

## **Rotary: A Tradition of Humanity** by Paul Kiser

**“I know they say we’re in a recession, I just choose not to participate.”**

Gary Foote  
Past President – Rotary Club of Reno Sunrise

The past few months of financial turmoil have impacted almost every part of the world, and as members of the world community Rotarians are no different. It is rare to have a discussion about membership recruitment and retention without the subject of economic hard times creeping into the conversation.

However, it is in times like these that we should remember that Rotary has gone through many world-wide upheavals in its one hundred-year plus history and survived. More significantly, it has been in the darkest times of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that Rotary has shined the brightest.

### **War and Rotary**

Since 1905, the world has experienced many wars, but World Wars I and II were the greatest tests for our international organization.

In August of 1910 the sixteen loosely organized clubs of Rotary met at their first convention to create the *National Association of Rotary Clubs of America*<sup>1</sup>. Three months later the new organization discovered that a Rotary club had been created in Winnipeg, Canada<sup>2</sup> and now they had the opportunity to become an international organization. A little over a year later the Winnipeg club was officially recognized and the organization became *The International Association of Rotary Clubs*.

In the years that followed, Rotary expanded in many countries, but as the War to End All Wars consumed Europe, Rotary’s rapid growth became stymied in those countries most affected. Even the chartered clubs faced challenges that threatened their existence. When rationing limited British resources a Rotarian suggested to the British Rotary Secretary that the Rotary lunches would likely have to stop. The Secretary replied, “Absolutely not! Rotary means SERVICE. Not only with a capital ‘S’, but all capitals, and if there were ever a time for SERVICE, it is now!”<sup>3</sup>

Carefully avoiding involvement in the machines of war, Rotary assumed the role of providing compassionate support for troops and citizens alike. Clubs took on projects to assist in caring for the wounded, helping the victims of war and, in America, became the forerunner of the USO for American troops waiting to be shipped overseas.<sup>4</sup>

As challenging as World War I was for Rotary, World War II had even greater impact. By the mid- to late 1930’s Rotary International was a much larger organization with clubs in all the major countries involved in conflict. The Nazi party began a campaign against Rotary, insisting that the organization was a Jewish linked organization and banned Nazi’s from being members. By October of 1937, the German Rotary clubs were forced to disband. By the time America entered the conflict, 484 clubs had been forced to close in countries allied with or subjugated by

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<sup>1</sup> Forward, D. 2003. *A Century of Service: The History of Rotary International*. Rotary International. p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> p. 78. (NOTE: The Winnipeg club had formed a month before the convention, but the United States clubs were unaware of it until four months later.)

<sup>3</sup> p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> p. 91.

Germany.<sup>5</sup> During World War II, some Rotarians in Axis countries were imprisoned and in some cases died because of their affiliation with Rotary.<sup>6</sup>

Still, Rotary clubs found ways to survive during the war by becoming ‘singing’ societies, or golfing associations to disguise their reason for meeting. When peace and sanity returned to Europe, so did Rotary. In fact, Rotary not only survived in Europe, but enjoyed a rapid expansion in the decade that followed.

As in World War I, Rotary clubs had demonstrated a dedication to the concept of service. Many clubs organized a wide range of local and international relief efforts, even as the war was taking a personal toll on many Rotarians. Service above Self aptly described the sacrifices made both during and after the war.

### **The Great Depression**

The financial disaster of the late 1920’s and early 1930’s brought about a terrible challenge to the fledgling organization of Rotary. As businesses failed almost overnight many Rotarians found themselves without the means to pay their own expenses, let alone help others, yet help they did. In the 1931 Rotarian magazine, Roy L. Smith wrote:

“No nation becomes great by becoming rich; neither does a man find enduring satisfaction in life by owning something – only by becoming something. This Depression has cost us some of the things we created, but it has robbed us of none of our power to create.”<sup>7</sup>

Rotarians helped establish soup kitchens, fed and supplied schoolchildren, and created work programs for their communities. While Rotary clubs struggled to survive during one of the bleakest times in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the desire to help others, including fellow Rotarians held a greater power than despair.

### **Lessons for Today**

There is no doubt that most Rotarians have felt the effects of the 2007-09 Recession and we face many challenges in the months ahead. But as we have seen before, now is the time for Rotary to shine. While many of us face difficult choices, Rotarians have learned that giving hope and helping others is the best cure for moving beyond our own difficulties.

The history of Rotary shows us that one Rotarian can make a difference. It all starts with helping one person or starting one project, and the rest will fall into place. Paul Harris reminds us of the challenge we have been given in his words from the 1914 RI Convention,

**“Whatever Rotary may mean to us, to the world it will be known by the results it achieves”**

(A special thanks to David Forward’s book, A Century of Service: The History of Rotary International. The book is no longer available in English; however, you can order it on CD rom for \$5.00 from Rotary International at [www.rotary.org](http://www.rotary.org).)

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<sup>5</sup> p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> p. 99-100

<sup>7</sup> p. 94