

ROTARY'S FOUNDER – THE PAUL HARRIS STORY

In the fall of 1900, Paul P. Harris met fellow attorney Bob Frank for dinner on the north side of Chicago. They walked around the area, stopping at shops along the way. Harris was impressed that Frank was friendly with many of the shopkeepers.

Harris had not seen this kind of camaraderie among businessmen since moving to Chicago in 1896. He wondered if there was a way to channel it because it reminded him of growing up in Wallingford, Vermont. Harris eventually persuaded local businessmen to join him in a club for community and fellowship. His vision laid the foundation for Rotary.

“The thought persisted that I was experiencing only what had happened to hundreds, perhaps thousands, of others in the great city ... I was sure that there must be many other young men who had come from farms and small villages to establish themselves in Chicago ... Why not bring them together? If others were longing for fellowship as I was, something would come of it.”



Harris at age three, around the time he moved to his grandparents' home.

GROWING UP

Harris was born on 19 April 1868 to George H. and Cornelia Bryan Harris in Racine, Wisconsin, USA. George attempted to support his family as a small-business owner but he often relied on his father for financial assistance. In July 1871 that reliance became permanent when Harris and his

older brother, Cecil, were sent to live with their paternal grandparents in Wallingford, Vermont. Harris later wrote, "Of all charges which might have been made against George and Cornelia, parsimony would have stood the least chance. They were both royal spenders."



Harris as a student at the University of Vermont in Burlington, 1886.

Harris was raised by his grandparents, Howard and Pamela Rustin Harris, and saw his parents only occasionally. He grew to revere the family values that characterized the New England of his youth. In October 1928, when he returned to his boyhood home for the charter night celebration of the Rotary Club of Wallingford, he proclaimed, "Much that there is in Rotary today can be traced back to the good old New England family table."

He was a mischievous child. He attended primary school in Wallingford and secondary school in Rutland, where he played pranks and skipped class. He also attended Black River Academy in Ludlow but was expelled after only a few weeks. Harris enrolled at the University of Vermont in Burlington but was expelled with three others in December 1886 because of his involvement in an underground society. He later wrote that although he was innocent of the crime he was accused of, the expulsion was nonetheless justified.

Harris spent the spring with a private tutor and in the fall of 1887, he enrolled at Princeton University. His time at Princeton was cut short by the death of his grandfather in March 1888. He completed the semester but did not return to school the next year.

LIFE IN CHICAGO



Harris soon after he started practicing law in Chicago in 1896.

After Princeton, Harris made his way to Iowa, where he found his professional calling working at the law firm of St. John, Stevenson, and Whisenand in Des Moines. After his apprenticeship, he attended the University of Iowa in Iowa City and graduated with a Bachelor of Laws in June 1891.

In 1896 Harris settled in Chicago, where he opened a law practice in the central business district. He remained active in his professional practice for more than four decades.

Harris sought meaningful personal and spiritual relationships in addition to his professional achievements. He attended religious services on Sundays but visited many different churches rather than aligning himself with one congregation. Later in his life, he said that his religious affiliations were, like himself, difficult to label. "I really have no church affiliations ... I am not easily classified; that is to say my convictions are not that of that definite nature essential to whole-hearted affiliation with the general run of churches. ... Of course, these days one can hear the best of preaching over the radio and I generally hear three or four sermons every Sunday."

Harris loved nature, and in 1908 he joined a group that organized monthly Saturday afternoon walking trips through the forests, fields, hills, and valleys around the city. In 1911 the group became the Prairie Club, and Harris served as one of its directors.

THE BIRTH OF ROTARY



The first four Rotarians (from left): Gustavus Loehr, Silvester Schiele, Hiram Shorey, and Paul P. Harris, circa 1905-12.

After setting up his law practice in Chicago, Harris gathered several business associates to discuss the idea of forming an organization for local professionals. On 23 February 1905 Harris, Gustavus Loehr, Silvester Schiele, and Hiram Shorey gathered at Loehr's office in Room 711 of the Unity Building in downtown Chicago. This was the first Rotary club meeting.

In February 1907, Harris was elected the third president of the Rotary Club of Chicago, a position he held until the fall of 1908. During his presidency, he formed the Executive Committee, later called the Ways and Means Committee, which met during lunch and was open to any member. The noon meeting was the foundation for Rotary's tradition of club luncheon meetings.

Toward the end of his club presidency, Harris worked to expand Rotary beyond Chicago. Some club members resisted, not wanting to take on the additional financial burden. But Harris persisted and by 1910 Rotary had expanded to several other major U.S. cities.

Harris recognized the need to form an executive board of directors and a national association. In August 1910 Rotarians held their first national convention in Chicago, where the 16 existing clubs unified as the National Association of Rotary Clubs. The new association unanimously elected Harris as its president.

At the end of his second term, Harris resigned, citing ill health and the demands of his professional practice and personal life. He was elected president emeritus by convention action, a title he held until his death.

In the mid-1920s Harris became actively involved in Rotary again, attending conventions and visiting clubs throughout the world.



Jean Harris ca. 1926-28.

LIFE WITH JEAN

Harris met Jean Thomson, Scottish-born daughter of John and Ann Younson Thomson, during an outdoor excursion of what would later become the Prairie Club.

“One beautiful March Saturday in 1910 I joined my fellow Prairians on an Elgin and Aurora electric train bound west. I was a bachelor and quite open-minded on the matrimonial subject. That is to say, I had never closed my mind and heart to the possibilities of conjugal bliss ... Here is where she came in, blythe, bonny Jean.”

They married on 2 July 1910 in Chicago. In 1912 they purchased a house on Longwood Drive in Morgan Park, a suburb of Chicago. The Harrises named their house Comely Bank after the street in Edinburgh where Jean had lived as a child. They entertained friends from Chicago and around the world, and hosted gatherings and reunions of the Rotary Club of Chicago. Many gatherings took place outside, in what they referred to as their “Garden of Friendship” or “Friendship Garden.”



Paul and Jean Harris in Christchurch, New Zealand, in April 1935.

The couple had no children and Jean joined Harris on his visits to Rotary clubs around the world. After Harris died, Jean briefly continued to live at Comely Bank. She later sold the house and returned to her native Edinburgh, where she died in 1963.

The Paul and Jean Harris Home Foundation purchased the house in 2005 and plans to restore it.

A WRITTEN RECORD

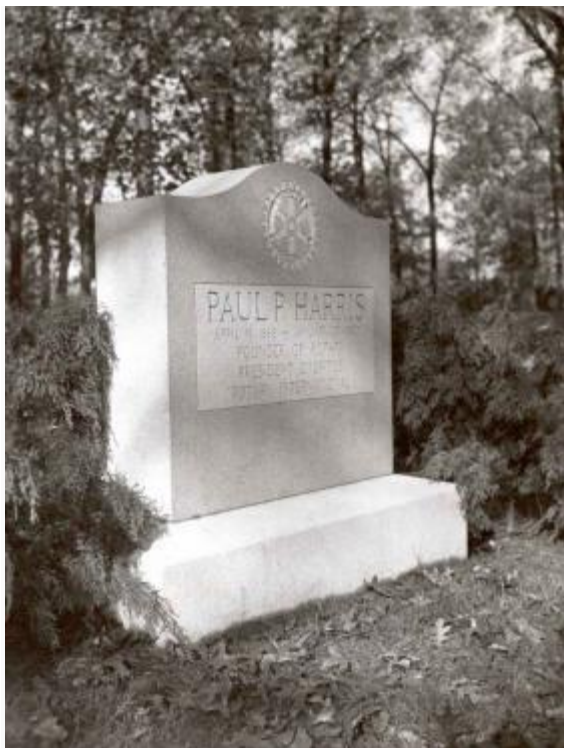
Harris wanted to write a special message for all Rotarians to read, but at the time Rotary had no way to spread the word. Chesley R. Perry, Rotary's first general secretary, suggested creating a publication to disseminate news and club business, with the cost offset by advertisers. Thus, the "National Rotarian," later "The Rotarian," was born. Harris's article "[Rational Rotarianism](#)" appeared on the front page of the first issue in January 1911. He wrote "[Passing Our Tenth Milestone](#)" to commemorate Rotary's 10th anniversary in the February 1915 issue.

In his book "This Rotarian Age" (1935), Harris explored what causes people to do good things and described how Chicago in 1905 was ripe for the kind of change Rotary could offer. He also addressed Rotary's future challenges and its potential as a force for world peace.

In 1935 Harris and Jean traveled for three months through Southeast Asia and Australia. Harris wanted to publish his account of this trip in a book that would become part of a series called "Peregrinations," to describe his travels as an ambassador of Rotary. He wrote "Peregrinations II"

about his trip to Southeast Asia and Australia (1935), thinking he would combine the pamphlet-style reports he'd written about earlier trips to Europe and South Africa into a book called "Peregrinations I." Although he would write "Peregrinations III" (1937) about his trip to Central and South America, he never compiled "Peregrinations I."

THE END OF AN ERA



Paul Harris's headstone at Mount Hope Cemetery on the South Side of Chicago. Silvester Schiele, the first president of the Rotary Club of Chicago, is buried a few feet away. Jean Harris is buried in Scotland.

In December 1945, the Harrises traveled to Tuskegee, Alabama, for the winter months, a trip they had made many times. In early 1946 Harris contracted influenza. Chesley R. Perry, a member of the Rotary Club of Chicago and Rotary's general secretary from 1910 to 1942, traveled to Tuskegee and reported that Harris was receiving good medical advice but remained weak: "He has had some lung trouble over many years. He was not getting the proper amount of sleep, nor proper nourishment." The Harrises returned to Chicago on 28 March 1946.

Harris died on 27 January 1947 in Chicago at age 78 after his prolonged illness. Funeral services were held at Morgan Park Congregational Church on Chicago's South Side. Three Rotary leaders spoke: Perry, Past RI President T.A. Warren, and then RI President Richard Hedke. Past presidents of the Rotary Club of Chicago served as pallbearers.

Harris made it known that he preferred contributions to The Rotary Foundation when he died in lieu of flowers. By coincidence, days before he died, Rotary leaders had committed to a major

fund raising effort for the Foundation. After Harris's death, the Paul Harris Memorial Fund was created as a way to solicit these funds. The Paul Harris Memorial Fund was earmarked to help establish Rotary Foundation Fellowships for advanced study. At its May/June 1947 meeting, the Board of Directors allocated \$60,000 of the \$228,000 raised to support the program. The program was known as the Paul Harris Foundation Fellowships for advanced study during the first year.