

**James Wheeler Davidson**  
**“World Citizen”**  
**1872-1933**

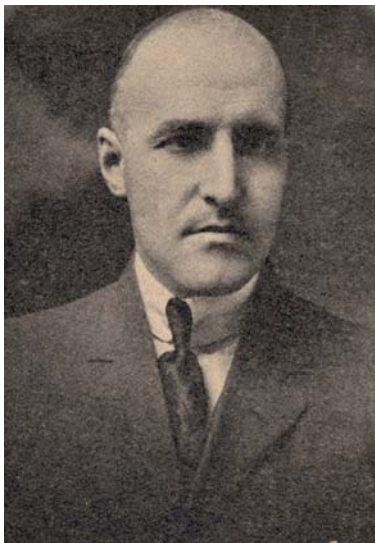


James Wheeler Davidson

When Paul Harris wrote his last article for the Rotarian in 1947 he identified three Men of Rotary. The first was the thirty year Executive Secretary of Rotary, Mr. Chesley Perry. The other two were Halifax lawyer J. Layton Ralston and Calgary businessman James Wheeler Davidson.

The latter two, together with Doug Howland of the Calgary Rotary Club chartered forty-seven Rotary Clubs in eighteen different countries in 1921, 1923/4 and from 1928-34.

Together with the Winnipeg Rotarians who formed the first Club outside the United States in 1910, these three Canadian Rotarians completed the circumnavigation of Rotary around the world by chartering Clubs from Greece to New Zealand.



J. Layton Ralston

As recorded in 75 Years of Service, the History of Rotary in Australia, the 1921 “choice of Canadians for the assignment is significant. It was decided (by whom is not known) that Canadians should be involved in the attempt...RI would have been aware of those close ties of Empire...Rotarians from a sister Dominion could be assured of a warm welcome...the Americans were friends and allies; Canadians were family...whatever the reasons for their selection, the Australian Rotarians owe them and the Rotarians of Canada a debt a gratitude...”.

The man at the center of Rotary Extension program was James Wheeler Davidson. Paul Harris acknowledged his international reputation was already established before he joined the Calgary Rotary Club in 1914. By then the man from Austin, Minnesota had been a North Pole explorer, a syndicated Far East journalist, a war correspondent, and a US Consul General in Shanghai before he came to Calgary with his new wife Lillian in 1907.

In Calgary he developed CPR lands northeast and southeast of Calgary, rapidly syndicated the Crown Lumber company into fifty-two branches with two hundred employees, helped start the Calgary Symphony, initiated the Calgary Mawson Report and successfully invested in the Turner Valley Oil Field.

He joined Rotary as a “Loans Officer”. But his inter-provincial travels almost cost him his membership. Fortunately for Rotary he didn’t, as he became Calgary Club President in 1919/20, the old Zone 4 District Governor in 1923/4 and was nominated as one of two Honorary Commissioners by the Canadian Advisory Committee to extend Rotary to Australia and New Zealand in 1921. On that task he was joined by Lt. Colonel and future Canadian WWII Minister of Defence Layton Ralston. They left for Australia in

early 1921 and chartered Clubs in Melbourne, Sydney, Wellington and Auckland. In those two countries there are now 1200 Clubs and 42,000 members.

To Davidson travel, roads and Rotary were inseparable. He took his “through highway thinking” and joined the Sunshine Trail Association to promote a road from Calgary to Salt Lake City and eventually Los Angeles and Mexico in 1922. He did the same with every trail coming out the Calgary hub to Banff, Edmonton, Gleichen and Lethbridge and made the motion to form the Alberta Motor Association in 1926. His trips to the Many Glaciers Hotel laid the foundation for the Rotary International Peace Park proposed in 1931 and declared in 1932.

As a Rotarian he was appointed to his first RI committee in 1920 and was never off one including his years as Honorary Commissioner until 1931, sitting on the Publications, Aims and Objectives, Extension, Finance and International Service committees, before being elected third VP of RI in 1926/27 and accepting the RI call to consolidate Clubs in Calcutta, Shanghai and Japan and charter Clubs from Athens to Jakarta in 1928-31.

During his thirty-two month world circumnavigation with his wife Lillian and daughter Marjory, the threesome overcame car accidents, personal injuries, indigenous fevers, near fatal insect bites, language barriers, cultural differences and unfamiliar religions. At the same time they addressed indifference, philosophical resistance and closed doors but in the end Davidson chartered twenty-three Clubs in twelve countries. This excluded Taipei, Formosa, which the Japanese Governor chartered two weeks after Davidson had sailed for Vancouver in 1931. Davidson reputedly spent \$250,000 of his own resources to successfully conclude his commission.

As requested in his correspondence, the RI Board expanded the Rotary vocational classification system, included members with similar vocations but different ethnic backgrounds, expanded the Rotary literature into new languages and modified charter requirements to adapt to the monsoons and hot summers which led to absenteeism.

Paul Harris personally complimented Lillian Davidson on the articles from the trip she serialized in the Rotarian from 1931-33. They revealed her latent literary talent and developed a large following. When she spoke at the 1932 Seattle RI convention in lieu of her husband, it was with passion, sensitivity and insight that she captivated the all male audience.

Lillian and Jim had prearranged to publish her articles in a book entitled Making New Friends before Davidson passed away July 18, 1933. Six hundred copies were printed by RI in 1934. In 1932 Davidson arranged for Calgary Clubmate Douglas Howland to follow in his footsteps from 1932-34. Howland chartered fifteen more Clubs in five countries. Their work was sealed by RI Presidents Sydney Pascall and Allan Albert who visited the new Clubs in 1932 and 1934 and finally by Paul Harris who cemented their work with his own Asian tour in 1935.

In October 1933 Lillian and Marjory Davidson accepted a Paul Harris invitation to plant a cultured blue spruce tree in the Harris’ Garden of Friendship to which the marker was added “To the memory of James Wheeler Davidson, World Citizen”.

The second Canadian RI President, Dr. Crawford McCullough wrote in his Davidson eulogy “he has done a great service, how great will perhaps never be measured, and with all, he is the most modest of

men. Perhaps if Rotary had gone searching she would never have found the militant apostle that she needed for successful work in the Near and Far East...there are no other fellows that I know of just like Jim Davidson; his personality is distinctly and entirely his own, and it is an odd conglomerate – seer, politician, showman, adventurer, writer, philosopher, incorrigible youth and modern go getter. And it took his whole repertoire to succeed. Indeed, I believe he succeeded where no one else could have”.

The Davidson saga was immortalized in 1935 when the Alberta Motor Association and the Calgary Rotary Club jointly requested that the Canadian Geographic Names Board add the Davidson name to a prominent Rocky Mountain peak. Approved, it never reached the maps until the transposition error was discovered in 2002. Mt. Davidson is located nine kilometers north of the Lake Minnewanka marker mountain the Devils Head, a mountain which has guided prairie travelers and natives for centuries.

Now this prominent peak has next door to it an even higher reminder of a celebrated Calgarian, Canadian and Rotarian James Wheeler Davidson.

What more significant centennial, for both Alberta and Rotary on their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversaries, could be conjured than recounting the goodwill and better friendships Davidson built, which have stood the test time and proven to be so beneficial to all of mankind.

“For the longer you look back, the farther you can look forward”  
(W. Churchill)

Robert Lampard M.D.