

## PAUL HARRIS

### **A Brief Biography of Paul Harris, Founder of the Rotary Movement**



### **This is the script of a talk given by Past President John Gillespie to Members of the Rotary Club of Newcastle upon Tyne**

Paul Harris was born in 1869 and with his younger brother, was brought up by his Grandparents in Wallingford, Vermont , USA. He and his boyhood friends enjoyed the freedom of exploring the hills and valleys of the area. The Harris family regularly attended the Congregational Church, the boys never missed Sunday School. On his maternal side, Paul was a grandson of Ruben Bryan, a Huguenot. The school house, built in 1818, has been restored as a memorial to Paul Harris and is in use still as the village social centre.

Towards the end of his school days, Grandfather Harris, referring to President Abraham Lincoln's Gettesburg Speech, one of the best known speeches in America which includes the words " a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are equal" said to Paul " In America, we believe that the benefits of education should be enjoyed by all, so that all may have a voice in governmental affairs". So Grandfather Harris saw to it that Paul would go to college, The Black River Academy, Vermont Military Academy, and the Universities of Vermont and Princeton.

After Princeton University, Paul spent a year with the Sheldon Marble Company and then he went to the University of Iowa in the law faculty. In his final year, one of his lecturers advised the class to go first to a small town and, as he put it " make a fool of yourself " practicing law for say 5 years, and then go to a big city of choice and really begin your law practice.

Paul took the advice literally, not in any small community but in all parts of the world, and in what nowadays is called his "Years Out", he explored America, working his passage throughout. We went to San Francisco as a cub reporter, to Los

Angeles teaching in a business college, to Denver, Colorado acting in a theatre and lastly to Florida where he joined a marble and granite company as a travelling salesman. He had some prior knowledge of the business having spent a year with the Sheldon Granite Company.

During this time Paul Harris made two trips to England on cattle boats, working his passage. Then the manager of the Granite Company sent Paul to Europe, to Great Britain, Ireland, France, Switzerland, Austria, Germany Belgium and Holland to make arrangements for buying quarry products.

At the end of his five years “vagabonding” Paul Harris started to practice law in Chicago. As was the American custom, he hung up his shingle – a wonderful expression – he hung up his name plate and hoped clients would appear. For some time , none did.

In this large strange city he missed the company of friends and he thought “ Why not have a fellowship as in a village, comprising just one person from each of many occupations” So on the 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1905 ( which is looked upon as Rotary Founders Day) Paul Harris called three young business men to met and he explained to them his plan for mutual co-operation and informal friendship. They began meeting for lunch one day each week , meeting in one another’s office in rotation – so the name Rotary was given to the meetings. The inaugural group comprised a baker, a banker, a parson, a plumber, a lawyer, and a laundryman.

In 1910 Paul Harris met and married a bonnie Scottish lass called Jean. They named their house “Comely Bank” after the street in Edinburgh where Jean spent her childhood. The Harris’s had no children by over the years “Comely Bank” was open house to Rotarians from far and wide.

In those early days , in the main, efforts were directed to helping each other in business. The strictly altruistic basis of membership did not develop till later. Paul Harris intensified Community Service as one of the club’s objectives.

Paul Harris conceived the idea of extending Rotary around the world and inaugurated Clubs in the States largely by correspondence with classmates at the three universities he had attended, also through friends he had made during his “vagabond” travels. In due course clubs were founded in San Francisco in 1908, followed by Oakland, Seattle, Los Angeles, New York and Boston. The first club outwith USA as founded in Winnipeg, Canada. An example was of George Clark, the manager of the marble and granite company becoming the first President of the Rotary Club of Jacksonville Florida.

Next came London through two friends who had business representatives there. Then Manchester. By a different route, an Irishman by the name of Stuart Morrow learned about Rotary in America and on his return to Dublin set up a Rotary Club there, and with encouragement from Paul Harris, followed this up with a club in Belfast, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Birmingham and Liverpool. Soon there were clubs in Madrid and other cities in Europe.

And so we come to 1915 and the sponsorship by Manchester and Edinburgh of our club of Newcastle upon Tyne. We celebrate our Centenary in 4 years time in 2015.

The first International Rotary Convention outwith the USA was held in Edinburgh in 1921. The 4<sup>th</sup> Object of Rotary “ The advancement of international understanding, goodwill, and peace through a world fellowship of business and professional persons united in the ideal of service” was adopted by this convention. In that year the 1000th Rotary Club was founded in York, England. In 1997 the International Convention was held in Glasgow.

Paul and Jean Harris visited the UK many times. In 1934 they visited our Newcastle club and stayed with Hugh Galloway who was our President in 1923, and President of RIBI in 1932. RIBI played a significant role in the development of Rotary International, and still does. Paul again visited this club in 1937.

I will close by quoting Paul Harris writing thirty years after Rotary’s beginning :-

“ This is a changing world – we must be prepared to change with it. The story of Rotary will have to be written again and again”. This is still true today.

Paul Harris died at “Comely Bank” Chicago in 1947, at the age of 78. The Rotary Foundation Fellowship is dedicated to his memory.