



Rotary Founder Paul Harris, second from left, spoke to the Rotary Club of Charleston in May 1939. This photo, taken by C. Bissell Jenkins Jr. at Fort Sumter, also shows (l-r) Buddy Thornhill, Henry Edmunds and Albert Von Dolhen.

The 1930s: Club survives hard times

John Milkereit, contributing editor

Overview

The Rotary Club of Charleston entered its second decade on hard times. Due to the Great Depression, the cost of luncheons was reduced to 65 cents. The bank where the Club kept its money closed. Unemployed men on the road wandered into the city, which concerned Club members.

Membership

The number of members dropped to a low of 57, but thanks to a membership drive beginning in 1933, membership recovered and grew to 84 by 1940. By the end of the decade, the Club was meeting on the 12th floor of the Francis Marion Hotel, where members expressed appreciation for the view, as well as the cool breeze.

Projects and community service

Even though times were hard, the Club responded to the needs of the community and the state. Among projects backed by the Club during the 1930s were:

- Support to prevent closing of the Charleston Naval Shipyard;
- Extensions of Cannon Street and Murray Boulevard;
- Successful support for a yacht basin facility at the western end of Beaufain Street;
- Founding of the Rotary club in Beaufort;

- Joint efforts with Kiwanis, Lions, and Exchange clubs for legislation of workers' compensation laws to help attract industry into South Carolina;
- Cleanup of Marion Square; and
- Opposition to gambling in the city.

Notable speakers

The Club attracted many outstanding speakers during the decade, including Rotary International Founder Paul Harris; Amelia Earhart; nationally acclaimed newspaper editor William Allen White; the national commander of the Girl Scouts of America; Rotary International President John Nelson; a member of Admiral Richard Byrd's Expedition to the South Pole; and a physician who told the Club that Rotarians had too few children.

1930–31: Bulletin praised by Rotary International

In its first meeting of the new Club's new year, the board of directors set aside the third Tuesday of each month as an "all Rotary meeting." Guests were excused from the meeting after lunch.

A resolution was passed supporting the resignation of The Citadel's President, Col. Bond. The resignation made it possible for The Citadel to secure General Charles P. Summerall as the new president.

In community affairs, the Club declined to join with the Chamber of Commerce in erecting a welcome sign at the entrance to the city. A resolution in support of the Charleston Naval Shipyard was passed in response to a news item reporting on a proposal to close the facility. It was pointed out that repairs on small vessels were less costly in Charleston than at any other yard.

Rotarians pushed the desirability of completing the Cannon Street extension. Members also discussed traffic problems, state drivers' licensing and the state's highway patrol. Members were urged to lend assistance to an immediate development of an adequate airport near Charleston.

Some topics and speakers during the year included city zoning, Charles Lyon on the gas business that started in Charleston in 1847 and a Navy destroyer's squadron leader who expressed delight of many families who were cordially welcomed to the community. Programs also were on Admiral Byrd's expedition to the South Pole by a member of the expedition team, about the work of 4-H Clubs, on air mail service and on the cotton movement.

Alman E. Rath, the president of Rotary International, wrote a letter to the Club congratulating Roe Remington on the weekly bulletin of the Club, know by this time as *The Charleston Rotarian*. The Club held a reception for The Citadel's incoming president and his wife, General and Mrs. Summerall, in June 1931, and the annual Ladies' Night was very successful.

Fred Peters attended the Rotary International Convention in Vienna; Charles Webb and Harold Reeves reported on the 25th annual Rotary International Convention held in Chicago.

The board subscribed to the magazine *The Rotarian* and had a copy mailed to all libraries in the county. Several members were dropped for failure to meet attendance rules.

Start: 80 members. End: 77 members.

1931–32: Earhart visits club

Miss Amelia Earhart arrived at the local airport in November 1931 in the first autogiro ever seen in Charleston. She spoke to the Club and stated that in two years Charleston would have regularly scheduled airline service. The first passengers on the Charleston–Atlanta airline arrived in Charleston in December from Atlanta and were entertained by Rotarians.

In other presentations to the Club, Harry Bunting of Chicago stated that thousands of families would come to Charleston to spend part or all of the winter months if they knew what Charleston had to offer. Mayor Burnet R. Maybank told the Club the City could not raise taxes and must cut expenses or go bankrupt.

This year, the Club received many appeals for charitable donations. Funds were appropriated for 4-H Boys' Club, payments

of luncheons for newspaper reporters and school luncheons for deserving boys. A contribution went to Rotary International to help buy a gift for the outgoing international president. The Club also agreed to spend \$50 for the Good Cheer Fund and \$100 to buy firewood for the needy, and to pay expenses for four Boy Scouts to attend summer camp. Members also contributed to a Student Loan Fund authorized in June 1932.

The Club supported the "Stay in School," project, refused to sponsor a boxing bout, requested support for the Inland Waterway and supported a visit to Charleston of the giant flying boat, Do X.

Buddy Thornhill and Oscar Schleeter were appointed to a committee to see whether the Francis Marion Hotel couldn't prepare and serve better meals for the Club. The Club's bylaws were again amended to bring the Club in line with Rotary International's suggestions.

Coin envelopes, started the year before, netted \$1,800 by 1931. The Ladies' Night held in the spring was successful. Sons and daughters of Rotarians attending local colleges visited the Club as guests. Flowers were presented to Rotarians on their birthdays. The Club voted to invite the 58th District to hold the District Conference in Charleston in 1933.

Start: 77 members. End: 65 members.

1932-33: Depression hits Charleston

The Great Depression that swept the nation was evident in Charleston. Rumors persisted that the Navy Yard would be closed. The Club was continually solicited for charitable donations. The cost of the weekly luncheons was reduced to 65 cents. The Student Loan Fund began to make loans. The city experienced a problem with vagrants as a great number of young men took to the road. It was difficult for a college graduate to find employment at a living wage. Even the bank where the Club kept its money was closed. Membership in the Club dropped to 59 because times were hard.

Rotary, however, continued to provide community leadership. Members participated in an intercity service club baseball league under Captain Rufus Barkley.

The Club asked the City of Charleston to make the entrance to Charleston more attractive by having billboards removed. The extension of Cannon Street to the Ashley bridge was completed.

A doctor spoke to the Club and told members that Rotarians had too few children!

The Club's bylaws again were amended so that ex-officio members would have all privileges of all other officers. Buddy Thornhill, Freeman Williams and Clarence Getty attended the Rotary International Convention in Boston.

Board members were fined a dollar for missing a board meeting. Also, latecomers to Club meetings got sandwiches after the meeting because waiters were not allowed in the dining area after 2:30 p.m.

An intercivic service club meeting held in December included eight clubs, and the Rotary Club met once at the American Tobacco Company. A successful outing was held at Folly Beach. The District Conference was successful, highlighted with trips to Middleton Gardens and a tea at Wappoo Country Club.

Start: 65 members. End: 59 members.

1933–34: Club has membership drive

A membership drive was held to add new members for open classifications, and it extended to prospects from outside the city limits. For the first time, the president of the Club was chosen from the elected board members. In July 1933, the Club had its smallest number of members in years – 57.

The Club sang "Grandfather's Clock" with Dick Reeves as song leader. Critics rated the quality of the singing as "rotten." Members were afraid to try new songs, and some members made no effort to participate in singing.

The Club supported a yacht basin facility at the west end of Beaufain Street. The City of Charleston passed an ordinance forbidding the filled land on Cannon Street to be used for commercial purposes. The objective was to create a lake similar to Colonial Lake and to build a marine aquarium.

The News and Courier was congratulated for printing photographs of the World Series the morning after the game. The

newspaper's Christmas 1933 edition headlined mostly bad news. The Club was told that there was little chance that the government would finance the Santee-Cooper project.

One of the Club's meeting days was changed during the year to a Saturday to allow Rotary International President John Nelson to address members. Also during the year, members visited the Savannah Club to see the South's newest industry, manufacturing paper from Southern pine trees.

Allan Mustard and Harold Reeves led the organization of a Rotary Club in Beaufort. Quarterly meetings were started as joint meetings of four civic clubs in the community.

The following principle was suggested by Rotary International: "Corporate action on controversial subjects on which its members widely differ is generally inadvisable. Nevertheless, a club may properly promote discussion and information on a controversial subject. Both sides of the question should be adequately presented and it should be clear that a Rotary club does not necessarily assume responsibility for opinions expressed by individual speakers at its meetings."

Start: 59 members. End: 58 members.

1934–35: Club endorses workers' comp

In the early days of Rotary, many men were attracted to the membership, believing they would benefit from member patronage of their businesses. Although there were some abuses, wider understanding of the idea caught on. "Acquaintance begets business wherever business deserves to be begotten."

During this year, President Jim Gibson and Secretary "Dick" Reeves, who was the governor's representative, helped establish the Beaufort Rotary Club, which was chartered Nov. 14, 1934, with 15 members. Twenty-seven members from the Charleston Club attended a party for the new Beaufort Club in December.

Six objectives of Rotary were changed to four at the Rotary International Convention in Mexico. The Club appointed a committee to change its bylaws. The Club set aside the rules and declared that the Club was for Buddy Thornhill as district governor in 1936. He would become governor in 1938.

Rotary hosted Kiwanis, Lions and Exchange clubs in a joint meeting during which they decided to concentrate on encouraging the State Legislature to enact a Workers' Compensation Act. The legislation was needed because several industries chose not to locate in South Carolina because the state did not have it. The clubs also promoted the need for an automobile financial responsibility law.

Jake Weston was presented with a handsome Rotary emblem in recognition for his work in filling in for President J. Albert Von Dohlen, who had been ill during his term the previous year. The Club voted to have 5 percent of the gross income for the year set aside for work with crippled children.

Smiles were evident on Broad Street when the defunct Peoples State Bank declared a 20 percent dividend, and the Club was \$100 richer.

When Simms McDowell's bulldog was awarded the best of breed in a Savannah dog show, it reminded one Rotarian that the Agricultural Society in Charleston presented an award to George Washington for raising the largest jackass!

The famous editor William Allen White addressed the Club, and speakers were recruited to talk about the many contributions made by local public and private schools.

Start: 58 members. End: 60 members.

1935–36: Pulp company attracted to area

Members' attendance records were published as information to help in voting for candidates to the board of directors. Many thought good attendance should be a factor in the election.

Members were told it was the obligation of proposers to see their new members get acquainted, attend meetings and catch the Rotary spirit. New members were assigned to a committee the day they joined the Club.

Any member absent, without notifying the secretary in advance, was required to contribute the price of the luncheon to the Club Charity Fund. Members bought their luncheon tickets each week from the hotel. The Club experienced a huge gain in membership during the year.

A meeting was held at the Gold Eagle restaurant in Beaufort with the Beaufort, Savannah, and Charleston clubs. Attending were 38 from the Charleston Club. The Gold Eagle was considered the best place to eat in the state. Members Allen, Clement, McDowell, Sr., and Thornhill also attended an intercity meeting in Sumter. Seven members attended the District Conference in Charlotte. Members Barkley and Reeves went to the Rotary International Convention in Atlantic City.

At the County Fair in October 1934, Rotarians said agriculture and industry were not promoted. At the fair, they observed 42 gambling games, 18 refreshment stands, 15 freak shows, eight rides, two shooting galleries, one fortune teller, an excellent display of pigeons, a fair poultry show, a few good head of cattle, six agricultural exhibits, a dozen industrial exhibitions and two automobiles on display!

The Club congratulated the City for recruiting West Virginia Pulp and Paper Company to the area at a cost of \$5 million. In Charleston, a long-needed yacht basin finally became a reality. The Club also endorsed a local terminal for Trans-Atlantic Air Mail.

Ladies' Night again was successful, and a quarterly event for the ladies was proposed. But, since Rotary is a men's club, this idea was abandoned. The Club sponsored a Christmas tree for 52 underprivileged children.

President Clarence Getty thanked the members for improved behavior in coming to order, for attention to programs, for thanking the speakers and for their hospitality toward guests.

Start: 60 members. End: 83 members.

1936–37: Marion Square improvements pushed

Club members this year promoted improvement and beautification of Frances Marion Square. Although some thought it was not an eyesore, many agreed it had been neglected.

Club members expressed preferences for their own members as speakers, because they would rather be informed than entertained. President Rufus Barkley asked members to choose a different table and different companions at each meeting. He pointed out that sitting at different tables was an important part of the pleasure and

value of membership. He said that it was possible to get into a rut in Rotary if one did not rotate.

Rotarians believed that the new yacht basin should be operated by the City. The Azalea Festival brought many tourists to Charleston, and downtown hotels were full. Spare rooms were available in Windermere.

Apparently at this time, Charleston had a good many marble, jackpot and other gambling devices that paid off in cash. They were operated openly and took in hundreds of dollars each week. Local police allowed them to continue. Rotarians criticized the situation that allowed law enforcement officers to determine what laws should be enforced.

There was controversy over the involvement of Rotary in removing streetcars. In 1937, Article 9 of the Club Constitution stated: "The merits of any public question involving the social, economic, moral or physical welfare of the people may be fairly and intelligently discussed before a meeting for the enlightenment of the members, but this club shall not take any action or condemn any measure which is to be submitted to the vote of the people."

The national commander of the Girl Scouts of America addressed the Club and said the organization was in bad shape financially.

Rotary installed a traffic light to guide and warn speakers. Nine members won the interclub golf tournament.

Rotary International started a district reorganization.

Start: 83 members. End: 78 members.

1937–38: City service projects considered

Following a Rotary reorganization, the Charleston Club became part of District 190, which included clubs in South Carolina and western North Carolina.

Carl Walker was transferred to Charlotte after serving only one month as president. Vice President Julius Schroeder was elected president and Jake Weston as vice president. The third Tuesday of each month was designated as "All Rotary Day," and visitors were excused after lunch before the program began. The Club offered

congratulations to past president Rufus Barkley for turning in the highest percentage of attendance in the Club's history — 84.9 percent. Seven members had perfect attendance. There was no mandatory rule in Rotary that first names should be used, but the practice was recommended. Members were criticized for not wearing Rotary lapel pins.

Cham Connelley reported that the Community Service Committee was considering various projects: beautification of Marion Square, better facilities for crippled children, extension of Murray Boulevard, construction of a lake south of Cannon Street, more signs for promoting Charleston and removal of bridge tolls.

Following an appeal by Charles Webb, the board authorized a \$300 contribution to crippled children, and Rotary distributed gifts to the homes of the crippled children. The Student Loan Fund had loans pending among 16 students. Contributions were made to Roper Hospital, Boy Scouts and the Citadel Athletic Fund. Bantam Football season tickets were promoted. Rotary also helped promote lighting at Johnson Hagood Stadium, and the members voted to allow the Ashley Avenue Oak to remain in place. Members bought tickets for the President's Ball, and there was a very successful Ladies' Night with Buddy Thornhill as chairman.

In a bit of humor, Rotarians were classified as "tired" (works if coached), "retired" (believe they have done their share), "rubber tired" (goes along if the road is smooth), and "flat tired" (suffered a puncture and never recovered his wind)!

Buddy Thornhill was elected District Governor for the following year. He and other members went to Georgetown to promote a new club.

Start: 78 members. End: 79 members.

1938–39: Rotary founder speaks to members

The founder of Rotary, Paul Harris, spoke at the club on May 1, 1939. The presentation was made possible by District Governor Buddy Thornhill. Harris stressed the importance of attendance when he said that absentees "break the complete circle of acquaintance which Rotary affords."

There were 40 Clubs in the 190th District, with 13 in North Carolina and 27 in South Carolina. The average membership of each Club was 38 members. A Senior Membership Classification was added in Rotary at the International Convention. Fourteen members of the Club accompanied Thornhill to Aiken to present a banner to the community's newly chartered club. Several members went with Thornhill to present the charter to the new Georgetown Club.

An intercity meeting was held with Beaufort, Georgetown, Orangeburg and Charleston clubs participating. A father and son day was held, and 29 Rotarians brought their own or borrowed a son. Some 125 boys and girls attended the Christmas meeting to welcome Santa Claus.

Fines and the practice of making absent members pay for luncheons were thought to be undignified. The Service Fund grew to \$1,800, with members making contributions on their birthdays, a practice that started in 1931.

The club's bylaws were amended to hold the annual meeting in April, which allowed the new president to attend the Rotary International Convention and to hold a Club Assembly for training new officers. The board determined that all new resolutions submitted at Club meetings should first be submitted to the board for their recommendation.

Rotarian G. Simms McDowell, Sr., volunteered to serve as the chairman of the Community Chest. Rotary had its own division in the Chest's campaign.

President Henry Edmunds served with dignity, impartiality, good humor and competence. He had a good year, and the Club was responsive to its leader.

Start: 79 members. End: 76 members.

1939–40: Traffic safety promoted

President George Rogers started his year by saying, "If Rotary is worth doing, it is worth doing well." Rotarians were encouraged to express themselves individually on whether they believed the

county should build and operate a hospital to compete with Roper Hospital.

The Club supported and promoted greater safety on streets and highways. Buddy Thornhill paid personally for a \$400 traffic survey sponsored by Rotary. The community's "loan shark racket" and "ambulance chasing" were two topics discussed by the Club.

The Club played a big part in reorganizing the Boy Scout Council, chaired by P.M. Clement. Rufus Barkley was elected as the new president of the Scouts. And the Community Chest folded for lack of support after the Scouts successfully raised more money in an independent campaign under the Scout executive Rucker Newbery.

Members were requested to sit at designated tables each month to break up the "Zebra" table that had become a clique. The Club's officers sat at a head table known as "Seats of the High and Mighty." A movement to sponsor a Boys' Club in Charleston failed for lack of support by the service clubs.

A.W. Allison presented the Club with a new lectern. Members were told they should become familiar with the Club's bylaws. The Club continued to have All Rotary programs on the third Tuesday of each month. The Club held its first luncheon meeting on the 12th floor of the Francis Marion Hotel in April, and members were pleased with the view and the breeze.

Julius Schroeder and Clarence Legerton attended the Rotary International Convention in Havana, Cuba. Charles Webb put on a program about crippled children – a revelation and an inspiration as Rotarians heard about the true value of Rotary.

Adopted Charlestonians were beginning to be elected to the board of directors and recognized along with those born in the city.

Start: 76 members. End: 84 members.