

Educational Reading #1

The History of Rotary and Paul Harris

On February 23, 1905, a young Chicago attorney named **Paul Harris** gathered with three business acquaintances for what would become one of the most influential meetings in service organization history. Those four men—Paul Harris, Gustavus Loehr, Silvester Schiele, and Hiram Shorey—shared a common desire to recreate the spirit of friendship and trust they had experienced in the small towns where they had grown up.

Chicago was growing rapidly, and many professionals felt isolated in the busy city. Harris believed that bringing together business leaders from different occupations would foster friendships while encouraging ethical business practices and service to the community.

The group's meetings rotated among each member's office, giving rise to the name "**Rotary**." What began as a social gathering quickly evolved into an organization dedicated to improving communities through volunteer service.

The first Rotary service project took place in 1907 when the Chicago club installed public comfort stations—public restrooms—in downtown Chicago. This project established Rotary's tradition of identifying community needs and taking action to address them.

Rotary spread rapidly. Within a few years, clubs formed across the United States and Canada, then expanded into Europe, Asia, South America, Africa, and Australia. By 1922, the organization officially became **Rotary International**, reflecting its growing worldwide presence.

Paul Harris served as Rotary's third president but remained actively involved throughout his life. Although he was an attorney by profession, his lasting legacy is his vision that friendship and service could transcend business, politics, religion, and national boundaries.

Rotary's motto, "**Service Above Self**," became the guiding principle for members around the world. Rather than asking what they could gain from membership, Rotarians committed themselves to improving the lives of others.

Throughout its history, Rotary has responded to changing community needs. Early clubs focused on local civic improvements. Over time, Rotary expanded into international humanitarian projects, educational scholarships, disaster relief, disease prevention, and peacebuilding.

One of Rotary's greatest achievements began in 1985 with the launch of PolioPlus, an ambitious effort to eradicate polio worldwide. Today, Rotary remains one of the leading partners in the global effort to eliminate the disease completely.

Rotary now includes more than 1.2 million members in over 200 countries and geographic areas. Although cultures and languages differ, Rotarians everywhere share a common commitment to integrity, friendship, and service.

Paul Harris often said that Rotary should never become satisfied with past accomplishments. Instead, it should continually adapt while remaining faithful to its purpose of bringing together people who are willing to make a positive difference.

More than 120 years after that first meeting in Chicago, Rotary continues to fulfill Harris's vision—proving that ordinary people, working together, can accomplish extraordinary things.