**TWO RIVERS ROTARY: A peek at the past twenty-five years**

[Colleen will have paid tribute to our three 50-year Rotary members, two of whom can be here tonight: Wes Drumm, since 1961; Bill Webster, 1963; and Jim Lester, 1965]

*I want to thank* ***Brenda Georgenson, Brian Jensen, and Julie Schroeder*** *for helping me with different aspects of the technology in this program tonight. I need a lot of help there. I’m also indebted to a past Rotary member,* ***Dennis Hernet****, who twenty years ago produced a fine short history of Two Rivers Rotary.*

This is a talk about what a service club in a small town has done to seek to do “good in the world.” Which is Rotary’s goal. Even when the fishing fleet is now in the low single digits and many of the factories have left town. … Thank you, by the way, Bill Webster, Jim Lester, and Wes Drumm for keeping your businesses here in Two Rivers. . . .

(pause)

**“StackFest. On May 31, 2015, a**n iconic town symbol, the tall smokestack of the Hamilton Manufacturing Company came tumbling down, signaling the passing of an industrial era, 1880 to 2014, in Two Rivers, Wisconsin.

Nearly a century earlier, in 1923, in Two Rivers’ bustling manufacturing era, a group of businessmen founded a branch of a new men’s service club that had begun in Chicago a decade and a half earlier…. back in 1905. It was called Rotary. Racine-native Paul Harris, a Chicago lawyer and Rotary’s founder, had thought it important to bring together professional men from diverse occupations in the cause of “Service above Self.”

In America the early 20th Century was a time for Progressive reform. It was a heady and exciting time. Widespread political and social activism challenged corruption in politics and monopolies in business. Teddy Roosevelt and Wisconsin’s “Fighting Bob” La Follette denounced greed and profiteering. Women demanded the vote, temperance targeted saloons, workers sought the protection of unions.

Paul Harris’s service club creation, Rotary, was a product of its era. All over America, businessmen’s clubs popped up like mushrooms in the night. By 1910, Rotary clubs existed in 16 American cities. Our Two Rivers Rotary Club, chartered in 1923, was the city’s first service club and—reflecting the rapidity of change—was the 1,341st Rotary Club established in the United States. From its origins, the institution of Rotary went international. Today, across the world, there are 34,000 Rotary clubs, 1.2 million Rotarians in more than 200 countries. Rotary International, headquartered in Evanston, Illinois, now operates in 8 official languages, most recently Japanese and Korean. The International President this year is K.R. Ravindran of Sri Lanka, the nation formerly known as the British colony of Ceylon.

But let’s return in our time machine to a century earlier, back to Wisconsin. Manitowoc had established its Rotary Club in 1919, and four years later sponsored the creation in Two Rivers of a Rotary Club. In its first year the Two Rivers club enrolled 31 members, George S. Hamilton was President and Fred Schroeder, Treasurer. Rotary met weekly in the Hamilton Hotel on Washington Street, and would continue to do so for 35 years. The club grew in membership. The first two-thirds of last century was the industrial golden age in the Upper Midwest, factories numerous, businessmen plentiful. The Two Rivers club thrived, even to the point of supplying two Rotary District Governors—Howell Evans in the 1930s and Earl Kromer in the 1960s.

I have not seen those documents, if they still exist, for memberships in the six decades from 1930 to 1990. I am able to tell you that as recently as the mid-1990s Two Rivers Rotary’s membership numbered in the 50s. This document on the screen reveals a vibrant 52-member Rotary Club representing more than three dozen professions, from Accounting and Automobiles to Wood and Woolens.

We are all familiar with the “Rustbelt” story of America’s Upper Midwest. The job erosion in industry began in the 1970s whenso many factory jobs, both workers and management, headed South and then Overseas. As the hemorrhaging increased, a void was created in the community, and in this void Rotary clubs began to struggle to find members.

*However,* what this Club document of Rotary membership in 1994 shows is that, twenty years ago, membership levels were still robust. They began to drop after 2000 with the bizarre emergence of Communist China as the purveyor of capitalist production goods to other nations, including (as we all know) the West. Another factor to explain membership decline is, of course, the current cultural unpopularity of service organizations and the rise of values of privatism, even personal self-absorption. The result? It’s not just Rotary; other service clubs —Kiwanis, Lions, the Jaycees—are today all scrambling for members.

Women from the 1960s onwards were knocking on Rotary’s doors for membership. Rotary International finally opened those doors in 1989, rather late, in my opinion, and in 1995 even got around to rewriting some documents, deleting masculine pronouns that no longer reflected Rotary’s membership. <For example, “gotta rewrite ‘He who profits most serves best.’”> The addition of women has proven overwhelmingly beneficial to Rotary and to our club in particular. Six of our current 20 members , or 30%, are women. (That’s a higher percentage of women club members than the average, which is 22%, for all Rotary clubs in the USA.) Two Rivers Rotary women are certainly among our most active, energetic members. Where would our Club be *without* Betsy Benz, Betty Bittner, Brenda Georgenson, Colleen Inman, and Lauretta Krcma-Olson?! Five of our Rotary presidents since 1996 have been women: Lauretta, the first woman president, followed by Ann Duebner, Betty Bittner, Jane Gates, and currently Colleen Inman. *(applause)*

**II. You know, Rotary is all about “Service above Self.**” *But* it’s also OK for Rotarians to have fun. We’ve enjoyed Dave Hartman’s annual “Steak Fry” in late summer, and a Christmas Social every December. Our major fund-raising event is our March Dinner and Auction at a suitably tony restaurant. Twenty years ago, when our club had nearly three times as many members, we shared with Manitowoc Sunrise and Noon Rotary Clubs an *S.S. Badger* Car Ferry summer outing to Ludington, Michigan. Other past social events? A Two Rivers Snowcoaster Pizza Night, a Wine & Cheese Tasting party, a Classic Arts Dinner Theatre Outing to Appleton….

On the other hand, Rotary is essentially about service, “Service above Self.”

**III. So here’s what Two Rivers** **Rotary has been doing in our community:**

— Participating with Manitowoc’s two Rotary clubs, Sunrise and Noon, in September 2015 in the 10th annual *“Lobsterfest”*, an inter-city fund-raising event.

—Hosting annually in April (PHOTO, 4/10/1994 PROGRAM) at the Lighthouse Inn an annual dinner for the Two Rivers Senior Center. Why? As club President Wes Drumm told the 40th annual senior dinner crowd in 1994, “It’s good for the community; most importantly, this recognition and thank-you dinner “honors those persons who formed this solid foundation that we enjoy, you, our senior citizens.”

— The Fall season Rose Sale fund-raising, initiated (I believe, by Dr Bob Gahl) in 1994, now in its 21st year and still going strong

—Christmas-time bell-ringing for the Salvation Army

—Participating in the nationwide Meals-on-Wheels program

—Engaging in work projects and fund raising for Habitat for Humanity, the Cerebral Palsy center, Peter’s Pantry in Manitowoc, and the Two Rivers Ecumenical Food Pantry

— And, of course, most recently, our program advocating for and pledging 25,000 of our own dollars to build the $125,000 Rotary Lakeshore Pavilion on Neshotah Park’s half-mile sandy beach. As you know, the pavilion was dedicated this past Labor Day weekend.

— Three projects we NO LONGER do are the Super Bowl Party, fund-raising at “Snowfest,” and loaning money to students going to college (we do award Scholarships; we no longer loan money):

1. Dennis Hernet’s history of Two Rivers’ Rotary described the Super Bowl Party as “one of the major social events” of our club. I know it was a raffle event. Top prize: a trip for two to the Big Game. The Super Bowl Party disappeared from our budget records in the early 1990s. During his presidency, as replacements, Dr. Bog Gahl initiated an NCAA final party and a casino night. But these, too, subsequently lapsed.

2. The second project, a “Snowfest” food stand to raise money, rose and fell with the event. In July 1936 a WPA work crew at a city park discovered a large snowbank underground. This summertime discovery of unmelted snow clearly confirmed that Two Rivers was “the coolest spot “in Wisconsin. Determined to drive the point home, from 1937 on, the city sponsored an annual July parade event complete with a “Snow Queen.” Discontinued during World War II, revived in 1958, “Snowfest” lasted another four decades. Rotary’s brat-and-hamburger stand in Neshotah Park during “Snowfest,” Dennis Hernet described as “our club’s major fund-raiser each year.”

3. The third project we no longer do is The Student Loan Fund. Way back in 1931, our Rotary club initiated a program of four-year, $250-a-year loans to a “boy student” (it was an era when “no girls need apply”). The program lasted for some sixty years, ending only in the early 1990s. It finally ended for a number of reasons: Rotarians not tossing in enough money, tuition dollar inflation, students’ neglect to keep up with repayments and the movement of some out-of-state, out of reach. Club President Bob Gahl in 1994 hoped “to re-institute the student loan program.” But that never happened. Our Rotary Club continues to offer Scholarships, which as you know are grants, not loans.

**IV. Historically, our Club’s community and regional** **work** has been wide-ranging, in projects large and small. The diversity and, in some cases, the scale of our accomplishments are, frankly, impressive.

— It involved supporting, back in 1925, Two Rivers’ transition from a mayoral to a city manager form of government.

— It meant also in the 1920s backing the building of a hospital for the City, and then in the 1960s, as new needs arose, building a second hospital next to it. Both today can be seen on Picnic Hill.

— On a more modest level, Club outreach could take the form of installing a bus shelter on Forest Avenue in front of senior housing at Village Green West.

— Youth and education have been a major Rotary focus. More than a half-century ago a Boys’ Work Program became the embryo for the Two Rivers Recreation Department. Many decades ago, this Club was active in installing the Hamilton Swimming Pool in the old Washington High School, one of the first public school swimming pools in the state.

Our club has sponsored youths to attend in-state conferences like Badger Boys State and the World Affairs Seminar, Student Exchange Programs (in-bound and out-bound), Summer Youth Exchange programs. At Two Rivers High School, we long had a Rotary “Interact” program with students, and we still maintain a Junior Rotarian program with the school. One of our club members, Dennis Swetlik, has for many years served as Coordinator of student youth exchange programs in Rotary District 6270.

In the area of recreation, Rotary has been active over the years in making various improvements in Neshotah Park—building rest rooms and the Beach House. Two Rivers has long been a city of parks. This early 20th-century photo of Central Park shows that this elevated gazebo west of Washington Street was built when the 1900 statue honoring the Civil War Union soldier was still **in** the street. Many decades later, Rotary service in 1976 meant working with other service clubs to build the current Bandstand Pavilion in the same Central Park.

Regionally, eight decades ago, our Rotary club pitched in with other organizations in the 1930s to help win state approval for the creation of Point Beach State Forest. In the 1990s, we made a three-year funding commitment to the Rogers Street Fishing Village to assist them with preserving the history of this long-important industry to Two Rivers. Our club also, working with many others, was delighted to be a part of creating in 2002 our beautiful, six-mile-long Mariner’s Trail along Lake Michigan’s shoreline.

**V. Two Rivers** **Rotary’s reach is international as well.**  Again, I must say it is remarkable, for a club our size, what we have accomplished over the past quarter-century.

From documents I’ve seen, our club had contributed *by 1995* some $80,000 to the Rotary Foundation. (I have not seen data for the years since 1995.) The Rotary Foundation is an endowment created back in 1917 “for the purpose of doing good in the world.” The Foundation’s endowment fund received its first contribution in 1918 when $26.50 came in from the Rotary Club of Kansas City, Missouri. By 1928, the endowment had swelled to some $5,000. In 1930 the Rotary Foundation made its first grant: $500 to the International Society for Crippled Children, whose name was later changed to “Easter Seals.” The Rotary Foundation’s endowment value today? More than $1 billion US dollars.

Two Rivers Rotary has participated in a number of international projects. Let me tell you, very briefly, about a few.

—In 1985, Rotary International mounted an international program, **“PolioPlus,”** to rid the world of the wild poliovirus. Already by 1995, our Two Rivers Rotary had contributed $25,000— 200% above its projected goal!! The program has been hugely successful. The last polio victim in the Western Hemisphere, a 5-year-old Peruvian boy, came in 1995—only ten years after the start of “Polio Plus.” Today this ancient worldwide scourge has now been 99% exterminated— only a handful of cases remain, in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Through Rotary clubs’ worldwide contributions of $1.3 billion and elbowing donor governments to spend $9 billion, some 2.5 billion children in 122 countries have gained immunity to the polio virus. Here we see South Africa’s Archbishop Desmond Tutu supporting Rotary’s phrase, “We are this close” to victory….

—Our Two Rivers club has pitched in to provide practical cooking facilities, **“Sun Ovens,”** to people in one of the most impoverished nations in the world. Over just two presidential years, 1992-1994, our club contributed $12,000 to purchase solar-powered ovens, “Sun Ovens,” to

people in need in Haiti. As you can see from these two slides, Two Rivers Rotary was a leader among District 6270 Eastern Wisconsin clubs in its level of funding for this worthwhile project.

—Our club was one of many that participated in a four-year, $300,000 project sponsored by our Rotary District 6270 in funding a Rotary project to train Haitian residents in installing 17 miles of **water pipeline** from a mountain stream to local villages so the people could, for the first time, drink clean water. Project completed, 1993.

—Led by Dr. Bob Gahl, our club has also participated in the 1990s in the **Jaipur Foot Project.**  Rotary International has provided artificial limbs, legs and feet, to amputees around the world, victims of land mines and other accidents, wartime or peacetime. Why?… So people can get on with their lives.

—Most recently, led by Two Rivers’ pharmacist Brian Jensen’s passion and stimulus, our club has participated with others in a Guatemala Medical Resources Partnership, **“GMRP.”** Brian has been regularly active in this Rotary project’s funding and in traveling every January with other health care professionals to provide medical care to people in Guatemala. Last year GMRP saw 500 patients, many walking hours to get to the four-day clinic. You can see more on this on our Club’s website where Brian frequently puts up news about GMRP.

**VI. Well, in closing,** I think you’ll agree that our Club has had a long, impressive “run.” I’m sure I’ve missed a lot of big tales and juicy stories, but then I’m kind of new to town. It’s been fun finding out about Two Rivers Rotary, but now it’s time to return to libations and conversations.