

# Is it the truth?

The story of how Herbert J Taylor survived the Depression and went on to make the world a better place

By Paul Engleman  
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It is a story so familiar to most Rotarians that it has evolved beyond lore and become assimilated into the genetic code of the organization. In 1932, Herbert J. Taylor, the newly appointed president of a nearly bankrupt Chicago cookware company, believing his employees were in need of an "ethical yardstick," wrote four questions on a small, white piece of paper:

Is it the TRUTH? Is it FAIR to all concerned? Will it build GOODWILL and BETTER FRIENDSHIPS? Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?

When Taylor penned what came to be known as The Four-Way Test, the country was in the grip of the Great Depression, and there was widespread distrust of banks and corporations after the stock market crash three years earlier. At the Club Aluminum Products Company, a new and expensive type of cookware was being sold with rapidly declining success by door-to-door salesmen using high-pressure tactics. Although Taylor instituted additional measures, such as establishing distribution channels through retail stores and offering free trials and affordable payment plans, he came to believe that applying his test to Club's advertising and sales methods was the key factor that led to the company's remarkable return to profitability.

Before implementing the test as a company policy, Taylor consulted four managers – a Roman Catholic, a Christian Scientist, an Orthodox Jew, and a Presbyterian – to make sure nothing in it conflicted with "their religious or moral beliefs." He came to see the test as useful beyond business, writing in his autobiography, "Anyone who checks his thoughts, his words and deeds

against The Four-Way Test before he expresses himself or takes action is almost certain to do the right thing."

In the 54 years since Taylor graced the cover of *Newsweek* magazine as president of Rotary International during its 50th anniversary year, The Four-Way Test is still front and center in Rotary circles, with most club members reciting it before meetings and applying it to personal and professional challenges. But in the midst of another economic crisis and a period marked by corporate greed and scandal, this seems an appropriate time to renew acquaintances with one of the key figures in the history of Rotary.

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Perhaps the most important thing to understand about Herbert Taylor is that while he worked hard to promote The Four-Way Test – primarily through Rotary, but also through speaking engagements, radio broadcasts, and youth organizations – he did not claim credit for its authorship. Taylor was a deeply religious man who believed the test came to him through prayer. He believed that "God has a plan for all of us" and that his willingness to accept that idea led to the positive accomplishments of his life, including his association with Rotary. He viewed Rotary as "a maker of friendships, a builder of men and communities and a creator of goodwill and friendship between the peoples of the world."

Taylor's association with Rotary began in the early 1920s, when he helped organize a club in Pauls Valley, Okla., where he had moved from Chicago with his young wife, Gloria Forbrich, after serving in World War I as a naval officer and, before that, a YMCA volunteer in France. Born in 1893, he grew up in Pickford, Mich., a town of 300 in the Upper Peninsula. His father pretty much ran the town, starting up the telephone and electric companies while operating a bank, a lumber



Herbert Taylor with The Four-Way Test.  
Rotary Images

supply company, and a dairy, so Taylor was comfortable with small-town life and commerce. He also was willing to work hard, as he had shown while he was a student at Northwestern University. There Taylor had four jobs: selling typewriters, selling ad space for the yearbook, working for a telegraph company, and writing sports stories for two Chicago newspapers. (He would use the telegraph to wire his stories before the regular reporters turned theirs in.)

In Oklahoma, Taylor sold insurance and brokered oil leases. One of his most memorable sales came about when he attempted to purchase an oil lease from a farmer who, moments earlier, had been served with divorce papers by the local sheriff. Taylor drove the man to a neighboring farm where his wife and children were staying and sold the couple on the idea of marital reconciliation while getting both of their signatures on a lease agreement.

After five years in Oklahoma, the Taylors returned to Gloria's hometown, Chicago, where he joined the local Rotary club and took an executive post with the Jewel Tea Company. By 1928, he was a vice president of the company and the father of two daughters, Beverly and Ramona.

In the early 1930s, around the time Taylor was giving up his steady position at Jewel to save Club Aluminum, he and Gloria set up a storefront mission with a bread line and soup kitchen that drew hundreds of people. That led to the establishment of the Christian Workers Foundation, one of several youth organizations to which Taylor devoted his time. In 1939, he became president of the Rotary Club of Chicago and later held the posts of district governor and director before becoming a vice president of Rotary International in 1945.

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In 1941, with the nation gearing up for World War II, the government curtailed all domestic aluminum use, effectively shutting down Club Aluminum except for selling off existing inventory. Taylor launched a new product, flameproof glass coffee makers, and hired Japanese workers, whose national loyalty was being called into question. Taylor himself was called to Washington, D.C., to serve as one of the nation's "dollar-a-year" men - business executives who worked for the government to help drive the economy. He served as vice chairman of the War Department's Price Adjustment Board, a group that had no actual authority but could appeal to the patriotism of manufacturers to not overcharge the government. He resigned in 1943 over differences in certain "principles and policies," but not before delivering an address to manufacturers in which he said his group had uncovered about \$2.8 billion in "excessive profits." A "fair profit," Taylor told the audience, was "that profit which the contractor would be willing to announce to the men who have left

his plant and are serving in the armed forces."

Around the time Taylor was lecturing manufacturers about ethics, an RI Board member asked for, and received, his permission for Rotary to use The Four-Way Test to promote high ethical standards. That, Taylor writes in his autobiography, was when "things really started to happen!" By 1954, when he became RI president and formally presented the organization with the copyright of the 24 words, the test was already in wide use around the world. On the occasion of Rotary's golden anniversary, the test traveled with the Taylors as they promoted goodwill and friendship in 38 countries and earned plaudits from *Newsweek*, which saluted the organization for having "broken through the barriers of race, religion and language as government and church have seldom been able to do."

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A model of self-discipline who abstained from alcohol, wore a suit and tie even while at home, and memorized the Sermon on the Mount and recited it to himself daily, Herbert Taylor was, nonetheless, "not an intimidating guy." So says G. Robert Lockhart, 82, an active member of the Rotary Club of Wolfboro, N.H., nearly 60 years after his father-in-law recruited him for the organization.

Lockhart recalls that when he made clear his intentions to marry Taylor's daughter Ramona, "he made no big demands about my vocational ambitions. He had a very friendly outlook. He treated everybody that way. I loved the man. I couldn't have had a greater father-in-law."

"He was always optimistic," says Ramona of her father. "I can't remember him being pessimistic about anything. He never raised his voice. He had a gentle spirit." She recalls that although he suffered from chronic headaches, a result of a rare disease called brucellosis, or undulant fever, he rarely complained. Even after losing his ability to speak after a stroke in 1975, she says, he remained

cheerful during the final three years of his life. During that time, he was cared for by his wife, who lived to be 100. In her parents' heyday in Rotary, Ramona says, Gloria was affectionately known as "Herb's costume jewelry." In 1999 at her birthday celebration, she received Paul Harris Fellow Recognition.

Ramona and her sister, Beverly, heard about The Four-Way Test all the time. "He talked about it to the point where, when he told us we had to do something, we would ask, 'Is it fair to all concerned?' We were always teasing him about it."

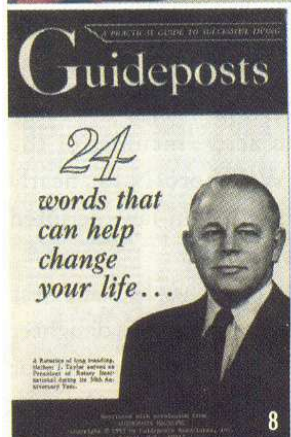
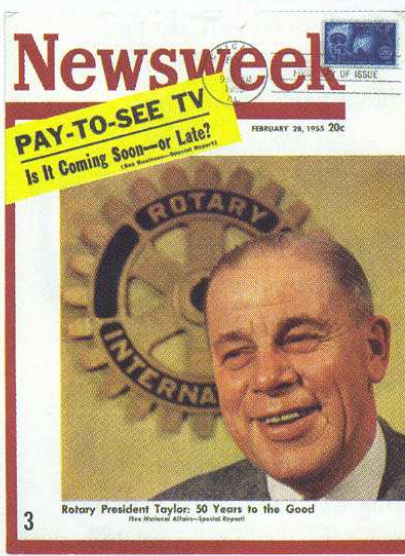
Ramona's nephew, Allen Mathis III, lived near his grandfather in Park Ridge, Ill., and spent considerable time with him growing up. "He was soft-spoken and had a quiet manner," he recalls. "To me, he wasn't a take-charge type of person. He was very low-key. When I learned about all that he had accomplished, I was surprised."

Now living in Alabama, Mathis, a member of the Rotary Club of Sylacauga, considers Taylor the greatest influence on his life and regularly speaks to groups about The Four-Way Test. Along with his sister, Caryl Cusick, a former Rotarian in Florida, Mathis manages The Four-Way Test Association, a nonprofit organization established by their grandfather in 1959. While they work alongside Rotary to preserve and promote the test, crafted nearly 80 years ago, Ramona points out that it is not her father's only legacy.

"Club Aluminum," she says. "I've been cooking in it for years now. It was advertised that it would last a lifetime - it has for us."

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Photos from Herbert Taylor's life: 1) In 1916, at Northwestern University; 2) Herbert and Gloria (sitting) with daughters Ramona and Beverly; 3) The cover of *Newsweek* in 1955; 4) June 1919, Herbert and Gloria marry; 5) Rotary's golden anniversary, the Taylors with Ramona, Beverly, and their husbands; 6) Herbert with a copy of *The Four-Way Test*; 7) Pickford, Mich., Herbert and Gloria at his birthplace; 8) The cover of *Guideposts* magazine in 1955; 9) The family gathered on Herbert and Gloria's 50th wedding anniversary.