

A Brief History of the Rotary Club of Bellingham
For Presentation at the RCOB Past President Recognition and
Appreciation Luncheon April 1, 2024

By 2023-24 President Doug Cole

The first meeting of the Rotary Club of Bellingham was held on August 24, 1917 at the Leopold Hotel. 31 charter members attended and attorney Will J. Griswold presided. Griswold was later elected at the first president. The club was sponsored by the Seattle Rotary Club.

Initial activities were geared to wartime conditions. Delegations were sent to the Great Northern train depot to give a Rotary send off to soldiers departing for Fort Lewis.

By the end of 1918 the influenza epidemic was disturbing the routine of the club and from time to time the Health Department ordered a total city-wide quarantine. The 1920 proposal to make the wartime concept of Daylight Savings Time a permanent measure was met with scorn and even rage by the Rotary Club of Bellingham, the thought being that, "It would hurt business."

Former president William Howard Taft addressed the club in 1921 but received a cool reception due his advocating for the US to join the League of Nations. Membership had climbed to 120.

In 1925 the first "Bravo" fund raising event was held which netted \$93 for the charity fund.

J.J. Donovan was elected president of the club in 1927. That was also the year the club was entertained by the famous band leader John Phillip Sousa. Roland Gamwell, in whose house on 16th street past president Ken Culver lives, spoke to the club protesting a plan urged by some local citizens to put Whatcom Creek into a pipe, and filling in the creek bed so that more buildings could be constructed. Rather, Gamwell urged the

opposite and that it be turned into parks and a greenway. It was through Rotarians such as he that several local parks became a reality.

By 1931, and with the Depression taking its toll, club resignations began to rise as an increasing number of members were unable to pay their dues. While leaders in politics and business resisted demands that the government help with massive welfare needs of the unemployed, the Red Cross, its funds depleted, came to the club with a plea for help. The club responded with the creation of the Milk Fund and Community Chest and help with orthopedic services for crippled children and to the local mission for destitute men.

J. J. Donovan seemed to have an understanding of the future when he warned, two full years before Hitler became chancellor of Germany, that this man could lead the world into catastrophe.

The Tattler was established in 1938 and the Service Fund was established in 1947 to be used for philanthropic causes.

An annual occurrence during the 1950s was a visit to the Bellingham High School. It was reported during one visit that “Young Brian Griffin, student body president, was much in evidence, and handled himself with enough dignity and skill as to arouse the admiration of the Rotary members present.” (Brian’s father, Earle Griffin, was Rotary president in 1944.)

For years the Sergeant at Arms passed around The Charity Box and had received contributions of ten cents from each member present. In 1950 the donation was increased to twenty-five cents. In 1952 there was a great deal of complaint when the cost of lunch was increased to \$1.25 and again in 1959 when it was increased to \$1.50 - - with a reminder to “put a nickel on the table for the girls.” By 1992 lunch cost \$8 and was served buffet style.

In 1958 the club had 164 members.

In 1967, the 50th anniversary of the club, Brian Griffin and Al Levin presented a plan for a renovated downtown Bellingham. The following year Bob Diehl proposed the construction of a special education facility in the Birchwood area. Known as the Redwood School, club members contributed both funding and hands-on labor. It became the first large community project for the club. A van was donated to the YMCA and a dialysis machine was purchased for the Northwest Kidney Center. Boulevard Park was developed as a Rotary idea. Much of these were funded by proceeds from the annual BRAVO event.

In 1979 the club moved from the Leopold to the Elks club out by the hospital. In 1979 the Whatcom North club was formed and in 1981 the Bellingham Bay club. In 1981 the club moved their meeting location to the Bellingham Yacht Club. Key features were Happy Bucks, the Football Pool, Salvation Army Bell Ringing and the annual Rotary Cruise, the latter sometimes being known for participants returning somewhat tipsy, and not necessarily as a result of sea conditions. A watershed moment for Rotary was in 1989 when women were invited to join. Our first female members were Ann Jones and Mary Robinson. Our first female *president* was Jan Marchbanks in 2004.

In 1992 the club celebrated its 75th anniversary and having spun off four other clubs, became known as “The Old Club.” Around this time the club donated \$50,000 from its Bravo income in each of two years towards the building of a civic swimming pool. The club also contributed \$50,000 to Rotary International’s Polio Plus program. Under the leadership of Dick Tucker, Paul Hanson and Larry Halgren, the club funded and helped install a fish ladder on Whatcom Creek.

In 1996 the club moved to Northwood Hall. Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner replaced golf and bridge tournaments and The Tattler went from being mailed to being emailed. Teri Treat served as club president in its 100th year. In 2020, as a result of COVID, the club resorted to virtual meetings via Zoom and then “hybrid” meetings at The Lakeway Inn. In 2022 the club moved to Whatcom Community College.

We would be remiss not to mention our longtime and faithful Executive Secretary, Sandee Lindhout, who's been with the club since 1970.

In looking back, I note several recurring themes in our 107 years: Epidemics, issues with daylight savings time, environmental concerns, economic swings, politics and perpetual inflation. The most important though is The Rotary Club of Bellingham's continued participation in community service.

107 presidents have served the club. Three were named Morse, three were named Diehl, two were named Griffin, two were named Griggs and two were named Haggan. And three were named Cole, but to my knowledge, the Coles were not related. Within the past several months we lost past presidents Dave Nichols, Chuck Farrell and Bob Diehl.

It does strike me that each president answered the call, put in the effort required and that each led this club to the best of their ability. We commend each one and especially thank those who have been able to attend today.