

HOUSTON DISTRICT 5890 (589) HISTORY

From a write-up by Jon R. McKinnie in 2009

At a time when Rotary International can claim 1.2 million members and nearly 31,000 clubs, it is difficult to think of a time when there were less than 5,000 members and 50 clubs comprising the entire world of Rotary.

Yet, such was the case when the Rotary Club of Houston was founded, on November 1, 1912, and received charter No. 53, of the National Association of Rotary Clubs. Today, the Rotary Club Houston is one of the oldest clubs in Rotary. Any consideration of the history of the present District 5890 of Rotary International, or of any aspect of Rotary in all of South Texas, for that matter, must begin with full appreciation of the enduring leadership of the Rotary Club of Houston.

According to the 2008-09 Roster of District 5890, ten of the sixty clubs of the district list the Rotary Club of Houston as their sponsor, and we may take any one of those ten and develop an interesting kind of genealogy. Pasadena, the second largest club in the district, has sponsored six clubs. Harrisburg has sponsored four; several clubs have sponsored two or three. It may well be that every club in the district is a lineal descendent of the Rotary Club of Houston.

Despite the fact that it has been the principal factor in the growth of Rotary in this area, the Rotary Club of Houston has not assumed a role of dominance. As might be expected, in the first thirty-five years of its existence - from 1916, when Rotary first grouped clubs into district - until the immediate post-war years, the Houston club furnished most of the District Governors. However, since the creation of the present District 589, in 1956, the Houston club has furnished only seven persons for that office. Nevertheless, the Rotary Club of Houston, by reason of its age, its size and its prestige, continues to be the bench mark for all Rotary activity in this part of Texas.

What we know today as District 5890 has been variously numbered and variously constituted. In 1950, for example, it included forty-three clubs in the area from Orange to Weimar and from Galveston to Nacogdoches, and was then District 190. Prior to that it had been numbered 12, 18 and 47. In 1955, the number of clubs in the Houston area having increased, the district lines were re-drawn and the district was given the designation of District 589. The first Governor of the newly constituted district was W. H. "Bill" Avery, a member of the Houston Club.

Incidentally, the only person ever to be District Governor without first having been presidents of a club was Walter Jenkins, long-time International song-leader, and later to become president of the Houston Club. Of the sixty clubs presently comprising District 5890, as shown in the 2007-08 Information Directory, forty-two have been organized since the end of World War II.

As might be expected, the range of a club size is very great. The Houston club has 294 members; Palacios has twenty-seven. The latter club would seem to prove that growth alone is not an adequate index to the viability of a club. Palacios was chartered in 1934. Thirty-five years ago the membership was about thirty-five, but neither gain nor loss seems to alter the determination of the club to make Rotary known in that town.

Pasadena has proved that a community does not need to be a metropolis to sustain two Rotary Clubs of good size. The growth of the city of Pasadena proved to be such that in early 1967, the Rotary Club of Pasadena sponsored the Rotary Club of South Pasadena. In 2007, Pasadena had 161 members; South Pasadena has 43.

Such is the nature of Rotary today that every club is expected to engage in a project in one or more of the Avenues of Service. Since these projects almost certainly require funds, every club must seek for the means of raising those funds.

The Houston club's "Lombardi Award" dinner is not only their primary fund-raiser, but it is a major event in the sports life of the city. Football notables from all over the country attend, and the event generates a great amount

of media coverage.

For the most part, fund-raisers in District 5890 clubs take several forms: Food sales (pancakes, shrimp boil, fish fry, barbecue, chili, spaghetti) with or without an auction; Las Vegas or casino night, also with or without auction; raffle, usually involving an expensive car or truck, although one club has its prize a Caribbean cruise. There are golf tournaments and fun runs. Alvin takes part in their community "Frontier Day", and Palacios conducts the "Miss Palacios" contest. At another level the University Area club conducts an annual book fair for the benefit of M. D. Anderson Hospital volunteer services. From all this it can be seen that a major part of the energy of every club is directed toward raising funds to support its good works.

The Rotarians of District 5890 involve themselves in International Service in many ways, not all of them within Rotary's organized framework. For example, the Angleton club has, since 1962, worked with the American Field Service student exchange program, and as a result has hosted eighteen students from countries outside the United States.

In 1973, William "Bill" Carter, of England, then president of Rotary International, visited for three days in Bay City and participated in that club's observance of its fiftieth anniversary. Beginning in 1970 and continuing to the present time, Houston Heights has exchanged visits with the Tacubaya Club of Mexico City.

Rotary Foundation announced the new Group Study Exchange program in 1965. Six years later a Houston Heights Rotarian led a six-man team to District 275, in Australia. A team from District 120, England, visited this district in 1974, and in April of 1975 a Harrisburg Rotarian led a team for a visit to District 120. Another team visited District 950, Australia, in 1980, and the next year a similar team from that district visited our District 589.

From time to time Rotary Foundation Fellows come to study for a year in one or another of the numerous institutions of higher learning in Houston and vicinity. The District has a committee of Rotarian Counselors whose responsibility it is to provide hospitality for visiting Foundation scholars. When these scholars are in the District, in order to comply with a portion of their responsibility, they make appearances before the various clubs. It would seem, however, that not all clubs become aware of their presence and so are deprived of their visits.

There are presently sixty clubs in District 5890, with a total membership of 3,100. The relative rank of District 5890 in giving among all the districts of the Rotary world is probably irrelevant here. It is to be expected that some districts will place very great emphasis on such giving, while other districts place very little.

Suffice to say that the clubs of District 5890 regard the Rotary Foundation as but one element in Rotary's multi-faceted program, and generally maintain a balanced stance in their giving for the world community and for the community at home.

The District 5890 administrative structure is a complex one. In the 2008-09 year there were sixteen Assistant Governors (AG), each AG serving as liaison to from three to five clubs. While the District Governor is required to personally visit each of the sixty clubs in the course of his year, it is obviously impossible for the DG to maintain a continuing intimate relationship with each one. The Assistant Governors perform this function.

The entire district committee structure involves something over one hundred individuals. This is a way by which a great number of Rotarians may be drawn into activities which enable them to see something of the scope of Rotary beyond their respective clubs, and whatever can be accomplished probably enriches both Rotary and the Rotarians involved.

When one reads the historical summaries of the Rotary Clubs in District 5890, it becomes immediately apparent that each club is uniquely different; that, even when bound together by the principles and ideals of Rotary, each club has its own ideas of how to go about realizing those principles and ideals.

The reader will also sense that, for the individual Rotary Clubs, the District is not the essence of Rotary. It is but a

superstructure standing between the club and Rotary International. Club morale, club understanding of the Object of Rotary, and club effectiveness in earning a place for itself in the community are all attainments for which the individual club takes full responsibility and credit. In a very real sense, the Rotary District is not an array of clubs all marching in step, but is, instead, a collection of highly individualistic entities whose greatest desire may be to practice Rotary as they see it.

This is to say that this district, and every Rotary district, should see itself, not as administrator or judge of conformity, but as a helper, a supplier of ideas and, when necessary, a coordinator of activity. The sixty clubs of Rotary International District 5890 are bound together by their common loyalty and understanding of the Object of Rotary and by their common belief in the validity of Rotary's motto, "Service Above Self".