

History of Rotary International

It is 1900 and a young Lawyer named Paul Harris had moved to Chicago from Winconsin. It was a lonely time for him, and he missed the friendly spirit that he knew in the rural village in Vermont where he grew up.

One night, in 1905, whilst walking with his friend after dinner, he was impressed that his friend, also a lawyer, knew and was friends with most of the local business owners. Paul realised that although he had a number of clients who were business friends – they were not social friends. It set him to wondering why he couldn't make social friends out of at least some of his business friends. He envisaged a new kind of club for professionals that would rekindle the kindness, caring and friendship he had known in his youth.

So on February 23, 1905, Paul P. Harris, called three friends to a meeting. The three friends - a coal dealer, a merchant tailor and a mining engineer - decided that they should meet periodically to enjoy camaraderie and to enlarge their circle of business and professional acquaintances. What he had in mind was a club that would kindle friendship among members of the business community.

The four businessmen didn't decide then and there to call themselves a Rotary club, but their get-together was, in fact, the first meeting of the world's first Rotary club. As they continued to meet, adding others to the group, they rotated their meetings among the members' places of business, hence the name. Rotary was chosen, and with it, the commitment to improve the lives of those less fortunate.

By the end of 1905, the club had 30 members.

Early on, Paul Harris realized that Rotary needed a greater purpose. While Harris served as president of the Chicago Rotary Club in 1907, the club initiated its first public service project, the construction of public toilets in Chicago. This step transformed Rotary into the world's first Service Club.

Within five years clubs had formed across the country, from San Francisco to New York.

In August 1910, Rotarians held their first convention in Chicago. The 16 clubs that existed at that time united to form the National Association of Rotary Clubs. Rotary became international in 1910 when a club was formed in Winnipeg, Canada.

In 1912, the name changed to International Association of Rotary Clubs to reflect the addition of clubs in other countries.

By 1921 the organisation was represented on every continent, and the name Rotary International was adopted in 1922.

The first Rotary Club in Australia was formed in Melbourne on 21st of April 1921, and Rotary came to Western Australia in 1926.

Rotarians have not only been present for major events in history—we've been a part of them. From the beginning, three key traits have remained strong throughout Rotary. We persevere in tough times. During WWII, Rotary clubs in Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain, and Japan were forced to disband. Despite the risks, many continued to meet informally and following the war's end, Rotary members joined together to rebuild their clubs and their countries.