

first men of Rotary

## Harry Ruggles: he taught Rotary to sing

**I**N EARLY 1920, in a letter to Silvester Schiele, one of the original four members of the Rotary Club of Chicago, Rotary founder Paul Harris wrote: "As I look back over the field of early events, the work of Harry Ruggles so completely overshadows all others in connection with the founding of the Chicago club that it shocks my sense of justice to see him excluded from pictures of those times."

Harry L. Ruggles was the *fifth* member of the Rotary Club of Chicago, so he is not usually included in references to the "founding members," but other early Chicago Rotarians like insurance man Charles Newton agreed with Paul Harris that he "really should have his name engraved in the Rotary Hall of Fame."

Harry is best remembered for having introduced singing to Rotary, but his contribution to the organization was far more than that. He was the first treasurer of the Rotary Club of Chicago and its fourth president. And he was the club's champion "new member getter." According to Charlie Newton, of the first 200 members of the Rotary Club of Chicago, two-thirds were brought in, directly or indirectly, by Harry Ruggles. One member that Harry was particularly proud of having introduced was Ches Perry, Rotary's first secretary and the founding editor of its magazine.

Harry, incidentally, was a printer by trade, and it was his firm that printed "The National Rotarian," the 12-page newspaper designed by Ches Perry to carry a message by Paul Harris to the 16 Rotary clubs in existence in 1911. Harry's firm also printed the first edition of the official magazine that succeeded it, THE ROTARIAN. Harry handled all the Chicago club's printing needs: its letterheads, its songbook, and its first club bulletin.

"I was printing postcard announcements and letters about meetings in those days," he reminisced in a 1952 article in THE ROTARIAN, "and when there was space I'd slip in an item about some member. The fellows liked it so we started a regular publication called the *Rotary Yell*." The name was later changed to the *Gyrator* (Rotary spelled backward plus a "G," added for a reason Harry couldn't recall) and that title persists today as the Chicago Rotary Club's bulletin.

As for Rotary singing, Harry remembered in the same article, "Once we were having an especially dull meeting in our room at the Sherman Hotel (one of the club's early meeting places before the system of "rotating" meeting sites began) and I for one had got pretty tired of just chewing the rag. 'Gosh, fellows,' I said, 'let's sing!' By that time I was standing on my chair, waving my arms, and swinging into 'Let Me Call You Sweetheart'."

Soon afterward, Harry organized a quartet which sang at club meetings and outings and at an early convention. He printed a songbook and distributed copies by the thousands to other Rotary clubs. Years later, famed music historian and "tune detective" Sigmund Spaeth would credit Harry and Rotary with having given impetus to the vogue for community singing which started prior to World War I and has since become a part of the U.S. scene.

Personally, Harry Ruggles measured up to every requirement of the "true Rotarian." He was reliable, punctual, and straight-



forward—"so honest he can't see the crooks in the letter Z," according to an admirer. He was a "humorist of the first order" and an uninhibited social mixer. Not only did Harry extend Rotary membership in his own club, he also helped it spread to other cities; he was instrumental in organizing Rotary clubs in Indianapolis, Peoria, Minneapolis, and St. Paul. In 1910, the year after the first 16 Rotary clubs affiliated in a National Association, he was named a director.

Harry was brought up in a firm, upright, and poor Methodist farm family in northern Michigan. In 1887, the family moved to Chicago and Harry entered Northwestern University, working part time as a salesman for a printing firm. Eventually he was able to buy one-third interest in the company and later bought out both partners. He was in the printing business for 60 years.

The "sunset years" of his life—and he had a great many, for he lived to be 88—were spent in California with his beloved wife, Josephine. His son Kenneth, also a longtime member and past president of the Rotary Club of Chicago, took over the family printing business when Harry retired. On his 80th birthday, the Rotary Club of Chicago brought Harry "home" for a gala celebration, and once again he made the rafters of "Old Number One" ring as he led a spirited rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Harry and Josephine had two sons and a daughter, and they lived to enjoy two more generations of Ruggles grandchildren and great-grandchildren. A Rotarian to the last, Harry died of a heart attack on October 23, 1959, while enroute to a joint meeting of the Rotary Clubs of Cathedral City and Palm Springs. It is not at all improbable that he died with a Rotary song in his heart.