

The Rotary Club of Oxnard—A Club in the Making

1920 –

Between 1905 and 1920, more than 750 Rotary clubs were admitted to Rotary International membership, and the Rotary Club of Oxnard was proud to be among them.

Oxnard in 1920 was a small, sprawling bean and beet town on the Oxnard plains, boasting a population of 4,417--double what it was in 1910. Oxnard, California, was recognized as the center of the famous Santa Clara Valley in Ventura County and the trading point for the eastern half of Ventura County.

The first organizational meeting of what would become the Rotary Club of Oxnard was held on October 19, 1920, from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. in the Oxnard Masonic Temple. This meeting was reminiscent of the first meeting of Paul Harris and his friends in Chicago on February 23, 1905, when our founder said he wanted to start a club that “would kindle fellowship among members of the business community.”

“A kind of trial run,” Oxnard Rotary Club charter member and clergyman Tom Swift called it. With encouragement from his friends, accountant Rudolph Beck, Oxnard Union High School Principal William Bannister, women’s wear department store owner Charles Bagley, and farmer Charles Donlon, this first meeting was held at the Masonic Temple on the southwest corner of 5th and C Streets across from Plaza Park. Rotary Club of Oxnard archives contain the original set of minutes of that first meeting. Entitled “Oxnard Rotary Club in the Making,” the minutes list the names of 25 charter members and their potential Rotary classifications. James Briscoe, past president of the Rotary Club of Santa Barbara, was guest speaker. That 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. organizational meeting has meant so much to the Rotary Club of Oxnard! Minutes indicate that “Charles Donlon was then called on to give his impressions of the meeting and the future of the organization. Mr. Donlon spoke enthusiastically and predicted a very successful future for the club.” That statement made near the end of the 1:30 meeting bode well for the Rotary Club of Oxnard.

At the second meeting of the Rotary Club of Oxnard, Tuesday, October 26, a motion was made by Charles Donlon and seconded by Achille Levy, “That a club be organized to be known as the Rotary Club of Oxnard, California, and that formal application for a charter and affiliation with the International Association of Rotary Clubs be made.” News of this new organization in town was printed in the *Oxnard Courier*.

The first officers of the Rotary Club of Oxnard were listed as President Frederick Noble, Vice President Roy Witman, Secretary Rudolph Beck, Treasurer Leon Lehmann, and Sergeant-at-Arms A.J. Dingeman. Charter Directors included Achille Levy, Charles Donlon, Leon Lehmann, and Roy Witman.

Charter Membership closed on October 26, 1920, and the membership list was sent to the secretary of the International Association of Rotary Clubs in Chicago, showing the variety of vocations represented among that original membership. Frederick Noble, the first club president who would serve two terms, listed his business as manager of the American Beet Sugar Company of Oxnard. Treasurer Leon Lehmann owned the Wolff and Lehman dry goods store at 239 Fifth Street and listed his classification as “capitalist.” Other charter members included physician Edward Swift, druggist Ben Virden, attorney

Charles Blackstock, music dealer George Austin, newspaper proprietor Jim Krouser, and tractor dealer Albert James Dingeman.

In 1905, Paul Harris noted that in the first Rotary club, “There were no drones in the 1905 group. Everyone was interested and busy.” The same may be said of the charter membership of the Rotary Club of Oxnard. Members needed to wait until December 1, 1920, to receive their charter from the Rotary District Governor. The first organizational meeting of the Rotary Club of Oxnard, October 19, 1920, finally culminated in the Charter Night celebration of February 28, 1921, in the grand dining hall of the Oxnard Hotel.

At the eighth meeting, December 7, 1920, club member Dr. Bayles called on the Rotary club membership “to do something, in other words, to have a definite objective, and not merely assemble for the purpose of eating.” At the 22nd club meeting, March 29, 1921, meeting minutes note that “There was a discussion of the efforts to launch a county wide Boy Scout organization.” This would soon become a working reality, and the Rotary Club of Oxnard is proud to be a long time supporter of this fine organization.

Through years of *Service above Self*, Oxnard Rotarians have followed in the footsteps of their club’s forefathers of 1920 and have mirrored the precepts and built from the foundations laid by Rotary founder Paul Harris. During those early years, the constitution of the Rotary Club of Oxnard, California, as Club Number 788 was written followed by the bylaws for the club. As the club continued to grow after 1920, it was proud to sponsor other Rotary clubs in Port Hueneme, Camarillo, Channel Islands, and Thousand Oaks, never forgetting its history and legacy to the Santa Barbara club and those before it.

Members of the Rotary Club of Oxnard have accepted the challenge of the four *Avenues of Service*—they continue to sponsor a Rotary Interact Club at Oxnard High School, after the first model formed at Melbourne, Florida, in 1962. Scholarships are awarded annually to deserving Oxnard High School seniors and have been awarded to Ventura County Youth Authority students. The Rotary Club of Oxnard helped start the Cub Scout Pack at the former Camarillo State Hospital. In 1953, the Rotary Club of Oxnard co-sponsored the founding of the Oxnard Boys and Girls Club and continues to support this organization through annual contributions. Since 1985-86, Oxnard Rotary Club members have assisted the Oxnard Union High School District in hosting its annual Career Fair. In 1987, a charitable trust was established.

Through its history the club has sponsored participants in the Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholars program, including a year’s study in Bohn, West Germany, for current Oxnard City Councilman Timothy Flynn. The Rotary Club of Oxnard sponsors the annual Oxnard-area elementary school basketball tournament and cheerleading competition, an event started under Rotary club president Pete Lennox in 1947-48 and carried forward by member Rex Fryer and others, and now co-sponsored with the City of Oxnard Parks and Recreation Department.

On February 24, 1948, members of the Rotary Club of Oxnard planted a Chinese elm as a Friendship Tree in the city’s Plaza Park in honor of Rotary founder Paul Harris, and on February 23, 1999, the Friendship Tree and a Paul Harris Plaque were rededicated as a part of the city’s Arbor Day celebration.

First unveiled in 1984, Rotary's *Polio Plus* campaign was supported by members of the Rotary Club of Oxnard.

In the mid-1950s club historian Ted Metzger stated in minutes that "The Rotary Club of Oxnard was never quite satisfied with its base of operations." For over 85 years of history, the Rotary Club of Oxnard has changed its meeting sites from the first organizational meeting at the Masonic Temple to the charter site at the Oxnard Hotel, back to the Masonic Temple, to the Oyster Loaf Restaurant, back to the Masonic Temple, to the Colonial House Restaurant, to the Elks Club, and now at the former Oxnard Hilton Inn, currently named the Courtyard by Marriot Hotel. The club continues to meet at 12:10 p.m. Tuesdays.

Members of the Rotary Club of Oxnard are proud to join their 1.2 million colleagues in 32,000 clubs worldwide, convening weekly, enjoying fellowship, and carrying on activities demonstrating service above self. In his 1955 memoirs of the Rotary Club of Oxnard, club historian Ted Metzger stated, "Instead of ending with the final paragraph, this recording should be added to, so to speak, with succeeding chapters as the years go by."