

The Dinner

Though Paul Harris was doing okay in his new law practice and had many acquaintances, he missed having close friends. Unlike women, who often had a ready-made circle of close neighborhood friends, men did not. They were socialized from the time they could walk and talk, that when they grew up, they had to leave their homes and “go to work” in a world of strangers.

So, Paul decided to take action. On the evening of Thursday, February 23, 1905, he and his friend Silvester Schiele met for dinner. Paul talked about maybe starting a club. This club would be a fellowship and booster club.

Paul and Silvester thought this was a doable project. They would invite only men of good quality, and only one member from each business. Even in the beginning of the 21st Century, many Rotary clubs would not take people from a profession if they already had a member from that profession.

The Name – “Rotary”

Soon, Paul and Silvester were joined by other men, and they met for lunches at each other’s place of business. Soon, however, the group grew too large to host lunches in the offices, and they began meeting in a hotel.

As they grew, they decided they needed a name. Among the ideas thrown around were: “Windy City Roundup,” “Chicago Circle,” “Chicago Civic Club,” “Men with Friends,” “The FFF Club” (Food-Fun-Fellowship), and the “Trade and Talk Club.” Someone suggested that since they rotated locations, maybe they should be the “Rotation Club.” People didn’t care for that, but they did like Paul’s suggestion of calling their group “Rotary” and unanimously approved it.

Rotary Culture

The men wanted Rotary to be a place where they did not have to live by “stuffy office culture.” So, they stopped using titles such as “Mr.” and became simply Joe or Bill of Norm, or whatever. They decided membership would be for one year, and to become a member, one had to have unanimous consent. In the world of fraternities and sororities, this is known as the “blackball system,” where it only takes one “nay” vote to prevent a person from membership.

They also decided to have no dues. Rather, they would live on “fines” for inappropriate behavior – such as talking about religion or politics or telling risqué jokes.

Using nicknames was common in the group, and sharing the business interests of the members was very important. Singing was also a common feature of the first Rotary group, and this custom spread to other clubs as Rotary expanded in time. A young printer by the name of

Harry Ruggles captured a place in the history of Rotary for his love of singing at meetings, and he was famous for saying, “Hell, fellows, let’s sing!”

The men decided that their group would have two objectives:

1. The promotion of the business interests of the members;
2. The promotion of good fellowship and other desiderata ordinarily incident to social clubs.

It was not long, however, that a third objective was added to the group:

3. The advancement of the best interest of Chicago and the spreading of the spirit of civic pride and loyalty among its citizens.

This third objective is critically important to understand the rest of Rotary’s history, for it showed how Rotarians began to place “service” to others as a primary reason-to-be. After all, nobody is too impressed by a group of people meeting for lunch. They are impressed, however, by people serving those in need in their communities, nation, and world.

Paul Gets Shot Down

As the group grew and thrived, Paul began to think that if this group was such a joy to men in search of friendship and purpose, perhaps they should share it in other places. When Paul brought that idea up to the group, however, the men shot it down. This surprised Paul, for he couldn’t imagine why anyone would not want to share a good thing.

So, when he heard that one of the club members – Manuel Muñoz – was going on a business trip to San Francisco in June of 1908, Paul took Manuel aside and casually said, “Maybe you could get someone interested in starting a Rotary club out there.”

The seed was planted, and Manny carried it to the West Coast. The rest is history!