A Rogers Rotarian was very conscientious about tracking the events of our club from its beginning to 1939. I believe it was Erwin Funk, longtime club Secretary. I will use his annual reports to give you a taste of early Rogers Rotary.

1917 – The club took the lead in good road work in Rogers – helped form the Rogers Good Roads Club, published road maps, and took photos for the Motor World Magazine to promote NW Arkansas. A special committee was formed to be responsible for grading Walnut Street and for giving streets in the downtown section 2 coats of heavy oil and getting business owners to have streets swept all summer and fall. The Club headed the campaign for sale of Liberty Loan Bonds.

1918 – The 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary meeting was held in the Methodist Church. The lunch cost up to 50 cents. Club president, Perry Clark, died on October 8<sup>th</sup>. After his death only 2 more meetings were held in 1918 because of the flu outbreak, by orders of the Board of Health.

1919 – The Club gave \$300.00 in cash for prizes for the best apple exhibit at the State Horticultural meeting in Fayetteville. At the July 29<sup>th</sup> meeting, a Rotarian introduces a new apple variety – Fanny. Members discussed a plan for a local Chamber of Commerce.

1920 – The Club moved lunch meetings to the Elks Club rooms on the NE corner of Walnut and 2<sup>nd</sup> Street. Lunch was swerved by the Women's Progressive Club. The Club raised \$1,000 for the Ozark Playground Association. The Education Committee tried to raise \$10,000 for the Rogers schools. They did not reach goal but were still able to fund schools for the year!

1921 – The Club sponsored the new Fayetteville club, starting with 19 members. The Club sponsored the formation of the Rogers Commercial Club, forerunner to the Chamber of Commerce.

1922 – The club moved lunch meetings to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the Adams Building at 316 South 1<sup>st</sup> Street (now Resource Design Company). The Women's Progressive Club was still providing lunches. The Club held a Christmas party for 160 underprivileged children.

1923 – The Club has 45 members with 14 new members this year. The initiation fee increased to \$10.00 with annual dues at \$20.00. The Club helped to establish the Apple Blossom Festival.

1924 – The Club dues increased to \$25.00 with 5 new members added. The Club President, Ed Sharp, was elected as District #15 Governor. He was the first member so honored. In December, the club sponsored a new club in Bentonville. They had previously been organized but had not chartered.

1925 – The Club budget was set at \$1,200. The Club voted to raise the lunch fee to 75 cents.

1926 – The club had 42 members. In August, the meetings were moved to the Whitlow Building on West Walnut Street. The Women's Progressive club continued to serve lunch. The Club helped form the Rogers Athletic Club. The club members endorsed a plan to create a national park on the Pea Ridge Civil War Battlefield.

1927 – The May 10<sup>th</sup> meeting marked the 46<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first train to arrive in Rogers. The club adopted a standard constitution and fiscal year, which the current club continues to use today.

1928 – In August, the club voted to discontinue the once-a-month night meeting. On October 30<sup>th</sup>, the club members inspected the new county courthouse in Bentonville.

1929 – In February, the club appoints a committee to assist in securing a right of way through Rogers for US Highway 71. In April, the club held a straw vote to endorse a plan to have bonds issued for Highway 71 construction.

1930 – In August, the club held calf judging contest with live calves in the club room. In December, the club met for lunch, but all money collected went to a Christmas dinner for needy children.

1931 – In January, lunch cost was reduced from 75 cents to 50 cents and the annual dues from \$25.00 to \$20.00, probably a result of the depression.

1932 – The local economy was still in bad shape. The club membership fell to 25 fellows.

1933 – The club dues were lowered to \$3.00 per quarter.

1934 – The club gave \$25.00 to help buy schoolbooks for needy children. The cash receipts were under \$400.00 for the year.

1935 – The club moves meetings to the Harris Hotel where it remained until 1963. The economy was still a challenge for the area and the club.

1936 – On August 4<sup>th</sup> the club voted to approve a WPA lake project below Diamond Springs (now Lake Atalanta). A Christmas party was held for 210 children.

1937 – The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the club party was held at the Harris Hotel.

1938 – The club held a charter night for Berryville, Arkansas and for Cassville, Missouri.

1939 – The club start discussions about a Rotary Hospital for adults in Memphis. The #136 District Assembly was held in Rogers at the Harris Hotel. There were 57 clubs in the district at this time.

1941 – The club had 40 members.

1942- The club held its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary party on Tuesday, January 20<sup>th</sup>. The club had 36 members listed on the program.

1945 – The club started the year with 34 members and grew to 55 by July of 1946.

1955 – The club meeting venue, the Harris Hotel, is renamed the Hotel Arkansas. The club continued meeting there until July 1963.

1956- In the January meeting, the club passed a resolution which was sent to the US House of Representatives Appropriation Committee to request funding to construct the Beaver Dam in Benton County. The Club President was Robert Dubell. Dues were \$25.00 per year.

1963 – The club meetings were held at the Jan/Lynn Drive Inn and some at the Hickory House in Prairie Creek.

1964 – In August, the club meetings were moved to the Town and Country Restaurant on South 8<sup>th</sup> Street. The club stayed at this location until the 1980s with a short exception in 1976 when the meetings were held at the Lakeside Restaurant on Lake Atlanta.

1967 – The 50<sup>th</sup>/Golden Anniversary of the club was celebrated with a dinner at the Town and Country Restaurant with 67 members listed.

1972 – A second member of the Rogers Rotary Club, Artur Deason, was selected Governor of District 6-11.

1974 – A letter dated November 14, 1974, contained a notice of resignation for Harry Craig of Union Carbide and had a membership application for Hal Savage.

1975 – At the January 21<sup>st</sup> meeting, our club reached 100 members for the first time. Inducted into the club was Lew Taylor, Executive Vice President of the Rogers Chamber of Commerce. The club appointed a History Committee to work on a history of the city.

1976 – At the December 21<sup>st</sup> meeting, Joe Spivey (current member and past-President) was recognized for receiving the Eagle scout award.

1977 – The club set up the Rogers Rotary Club Foundation.

1980 – The Past-President, Jim Roundtree, was selected as the third Governor from our club to serve District 611.

1985 – The club sponsored the Rogers Early Risers Club, chartered on July 31, 1985 with 44 members. Past-President, Dick Trammel, was selected as Governor of district 611. The meetings

were moved to the Holiday Inn on South 8<sup>th</sup> Street. The club formed a singing group – the “Melodaires.”

1988 – The club inducted the first woman member at the November meeting – Sheila Stevenson (Mayor’s assistant).

1990 - The club meetings moved back to Town and Country, now called the Four Seasons Restaurant, then Heritage Restaurant.

1992 – The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the club was held at Southside Church of Christ. The club had 114 members. The meetings moved to the Harvest buffet in the mall at Dixieland.

1993 – The club meetings moved to the Rogers You Center in May.

2001 – The club elected the first woman as club President – Anita Johnson.

2014 – the club sponsored the Downtown Rogers Rotary Club.

In closing, I would like to note that American entered World War I just as our Rotary was starting in Rogers. Our 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary was in 1942 during the dark days of World War II. Our Gold anniversary was in 1967 during the cold war and with the Vietnam War. Our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary found the world still troubled by military actions, political conflicts, and terrorism. It is far from the perfect peace and understanding Rotary ideals envision. So, there remains much for Rotary to accomplish in working toward that international cooperation and goodwill that will bring real peace on Earth.

Other highlights:

- Rotarians worked a food booth at the Benton County Fair for many years – 1990s to 2002.
- Rotarians had a Catfish Fry dinner as part of the Rogers Frisco Fest 2009-2014.