

GLIMPSES OF MORRIS ROTARY CLUB 1915 -- 1997.

BY GEORGE BROWN — OCTOBER, 1997

While a more comprehensive history of Morris Rotary Club is in preparation, this presentation presents a few of the highlights that have propelled our club forward over the past 82 years.

Morris, Illinois — a small dot on a highway map — located in the midst of a lush agricultural region. People from all points east of the Mississippi River, and European lands migrated to this area, drawn by the prospects of diversified farming and fledgling industries, of which, mining was prominent.

Morris was established as a village and county seat in 1842 — a year after Grundy County was formed out of LaSalle County. First called Grundy — then Morrystown — it's name was later shortened to Morris.

Work on the Illinois and Michigan Canal had commenced in 1836 — and depending on the vagaries of finance — was progressing under construction. Commerce in Morris was first set up on Canal Street — later changed to Illinois Avenue with Washington Street just north of the Court House Square.

When the Rock Island Railroad came through town in 1853 — Liberty Street became the principal commercial avenue. Along with an increasing population, many clubs and societies attracted membership.

Within the commercial and professional community, the Lincoln Club of Morris came into being to promote commercial growth and for the community good. The name of the club was changed to the "Commercial Club" — numbering among it's membership businessmen, tradesmen, and professionals such as lawyers, medical men, and clergy.

This then was the climate of Morris — a town that had seen the ebb and flow of it's fortunes amidst physical disasters, financial panics of national proportion, the I&M Canal construction and finally becoming a water highway between the Great Lakes — the Illinois River, at LaSalle, and down to the sea at New Orleans via the Mississippi River.

Morris in 1915 had a population of about 4,700 persons. Rotary International had a population floor of 15,000 in any community seeking a Club Charter.

Why then did Morris successfully achieve a Rotary Club Charter, and a position of respect in the Community for the past 82 years?

People made the difference. In 1914 Richard M. McClure moved to Morris to become the Editor of the Morris Daily Herald.

He soon noticed that factionalism in the business community — principally between two large grain companies was stifling the attitudes and energies needed to make Morris prosper and grow with the times.

Dick had been a member of the Rotary Club of Chicago, and he felt that bringing a Rotary Club to Morris could have a lasting and positive effect upon the business climate of the community. He enlisted the aid of two men who had previously been affiliated with the Rotary Club of Chicago.

This nucleus of men went about the town talking to others about the principals and meaning of Rotary — Which culminated in a meeting at what became Weitz Cafe. The meeting on 9 April 1915 enlisted the help of the first president of Joliet Rotary Club.

Mr. E. D. Martin of Morris, then Superintendent of Schools, was selected to visit Rotary International HQ., and speak with the general secretary, Mr. C. R. Perry.

Mr. Martin had know Paul Harris, which probably lent weight to his presentation for the chartering of a small community club.

The Ottawa Rotary Club was also helpful in lending their voice in support of a Rotary Club in Morris — since Ottawa too had been chartered with a population less than 15,000.

On the 21st of April 1915, a second meeting was held at the Saratoga (Weitz) Cafe. Forty eight prospective members attended. Many were members of the foremost “Commercial Club.”

They adopted the constitution, naming themselves the “Grundy Efficiency Club.” Of the group that met on 21 April, forty five signed membership cards.

Among the first elected officers, I note that my father, Harry E. Brown, age 29 and an electrician — was the first Sgt-at-Arms.

The vitality of the new organization and prospective Rotary Cub was soon apparent. Interest was shown in the development of the Illinois river deep waterway — in encouraging a canning factory to locate here. There was a tonic effect already flowing and a serious move toward cooperation among the businessmen of the town.

On 9 June 1915, it was decided to send a delegation to Rotary International HQ, to petition for the issuance of a charter for a Rotary Club in Morris, Illinois. The delegation included President O. T. Wilson, Walter Wagner, Frank Demaree, E. D. Martin and Richard McClure.

Paul Harris was present and spoke in favor of granting the Charter. It probably didn't hurt to have Martin, his friend, on the delegation!

So a charter was granted — but it was conditional for one year! Much water has moved down the Illinois waterway since those urgent beginnings of the Morris Rotary Club. And much has transpired in Morris Rotary Club between the Presidencies of Orville T. Wilson, 1915-16 and Scott Reeded, 1997-98.

Two of our past Presidents have served as District Governors — Dr. F. Wayne Graham Jr. and Jerry S. Sproull.

In searching past newspapers I found numerous references to Morris Rotary Club's involvement in civic projects and in stimulation of the business community. Many of those projects have had lasting effect up to the present day; such as the Morris Swimming Pool.

It would be redundant to capsulize the efforts of each president, which has been so ably done in the work to date by Chuck Johnson and his Rotarianne. That detail may be seen in the “History of the World's First Small Town Rotary Club, 1915-1997,” copies of which are available. The purpose of this presentation is to give a flavor of the times that existed that led to the chartering of the Morris Rotary Club.

It is for us — the present day membership — to be mindful of our rich heritage and set our sights on bringing the Morris Rotary Club into the next Millennium — a strong organization — willing to lead — Service Above Self — and a keeper of the Principals of Rotary International.