



Rotary 1912-1919

In December 1912, just weeks after unwanted national publicity about the assassination attempt of President Theodore Roosevelt, civic leaders called an organizing meeting for the Rotary Club of Milwaukee at the Pfister Hotel. The Rotary Club of Milwaukee became the 57th club in the Rotary International network, which now boasts 46,000 clubs.

A month later, 12 charter members held the first official meeting over a six-course dinner at the hotel that cost 75 cents per person.

The initial goals of Rotary:

1. Promote progressive, honorable business methods
2. Arouse and encourage civic pride
3. Strengthen friendship
4. Promote democracy
5. Exchange ideas

In 1913, civic leaders expressed concern as the Wisconsin state budget reached \$13 million, an increase of \$9 million in 1900. The annual payroll for the Milwaukee State Normal School, now UW-Milwaukee, was \$11,509, with the next largest budget item being \$395 for the athletic department.

The year 1914 was marked by the start of World War I following the assassination of the Austrian Archduke in Sarajevo. It was also the year the Ford Motor Company announced an 8-hour workday with a \$5 minimum wage. President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed the first Mother's Day and Northwestern Mutual Life opened its monumental office building on Wisconsin Avenue.

Soon after its founding, the Rotary Club of Milwaukee hosted the first of fourteen annual Boys Christmas Dinners. Ninety-three club members brought 250 impoverished boys as their guests for dinner at the Wisconsin Club. Each boy took home a basket containing dinner for six people. The dinner included chicken, potatoes, peas, coffee, cookies, bread, jam, candy, nuts and oranges.

Historically, this period was marked by rapid change with inventions and public policies: the light switch, stop sign, time zones and daylight savings time. Our capitol building in Madison was completed at a cost of \$7.25 million. Wisconsin enlisted 120,000 residents in WWI and experienced nearly 4,000 fatalities.

In 1917, at a Rotary meeting the President of Anderson Electric Car Co. discussed his vehicle that could travel 80 miles on electric charge with speeds up to 20 mph. The car, which required no cranking, was popular with women and doctors who appreciated its reliable starting.

In 1918, President Woodrow Wilson became the first president to leave the country when he joined the Paris Peace talks. The next year, the Green Bay Packers professional football team was formed, and the 18th Amendment authorizing prohibition was passed. Milwaukee had a population of 457,000, including 6,000 brewery employees. The city had 2,200 saloons, and annual sales of beer reached \$22.5 million.



A February 1913 spread in the Sunday Sentinel celebrated the creation of the Rotary Club of Milwaukee.



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In 1919, the Community Chest asked for a \$25 contribution and the club responded with a \$100 gift. The club voted 187-23 to move luncheons from the Pfister Hotel to the Milwaukee Athletic Club to take advantage of a cost reduction from 75 cents to 65 cents. Luncheons changed to Tuesdays because attendance rates on Mondays were affected by members having especially large quantities of mail to read after the weekend.

Luncheon speakers reflected the times. In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson addressed invited guests at the Milwaukee Auditorium, including all the members of Rotary.

In 1920, the Rotary Club of Milwaukee established the Rotary Fund for the Education of Worthy Boys, making financial aid available to elementary and secondary school students who showed academic promise. The 162 members of Rotary donated \$10,000, which was largely consumed by 1923 when the concept was altered to make it

a loan program with a sense of permanency. That same year, the board decision to forbid future fundraising appeals from the podium took effect.

The Rotary Golf Match, launched in 1920, was held at Blue Mound Country Club. The next year, a tie vote among members meant the weekly luncheon would remain at the Milwaukee Athletic Club rather than move to the Wisconsin Club. And in 1923, the Boys Annual Christmas Dinner held on Christmas Eve landed on a Friday, so Archbishop Sebastian Messmer gave a dispensation allowing turkey to be served.

The average life expectancy in Milwaukee in 1920 was 39 years. That same year, Wisconsin became the first state to ratify the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote. 



This photo spread from a 1925 edition of the Milwaukee Sentinel shows the annual Christmas dinner for impoverished Milwaukee boys, an RCM tradition begun in 1914. Photo courtesy of Bill LeFeber, whose great grandfather John LeFeber was a founding member and is featured in the photos.

Created by Bill Durkin, edited by Mary Bolich

Bill Durkin, President of Durkin & Associates, was a member of the Rotary Club of Milwaukee from 2000 through his passing in the spring of 2021. Bill, who was instrumental in the development of MKE Urban Stables, was actively engaged in the Club's Centennial Anniversary celebration in 2013. An avid student of history, Bill created this history of the Club set in the context of key events occurring in the City, the State and the World.

Mary Bolich, a Principal with Red Rabbit Creative, joined Rotary in 2019. Mary has an extensive background in creative writing, journalism and editing working for organizations such as Kohler, Kohl's and the U.S. Navy. She is the volunteer coordinator of the Rotary Club of Milwaukee's People of Action profile series.