

Henderson's oldest civic club just passed the century mark.

By Frank Boyett | *The Gleaner* | September 10, 2017

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The Henderson Rotary Club was organized Sept. 6, 1917, during a banquet at the Kingdon Hotel, which was attended by Rotary delegations from Evansville, Louisville and Owensboro, according to *The Gleaner* of the next day.

Rotary International was founded in Chicago in 1905 and Henderson's club was Kentucky's third Rotary Club. Organizational work for it had begun at least a month earlier; coverage in *The Gleaner* indicates the Evansville Rotary Club was its primary sponsor.

The Evansville club threw a big barbecue in Atkinson Park Aug. 8, 1917, to which the Owensboro Rotary Club was invited, as well as "prominent business men of Henderson," according to *The Gleaner* of Aug. 2.

Gov. Augustus O. Stanley had been scheduled as the keynote speaker at that event, but for some reason was unable to attend, according to *The Gleaner* of Aug. 9. More than 200 members of the Evansville and Owensboro clubs attended, as well as about 20 Henderson men.

"The Garden of Eden is co-extensive with Kentucky," said J.H. Risley, president of the Owensboro club, who welcomed the Evansville visitors to the commonwealth. He closed by saying Henderson needed a Rotary club.

The district governor, James F. Finley of Chattanooga, came here to Sept. 6 to help install "a real live-wire Rotary club in this city," *The Gleaner* reported Sept. 7, noting Henderson was "on the Rotary Club's map."

Finley made it clear at the outset that Rotary had no interest in trying to throw shade on any commercial organization, but was perfectly willing to help in any way possible.

"Finley said the club was not a trade-swapping organization and if any of the members got into it for that purpose, to get out quickly. He said it was not political in any sense and no man or political question should be advocated."

If anything, attendees at that first meeting probably could have been forgiven for thinking the club's main purpose was to have a good time. After the invocation, George A. Bleich of Owensboro immediately started a "rough house" by fanning the flames of some good-natured rivalry between Henderson and Owensboro.

He got so "heated" in his comments that a police officer had to come take him in hand and lead him from the room. "The officer's part was well arranged by Gus Starr (one of the charter members) and the hit brought down the house."

H. Van Orman of Evansville, known as the "Hoosier Orator," got off to a good start when he said Owensboro was a "dinky little crossroad hidden behind two old boxcars.

"There is no place for the grouch or the clam in the Rotary Club," he said. "None but bright, happy, cheery fellows are wanted."

The welcoming address was given by James M. Yeaman of Henderson. "He said a Rotary Club was just the thing for Henderson, as it would bring Henderson, Owensboro and Evansville closer together and bind up many old commercial wounds and put an end to petty rivalries."

An air of informality was established from the beginning. All men introducing others were warned that if at any time they referred to him as "mister," they would have to pay a fine of 10 cents to the man being introduced.

A total of 43 men were inducted as charter members at the Sept. 6 banquet, and all their names are included at the end of The Gleaner's story the following day, as well as the names of all guests from Evansville and Owensboro.

That story was lengthy, but it was followed up with another on Sept. 9, which listed some important information that was left out of the initial story – the names of the first officers. They were President Charles T.W. Argue, Vice President James Yeaman, Secretary Spalding Trafton, Treasurer Arthur Katterjohn and Sergeant-at-Arms Charles F. Malling.

The officers were also on the first board of directors, along with James L. Lambert, John T. Elam and Thomas P. Boone.

As the city's oldest civic club, the Rotarians have led a variety important projects. Here are a few examples from my files:

The forerunner of the Henderson County Health Department was formed in February 1927 as part of a Rotary campaign.

The Rotary Club organized Henderson's first community-wide Easter Egg Hunt in 1929. More than 3,500 children participated.

An unemployment office was set up by the Rotary Club in mid-1930 as the Depression began slamming the local economy.

The Rotary Club helped organize the local Goodfellows organization in 1937, probably through its connections with the Owensboro club. Owensboro already had a Goodfellows program.

Columnist Ann Landers spoke to students at Henderson County High School in 1958 after being invited here by the Rotary Club.

Rotary does much more than that, of course. They truly live up to their motto of "Service before self."

I know. I covered many a Rotary meeting through the years, and to this day I still occasionally get their earworm, sung to the tune of the chorus of "The Gang's All Here." The part that sticks in my head goes like this.

"Pie, pie, we all want pie. / Peach or huckleberry, any kind but cherry. / Mince pie is mighty fine. / That's the way Rotarians dine."