



Members helped to raise some of the seed capital that got the Francis Marion Hotel built in the 1920s. For years, the Club held its meetings at the hotel. *(Photo courtesy of the Francis Marion Hotel.)*

# The 1920s: Getting started

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## Overview

The first meeting of the Rotary Club of Charleston was held on Feb. 3, 1920, following a dinner at the St. John's Hotel. The Club received its charter a few weeks later on March 1. Charter members were T. Wilbur (Buddy) Thornhill, Louis C. Fischer and 20 others as highlighted in Appendix 1.

The club's luncheon meetings were from 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. on the first and third Tuesdays of the month. Later they were scheduled weekly. Meetings in the early days were held at the South Carolina Hall, the Charleston Hotel, the Timrod Inn, and the YWCA.

## Membership

By the end of 1920, there were 30 members, 49 within a year, and membership increased steadily through the decade. By the beginning of the 1929 Club year, membership numbered 82.

## Projects and community service

The Club immediately began with ambitious plans for service projects and support of programs to improve the quality of life in the community. This set a precedent for the club for its future.

Included among the projects, members:

- Sold \$50,000 of stock in the new Francis Marion Hotel.
- Pledged to improve streets and roads in the area.

- Strongly advocated bridges across the Cooper, Ashley and Santee rivers.
- Organized the Boy Scout Council in Charleston.
- Helped establish recreational playing fields in Hampton Park.
- Supported formation of the Community Chest (now United Way).
- Led planting of palm trees at Union Station and along Vendue Range.
- Spoke out for repeal of blue laws.
- Provided support for hurricane victims in Florida.
- Endorsed the state's first workers' compensation laws.

## Notable speakers

Among many notable speakers during this decade were evangelist Billy Sunday; Rotary International presidents Guy Gundaker and M. Eugene Newson; Dr. Leon Banov of Charleston; Dr. George Fisher, deputy chief executive for Boy Scouts of America; Citadel President O.J. Bond; and the Imperial Potentate of the Shrine in North America, Frank C. Jones.

## 1920–21: Club founded by 22 Charlestonians

Thanks to the work of T. Wilbur (Buddy) Thornhill and Louis C. Fischer, the Rotary Club of Charleston received its charter on March 1, 1920, to become the 624th Rotary Club to be organized.

In addition to the above principal founders, members of the club's first board of directors included W.H. Cogswell, Rees Fraser, Charles Allen, T.P. Lesesne and William Burguson.

Club meetings were held on the first and third Tuesdays of the first month, after which members voted for weekly meetings. The annual meeting was scheduled for April each year. The first meetings were held in the South Carolina Hall, later in the Charleston Hotel, the Timrod Inn and the YWCA.

Members were busy with community service in their first year. Two of the biggest projects involved institutions that are alive today

in Charleston – the Francis Marion Hotel and the Boy Scouts. Members sold \$50,000 worth of stock in the Francis Marion Hotel to help it get started. As many new clubs across the country worked to support the local Boy Scouts movement, Charleston's members underwrote expenses and committed themselves to start Charleston's Boy Scout Council.

Members also worked to push other community goals. They pledged themselves to work for good roads, agreed to observe traffic regulations, endorsed the building of a new Citadel, aided the National Guard, helped generate community support for a bridge across the Santee River and advocated building a bridge across the Ashley River.

Luncheons were held from two to three o'clock. The weekly bulletin was called the *Rotary Ragout*. It reported on attendance and promoted Rotary principles.

In the early days, a member lost his membership if he missed three meetings in succession or if he was not excused in advance. No visitors were allowed at the third meeting of each month because it was a business meeting. President King McDowell fined members for various reasons, and when the Club retaliated by assessing him a fine, he quit Rotary in March 1921.

The Club participated in its first District Conference in Greenville in March and 12 members attended. McDowell, Allen, Samuel Reid and Harry O'Neill represented the Club at the International Conference in Atlantic City. The Columbia and Savannah clubs visited Charleston and put on programs for the Club. The first Ladies' Night in December was a huge success.

Charleston was a club in District 7. At the end of 1920, there were 30 members, and at the end of 1921 there were 49 members.

## 1921–22: Community service from beginning

Individual Rotarians took an active part in the development of Folly Beach. At this time, Charleston's population was about 68,000 residents.

**SPOTLIGHT:****New club starts local Boy Scout council**

Club founder T. Wilbur Thornhill was so impressed with the work of the Boy Scouts in England during World War I that he returned to Charleston determined that Lowcountry youths would have the opportunity to participate in the Boy Scout Program.

In the club's first year, every Rotarian contributed to a finance drive that was key in organizing a Boy Scout council and hiring a full-time director. Thornhill served as the council's commissioner for several years and was joined by another Rotarian, Alfred O. Halsey, as the first president in the crucial formative years of this Boy Scout group.

By the 1950s, the organization was so well established in the Charleston area that the Club felt it could drop active sponsorship of a troop. But the Club also has contributed in organizing Cub packs. Many individual Rotarians continued to be very active in Boy Scout support.

Rotary members have also been active financially through the years. Starting in 1929 with a modest \$100 gift to the Boy Scout Camp on the Wando River, Rotary contributions later sent Scouts to the National Jamboree, helped build a service center, built a leader's cabin at the camp in 1943, and paid for a sleeping cabin at the Civic Club Camp Site. Later, Rotary members helped with merit badge shows, boat purchases and development of a new Scout office in 1982.

Over the years, club members have served tirelessly by giving their time and money. Presidents of the Coastal Carolina Council included numerous members of the Rotary Club of Charleston: R. Barkley, E.J. Thornhill, S. Corbin, W. Gwynette, Ted Stern, Ken Johnson, T. Kennedy, J.A. Grimsley and W. Sapp. Scout executives who have been Rotarians include Rucker Newbery, M. Reeves Little, Mack Lassiter and Rob Keener.

-- Jerry Nuss

Tom Lesesne wrote in the weekly newsletter, *Rotary Ragout*, that Rotarians should learn the Club's constitution and bylaws. He also wrote Rotarians were rude to guests, committees were not functioning properly and attendance was terrible. Attendance was so bad that a contest was started, with the Club divided into teams.

The Club featured "Back to School" and "Stay in School" projects. President Lawrence Pinckney believed any Rotarian who was proud of his membership should wear his emblem.

Forty percent of Rotarians were active in a major campaign for the Chamber of Commerce.

The club's slogan was: "The manifestation of the Rotarian's interest in civics should be shown in his work as an individual and as a part of the various commercial and civic bodies rather than in a concerted action in the name of the Rotary Club." As a result, Rotarians were presidents of the Chamber of Commerce, Retail Merchants Association and the Boy Scouts.

In February, there was a meeting at the Confederate College. Buddy Thornhill was the official delegate to the Rotary International Convention in Los Angeles. Tom Lesesne and Joe Storfer attended the Rotary International Convention in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Start: 49 members. End: 54 members.

## 1922–23: 700 attend District Conference here

In its third year, the Charleston club became part of District 38. President Tom Lesesne was elected, in large part, because he had bombarded members extensively in the *Rotary Ragout*. "Words are not going to help the Boy Scout movement to achieve the success it has earned," he wrote, which prompted Rotarians Halsey, Lesesne, Snelgrove and Thornhill to accept service on the Scout Court of Honor to set an example.

Starting in June 1922, two talks were given at each meeting, one on Rotary and one on business. Automatic roll call was practiced at all meetings. To be credited for attendance, a member had to make up attendance in the week the Club met.

Obligations of Rotary were explained as follows: "To attend

## SPOTLIGHT: Nation's first Ladies Auxiliary starts here

The Charleston Rotary-Anns were organized in January 1923 because of the need for the assistance of ladies in entertaining the first Rotary District Conference held in Charleston. That year, more than 700 Rotarians and wives attended from Virginia and the two Carolinas. Mrs. A. Chambliss Connelley spearheaded the group, which arranged for accommodations and entertained the Rotarians at a tea in the Charleston Museum, an oyster roast on Folly Beach and at the District Governor's Ball.

After the conference, the ladies decided to keep the group together and organized an Auxiliary with 27 original members. Since Rotary was formed as a men's organization, the Auxiliary could not receive official membership in Rotary International.

But in response to a written inquiry to Rotary International, the headquarters secretary wrote: "To the best of its knowledge, the Charleston Rotary Club Auxiliary would be the first one ever organized," and he extended congratulations and best wishes. A constitution and bylaws were adopted in 1923 and revised in 1935. In 1956, the Auxiliary expanded by taking in wives of members of other area Rotary Clubs, revised the constitution and bylaws, and changed its name to the Greater Charleston Rotary Club Auxiliary.

The main projects of the Auxiliary are to participate in the March of Dimes for Crippled Children and to administer the Rose Murchison Connelley Scholarship.

The Auxiliary also has taken part in Easter Seals sales, the Cancer Clinic and Muscular Dystrophy drives. It has helped the City and Oak Grove orphanages and has awarded Girl Scout Camp trips. The Auxiliary is of invaluable assistance at Rotary conferences held in Charleston where members help at the registration desk, serve as hostesses and offer support.

-- Jerry Nuss

meetings regularly; to pay fines promptly; to do his part when called upon; to be a big-hearted and broad-minded man of energy and action." Lesesne pointed out the benefits of Rotary as: "genuine good fellowship; developing true and helpful friends; enlightenment as to members' vocations; stimulation to serve your fellowman."

Charleston hosted the District Conference in March 1923. The weather was miserable. Twenty Pullman cars were used, and every available room in the city was filled with 700 delegates attending. *The News and Courier* put out a 16-page special Rotary Edition in February 1923. The first Rotary-Ann Club, known as the Ladies Auxiliary, was organized in Charleston as a result of the District Conference, and is still going strong.

The Club sponsored a motor outing for all orphans. Ladies' Night was attended by 39 out of 58 members with their ladies.

It was (and still is) an unwritten law that no story be told at a Rotary meeting that is not acceptable to the ears of a lady or man of high personal deportment.

Start: 54 members. End: 73 members.

## 1923–24: Club starts local Scout Council

Under the leadership of Fred Davis, Rotarians were urged to raise \$6,000 for the local Boy Scout program so a full-time Scout executive could be hired. The Club successfully sponsored the organization of a Scout council, thanks to the dedication of Buddy Thornhill. Three consecutive meetings of Rotary were devoted to Boy Scouts.

The Kiwanis Club dined with Rotary at one meeting. Charles Webb reported on progress being made in the treatment of crippled children. The Ladies Auxiliary was present at a regular meeting, and William Allen presented them with a gavel.

The Club endorsed the work of the Red Cross, and Dr. Leon Banov, director of Public Health, discussed tuberculosis and requested support for a county sanatorium. The Club voted for athletic grounds in Hampton Park and endorsed a public swimming pool. Another program discussed ways of attracting



tourists. The Club voted to send a telegram to Mrs. Harding, wife of President Warren Harding, expressing hope for his recovery. The Club visited the local Standard Oil refinery and Roper Hospital and participated in the opening of the Santee Bridge.

During the year, the Club hosted Guy Gundaker, president of Rotary International. Evangelist Billy Sunday spoke overtime to the Club in November. The Club had a Father and Son Day in January, and members visited the new Francis Marion Hotel in March. President Cham Connelley attended the Rotary International Convention in St. Louis, Missouri.

Start: 73 members. End: 80 members.

## 1924–25: Major speakers talk with members

President O.J. Bond and Vice President Alfred Halsey attended the Rotary International Convention in Toronto. Rotarians went to Savannah for the Carolina–Georgia bridge opening celebration, and a Rotary fountain was dedicated on the Georgia side of the river.

A special committee composed of all committee chairmen was appointed to determine whether the old Citadel could be used as a permanent exhibit hall. The Citadel asked Rotarians to take an interest in the school's athletic program.

Programs were presented by William Haley of Standard Oil, Russell Waite of Port Utilities, and Barnwell and Rooney, agents of Clyde Steamship Company. Other speakers were Fred Davis of the Tuxbury Company Mill and Jim Mahoney of Ice Manufacturing. James O'Hear reported on Yeaman's Hall. Many felt the speaker of the year was Dr. George Fisher, the deputy chief executive of Boy Scouts of America from New York.

A joint meeting of four service clubs was held during the year to build support for the Chamber of Commerce. A group, under the Chamber's banner, visited 12 counties. The Club unanimously endorsed the project of hydroelectric power through the Santee Canal Enterprise. Member Harry O'Neill directed a project to plant palm trees at the Union Station and along Vendue Range. The Club voted to support the Community Chest.

Start: 80 members. End: 76 members.

## 1925–26: Publisher predicts big things for area

Club President Charles Kollock called on four members to give the names and classifications of members present at four different meetings. This took the place of the usual roll call.

Roscoe Whitman, publisher of the *New York Commercial*, spoke to the Club and predicted Charleston would achieve recognition in the world of shipping and would someday be a major port.

Rotarians and their ladies took a moonlight harbor cruise. One meeting was changed to Monday in order to hear discussion on street markers and other aids to traffic. Rotarians took orphans on an outing to Otranto.

The Community Chest plan was discussed and the Club made a donation in support of work for the local Crippled Children's program. Rotarian Alfred Halsey, as president of the Charleston Council of the Boy Scouts, requested Rotarians support the local Scouts financially. The Club sponsored a lecture by Dr. Russell Cornwell called "Acres of Diamonds" on behalf of the Auto Club. The Club also heard about problems facing the street railway system in a talk given by Horatio Bigelow.

The Club passed a resolution to endorse a plan for building a new street from the west end of Calhoun Street to the Ashley River crossing. Rotarians were invited to assist with the Spring Music Festival, and the Club had a flag in the parade. Dr. Robert Wilson, dean of the Medical College of South Carolina, spoke on the history and development of the college's first hundred years.

One of the most interesting programs of the year occurred when every member told of his first job and how much he earned. The Club was the guest of the Francis Marion Hotel for one meeting.

Start: 76 members. End: 77 members.

## 1926–27: Program for Charleston urged

During this year, the Charleston Club became part of District 58, which had clubs in all of South Carolina and the western part of North Carolina.

A series of Club programs instructed members on the significance of Rotary. Lionel Legge spoke on acquaintanceship. Louis Fischer discussed fellowship. Oscar Schleeter's presentation on friendship in Rotary was well received. Other topics included fair dealing in business and personal service.

Two amendments to the Club's bylaws were adopted. First, members agreed that "the President of the Club shall be named by the board of directors." Second, they agreed "the new President shall preside for the first time on the second Tuesday in April."

The new Ashley River Bridge was opened in May 1926. "Shall the Cooper River Be Bridged?" was the title of one Club discussion involving a panel of nine Rotarians. The Club learned that the new bridge would cost \$2 million. The new King Street extension added a notable link to the state's road system.

Tom Lesesne wrote an article that appeared in *The News and Courier* entitled, "A Program for Charleston." The Club endorsed and approved the paper's stand. The Club's members were opposed to partiality in blue laws and favored a quick repeal.

The Club met in the new plant of Williams-Gable and made an inspection of the Woodstock Manufacturing Company.

The Citadel championship basketball team's members were guests of the Club. The Club heard a debate on city management, and the Assistant Secretary of the Navy emphasized the need for a balanced Navy. Members were urged to buy from the merchants of Charleston. Dr. O.B. Chamberlain spoke on the value of summer camps for youth. The Club donated financial support to the Florida Relief Fund for hurricane victims.

Start: 77 members. End: 75 members.

## 1927-28: Club debates form of city government

Ten members of the Club attended the District Conference held in Spartanburg where Billy Way, H.S. Reeves and Orville Fischer were official delegates. Way also was the official delegate to the Rotary International Convention in Ostend, Belgium. The King of Belgium opened the Convention. (Rotarians paid their own way for these trips in those days.)

A member of the Anderson Club proposed that Way be nominated for District Governor, which the Club supported. He was elected District Governor for the 1928–29 Rotary year.

The Club and the Ladies Auxiliary entertained boys and girls of the City Orphan House in an excursion to Folly Beach. Rotarians were invited and accepted a visit to Roper Hospital and Riverside Infirmary.

A successful Ladies' Night was one of the highlights of the year. Ten members of the Club volunteered to look after 10 boys as Big Brothers. Rotary endorsed a plan for the marking of streets in Charleston.

The Club adopted with no dissensions a resolution deploring the apparent apathy of jury service in the community. Some 100 venire men were excused in one local court.

Twenty cadets of the training ship *Annapolis* were guests of the Club. Daniel Ravenel, Jr., asked for assistance in accelerating streetcar schedules. Loutrel W. Briggs bought "Cabbage Row" on Church Street and urged Charlestonians to recognize the importance of the preservation of its old buildings and hand-wrought iron work.

Among programs for the year were a series including E.J. Godshalk and Walter J. Miller, who favored the new concept of a city manager form of government; Louis J. Brownlow on the commission manager form; and Mayor Thomas P. Stoney on the advantages of the city government as constituted.

In another talk, James B. Mahoney explored, "Why not a swimming pool in Colonial Lake?" He also served as chairman of a special committee to plan an ornate and practical water fountain in Marion Square. The president of The Citadel, Colonel O.J. Bond, spoke on the need for a new Citadel campus. Members of the Club were supportive, and "The West Point of the South" now stands on the marshes of the Ashley River.

Start: 75 members. End: 81 members.

## 1928–29: Way becomes district governor

Because of a change in bylaws, new officers did not take office until July 1, thus extending the official year by three months. Thirty members attended the District Conference in Charleston, along with a total of 1,028 other Rotarians from the district. The Charleston Club's first district governor, William Way, presided.

At one meeting with the presidents of the Kiwanis, Lions and Exchange clubs as guests of Rotary, it was suggested that all four clubs hold a joint state convention.

Rotarians were urged to take more interest in The Citadel. Buddy Thornhill led a discussion about the serious congestion on James Island, with changes needed on Folly Road through Windermere and roads to James Island.

Captain Alston Deas declared that the community should save the home of Thomas Heyward, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Frank C. Jones, the Imperial Potentate of the Shrine in North America, urged the Club to continue its program of aid to crippled children. The Rev. Wallace Martin discussed the operation of the Harriett Pinckney Home for Seamen. International goodwill was discussed by Louis Fischer, Russell Waite, James Mahoney and C.J. Bond.

A hurricane prevented the meeting on September 18. A father and son get-together was held but no speeches were on the program. Rotary joined other service clubs in sponsoring a dinner to promote products made locally. A Ladies' Night was held at the Charleston Country Club.

Clark Howell, editor of the Atlanta Constitution, complimented Charleston on its extensive resources, attractions and advantages. James Mahoney attended the Rotary International Convention in Dallas.

The Club was told why it was necessary for the Medical College to seek financial support. G.L. Buist Rivers urged the Club to encourage the Legislature to pass a fair workers' compensation law.

The year also marked the start of construction of the Cooper River Bridge, which was expected to be the fifth largest cantilevered span in the world.

Start: 81 members. End: 82 members.

## 1929–30: Special Fund established

Following a suggestion of past District Governor William Way, a Special Fund for Boys was established to support programs for personal enrichment. Small coin envelopes were distributed at each meeting. Members were invited to make contributions. During the year, the total amount collected was \$365. Some \$100 promptly was sent to the Boy Scouts for use at the Wando River camp. A gift was also made to the Boys' Orchestra at Charleston High School.

Rotary endorsed the school boy patrol system promoted by the South Carolina Motor Club. Without a dissenting voice, the Club also endorsed a petition by Roper Hospital for a new wing for orthopedic and psychiatric care and treatment of contagious diseases. The advantages to labor and industry in the Workers' Compensation Law were cited by Charles Waring.

M. Eugene Newson of Durham, N.C., who was serving as president of Rotary International, spoke at a Rotary Ladies' Night as part of the Club's 10th birthday celebration.

Henry Raines, E.D. Clement and Louis Rubin were official delegates to the District Conference held in May in Hendersonville, N.C. The Club held a regular meeting at Fort Sumter as the guest of Col. W.P. Coleman.

The Chamber of Commerce urged Rotarians to try to help resolve deficiencies in local housing. The process of recording and the use of "talkies" in the movie industry were explained by a visiting representative of the Western Electric Company. The Club was advised that the new Cooper River Bridge would be open to traffic in August 1929.

Start: 82 members. End: 80 members.