

Vintage Lodi
For Lodi News-Sentinel, Sat. March 19, 2005
With one photo and Vintage Lodi logo

Rotary Club started in Lodi in 1921

By Ralph Lea and Christi Kennedy

Special to the News-Sentinel

Lodi and Galt's five Rotary Clubs joined more than 30,000 other clubs throughout the world to celebrate the organization's 100 years of service in more than 165 countries in February.

The first Rotary Club started in Chicago on Feb. 23, 1905 when a man named Paul Harris invited three other friends to meet regularly for fellowship and mutual business promotion. They met in an office and rotated their meetings from one member's place of business to another. From this system, their organization became known as Rotary. From that simple beginning, the club chartered more clubs in other cities and countries. Now, 100 years later, Rotary has more than 1.2 million members and is recognized by the United Nations as a leading non-governmental organization in international humanitarian services.

In Lodi, Rotary began with 25 men assembled 84 years ago in the early days of Prohibition. Today, Lodi has three Rotary Clubs with a combined 156 members, and Galt has two clubs with a combined membership of 55.

In December 1920, Dr. Dewey Powell, past president of the Stockton Rotary Club, observed that Lodi was a vibrant city with promising growth potential and

industrious businessmen. Powell was appointed to survey the community and take preliminary steps to organizing a club in Lodi.

In January 1921, Powell wrote a letter to Rotary officials in Chicago. "It takes a fine quality of citizens to make a community and in this particular (*sic*), Lodi is unusually fortunate. The leading men are men of vision, intelligence and courage and their accomplishments of the past few years are the best evidence of their dependability for future progress," Powell wrote.

Powell went on to advise Rotary officials that Lodi community leaders wanted to join Rotary, but they were also being courted by Lions Club organizers. If Rotary officials did not act soon, the Lodi men might join the Lions Club instead.

Powell's letter was answered less than two weeks later. Rotary International approved formation of a Lodi Rotary Club on Feb. 10, 1921.

On Feb. 21, 1921, the Lodi Rotary Club was formally organized at a meeting held at the six-year-old Hotel Lodi at Pine and School streets. There were 25 charter members, and as in Rotary tradition, all represented different professional areas. They were M. C. Jahant, independent fruit shipper, M. O. Holt, shoes, C. M. Ferdun, banking, C. C. Woodworth, almond grower, G. L. Meissner, lumber, N. D. Swim, fruit shipper, W. E. Garrison, cherry grower, S. H. Zimmerman, druggist, Glen West, attorney, A. V. Friedberger, furniture, Dr. James E. Nelson, physician, George H. Moore, publisher, H. E. Welch, commercial banker, D. D. Smith, dry goods, J. S. Montgomery, broker, George H. Keagle, men's furnishings, J. T. Langford, fruit products, W. H. Thompson, hotel, W. C. Brown, dehydrator, J. C. Bewley, real estate, H. T. Bailey, pumps, T. H.

Beckman, farmer, B. A. Towne, Sr., tokay grape grower, Dr. Charles Price, Protestant minister, and E. G. Steacy, hardware.

The first business meeting of the Lodi Rotary Club was on April 8, 1921 in the Hotel Lodi when Dewey Powell officially presented the charter to the club. This was described as an “enthusiastic and never-to-be-forgotten meeting”, according to a club history written in 1960 by Joe K. Newfield, Sr. Stockton Rotarians were present at the meeting and so thoroughly fined themselves that the Lodi Rotary Club’s financial fund was well on its way.

James Nelson, a well-liked Lodi physician, was elected the club’s first president. Other officers elected were Walter Garrison, vice-president, Mike Holt, secretary, Charles Ferdun, treasurer, Sam Zimmerman, sergeant at arms, and Wilson Thompson, Hillard Welch and John Montgomery, directors. The first new members were elected into the club within the first month. They were John Cory and Joe Newfield.

The Lodi Rotary Club immediately became involved, as it continues today, in promoting youth activities. The club began sponsorship of a Boy Scout troop in June 1921. Also that month, the club joined the Lodi Woman’s Club and the Lodi Parent Teacher Association in developing and maintaining two public playgrounds.

Rotary, for many years, was a club where only men could join. The wives were called “Rotary Anns” and participated in club social events. On Nov. 30, 1921, the Lodi Rotary Club held its first “Ladies Night” dinner and dance. During the dinner, everyone was entertained by a game where roses and lemons were passed around. A rose was passed from woman to woman, and a lemon was passed from man to man. The

passing was stopped when an alarm clock rang. The lady left with the rose was given a prize, and the man left holding the lemon was fined.

At the end of the Lodi Rotary Club's first year the membership had doubled to 51. Charles Ferdun was elected the 1922 president. Ferdun routinely fined members \$10 to \$50 "but everyone knew that the money was being put to good use for welfare and charitable purposes and for character building," Newfield's history stated.

As Rotary grew in Lodi, so did its meeting place in the Hotel Lodi. The Hotel Lodi was called one of the state's finest hotels when it opened in 1915, and by early 1922 more rooms and a dining hall were added. The Rotary Club formally opened the hotel's new Gold Room on Oct. 26, 1922. The room served as the weekly meeting place for the club into the 1960s.

Also in 1922, the state highway commission gave Lodi Rotary permission to plant four miles of shade trees along Cherokee Lane north of Lodi.

In 1923, the club continued its service to area youth by starting a student loan program for deserving high school students. They were loaned \$100 to \$350 to continue their college education with no interest charged. There was an understanding that the money would be repaid once the recipient was earning money.

On Jan. 10, 1924, the club voted to loan \$1,500 to form the San Joaquin County Health Unit. This effort to join other county service clubs to start the health agency was led by charter member Curtis Woodworth.

In 1929, Wayland Babcock was elected treasurer and held the office for the next 19 years. On April 24, 1930, Lodi Rotarians voted to sponsor the formation of the 20-30 Club.

The Great Depression years of the early 1930s made service club membership a financial difficulty for many. Still, the Lodi Rotary Club maintained a membership of approximately 56 men, carried on its activities and entertained speakers including James Rolph, Jr., governor of California.

By 1932-33, club membership grew to 70, but the fines levied on members each week were reduced to 25 cents as a concession to hard times.

Dave Ritchie was Lodi Rotary Club president from 1939 to 1940. Membership exceeded 100 for the first time.

In 1956, under the leadership of then City Manager Doug Weller, the Lodi Rotary Club hit a high mark of 164 members. Three years later in 1959, Joe "Speed" Newfield, Jr. took over as club president, and membership grew to 172 members by 1960.

As Lodi's population grew, Rotary grew. In 1977, Lodi's second club, the Lodi-Tokay Rotary was chartered. Ten years later, the Lodi Sunrise Rotary was chartered. In 1984, the first Rotary Club in Galt was formed. In 2000, a second Galt club, the Galt Sunrise Rotary Club was chartered.

Each area club conducts local fundraisers from organized cycling events to the Ohh, Aah Festival on the Fourth of July. Funds raised are turned back to the community for various local causes like scholarships and to international projects including the effort to eradicate the world of polio.

Vintage Lodi is a local history column that appears on the first and third Saturday of the month.

Photo Courtesy of Ralph Lea

Lodi Rotary Club members found entertaining ways to conduct meetings and social events to raise money for charitable causes. Here, Rotarians Bill Comartin, on the right, and Cecil Perrin, second from the right, perform in the “inexpensive band” at a club event in the Hotel Lodi’s Gold Room.