

BEMIDJI ROTARY HISTORY 1935 – 1985

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The year 1935 scarcely seemed a favorable time to form a Rotary Club in Bemidji. For several years the United States had been going from riches to rags and the business and professional men of the community were understandably hesitant about the venture. The recent failure of a similar service club in the city was also a discouraging factor. Yet in spite of the hard times, Amos Ayers, Rotarian of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, with Brainerd club as sponsor and the help of a few local men, recruited the group who became the twenty charter members of the Bemidji Rotary Club. On April 10, 1935 the club was elected to membership in Rotary International. The Markham Hotel was chosen as the meeting place.

Bemidji Rotary Club No. 3790 received its charter on May 6, 1935 at a dinner meeting at the Markham Hotel. A total of 176 attended, including Rotarians from seventeen other clubs. District Governor Walter L. Stockwell of Fargo presented the charter. The program also included congratulatory messages by several of the visitors, and the presentation of gifts from other clubs and music. J. H. Wallin, president of Bemidji Rotary gave an appreciative response.

Bemidji Rotary immediately became an active club. It began publishing the "COG", the club bulletin. During the first year seventeen new members joined the club. By 1940 membership had increased to fifty-two. Projects and most programs focused on the four avenues of service. Local persons and prominent visitors spoke at meetings. Rotary Ann parties and inter-city meetings were held. The attendance was generally excellent.

During the 1940s club programs and activities were influenced by the war effort and its aftermath. Many programs dealt with topics related to the war and international issues. The club participated in various community projects. Several members were active in the Boy Scout program. Bemidji Rotary was well represented at District Assemblies and Conferences and the Winnipeg International Good Will meetings. Joint meetings were held with the Lions Club. Two high school students were sent annually to the Youth Conferences held at St. Paul and later at Port Arthur. After V-J Day Rotary Ann parties and inter-city meetings, which had lapsed during the war years, were resumed. In 1951 membership was sixty-two.

Major events of the 1950s included hosting the District Assembly (1952), sponsoring the Black Hills Passion Play (1955), the change of the district number from 173 to 558 (1957), sponsoring the participation of two high school students in the Model United Nations Assembly at Winnipeg, with A. C. Clark as adviser (1959) and annual fund

raising projects for the Salvation Army in cooperation and friendly rivalry with the Lions Club.

In 1952 Martin Sathre became editor of the "COG" shortly before the death of his father, Elias Sathre who had edited the bulletin almost continuously since the club was organized.

The club had an enviable attendance percentage. One year nine members had perfect attendance. In 1960 eight members were recognized for perfect attendance records ranging from one to fourteen years.

Rotary Ann parties, picnics, inter-city meetings and the Winnipeg Good Will meetings offered a full round of social activities. Joint meetings with the Lions were frequent.

Two parties marked the 25th anniversary of the club in 1960. The Rotary Ann dinner on March 28 provided an evening of fun and entertainment. The club observance was held on April 11 with 127 Rotarians present, including delegations from twelve other clubs. With President Lowell Bjella presiding, the program featured an address by District Governor elect Ralph Bird. Bill Bender led group singing with Don Stubbins at the piano.

Through the years, several club activities and projects have become traditions. Each year two Bemidji High School students participate in the Model United Nations Assembly in Winnipeg. The annual International Good Will Meeting at Winnipeg attracts a number of Bemidji Rotarians and Rotary Anns. There is a special birthday table each month for members whose birthdays fall during that month. The Christmas Concert by the Bemidji High School choir with the Rotary Anns as guests is a special yearly program. The lively group singing, led by Bill Bender for many years and then John Yourd with Don Stubbins as piano accompanist, and the rousing "Hello Song" have become widely known throughout the area.

From time to time club members have served on District committees and projects. J. W. Smith was a District Governor nominee but did not live to assume the office.

Bemidji Rotary was host to the District Conference on May 3, 4, 5, 1979. The welcoming festivities, the informative plenary sessions, the Governor's Ball and Banquet, the Rotary Ann events and the Memorial Service highlighted a most successful conference. District Governor Miles Rowe, Club President Bob Welle, general co-chairmen Ron Hermann and Daryl Knoer and other committee members arranged the conference.

The club has regularly given assistance and support to numerous projects and voluntary organizations for the betterment of the community and the life of its people. In recent years, "Radio Day" has been a successful annual fund-raising project. In cooperation with station KBUN, members sell advertising and serve as announcers on the designated day. Rotary information is also part of the broadcast program.

Bemidji Rotary has helped to support “Operation Aware” in local schools. This is a program for elementary school pupils emphasizing responsible behavior and keeping them out of trouble.

Since 1982 the club has sponsored the Bemidji Area Good Neighbor Program to provide a network of trained CPR volunteers. These will respond to calls for help from victims of cardiac arrest in their immediate neighborhood. The club, in conjunction with all the local CPR training resources, provided refresher training for previously trained volunteers as well as Rotarians.

During 1980-1981 the club began participating in the Youth Exchange Program by hosting a student from Bolivia and sending a student to Norway. In succeeding years the club has hosted students from Germany, Sweden, Finland and Norway while at the same time ten Bemidji students have each spent a year as guests of Rotary clubs in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Germany.

Bemidji Rotary has actively promoted and supported the Rotary Foundation. Foundation informational programs are presented. In 1954 a club nominee received a scholarship for study in England. In 1980 another nominee was a member of the Group Study Exchange which visited and studied in Sri Lanka. At present Bemidji Rotary is a 1700 percent club. Since 1979 the club has awarded Paul Harris Fellowships to Hollie Higgins, Herb Dale, Vern Gunvalson, Larry Hegstad, Martin Sathre, John Schuiling, Don Stubbins, John Yourd and Al Withoff for outstanding records of service.

The object of Rotary is the application of the ideal of service by every Rotarian to his personal, business and professional life. This has been the steadfast goal of the programs and activities of Bemidji Rotary, which now has 108 members, including charter member John McKee. Tonight we celebrate a half century of worthy service. May the experience of the past light the path to even greater fulfillment of “Service Above Self” in the years to come.