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“Service Above Self” 100 Years: The Canandaigua Rotary Club

by

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The spring of 1919 was a time of change. World War I was over. The terms of a fragile peace were yet to be determined. Canandaigua mourned its losses to both combat and disease. More than that, the community celebrated the outpouring of service and patriotism brought forth by the war. The people of Canandaigua; indeed, the entire area; looked back to a quieter time and began to think about the needs of neighbors.

That March, Frank DeGraff and his business partners traveled to Elmira to visit one of their book and stationery stores. Over lunch, the subject of forming a Rotary Club in Canandaigua dominated the conversation. Founded in Chicago in 1905, the Rotary club concept had taken root in several Upstate communities in the years before the war. DeGraff had been approached by members of the Elmira Rotary Club (organized in 1916) who offered to assist in organizing a club in Canandaigua.

Upon his return to Canandaigua, DeGraff approached Arthur E. Thompson of the Canandaigua Business Men’s Association to gauge local support. At first, Thompson was not very enthusiastic. He thought that the formation of service club might interfere with the business association. Thompson was shortly won over, however. In fact, by 1955 Arthur Thompson (president in 1932-33) was the only charter member of the Canandaigua Rotary Club still active



Frank DeGraff Founder and first president of the Canandaigua Rotary Club. He was one of three partners in the Main St. stationery store of McGreevy, Sleight, DeGraff.

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The Canandaigua Rotary Club was formally organized on April 24, 1919. The new club was said to be the first of its kind chartered in a city of less than ten thousand people. Thirty Rotarians came from Elmira, and fifty more came from Auburn for the formalities. District Governor, Russell C. Kelly of Hamilton, Ontario, represented the Rotary International. Guests came from Rochester and Waverly as well. A “club supper” was served to a hundred people at the Canandaigua Hotel (where the Police Dept. is now located). Frank DeGraff was elected president of the new Canandaigua club.

Lunch at Flanigan's

Over the years, the Canandaigua Rotary Club has held its luncheon meetings in many locations around the community. John Flannigan’s oyster house was a popular venue for several years. (It was located at the site of the parking lot next to Simply Crêpes.) After a while, the club moved to the Webster Hotel (current location of Commons Park). For a time in the 1930s, the club met at a small lunch and tea room in a home on North Main St. called Florence Villa. Moving back to the Canandaigua Hotel for many years, the club later moved its meetings to the Lakeshore House and Steamboat Landing on the lakeshore; then to the Moose Club, the Wine and Culinary Center, and finally to the American Legion. As Rotary grew there has always been a need for ever larger meeting space.



Flanigan's Restaurant, famous for its oyster cocktails

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Among the local club's distinguished luncheon guests have been composer and band leader, John Philip Sousa (1926) and Governor (soon-to-be-President) Franklin D. Roosevelt (1930). Justice Robert F. Thompson invited surviving veterans of the Civil War to have lunch with the club from time to time. Twenty-three of them accepted the invitation as late as 1935. Here they can be seen outside Florence Villa on N. Main St.



Civil War veterans entertained by Rotary in 1928

In 1948, Harvey Stowers, a Los Angeles executive with the Aircraft Industries Association spoke about the post-war future of air power. Heikki Herlin, a Rotary International director from Finland, spoke to the club (1950) about his experiences during the recent decade of turbulence and war in his homeland. University of Rochester emeritus professor, Dexter Perkins, addressed the club in a public meeting on Jun. 1, 1972. A noted authority on American diplomacy and foreign policy, Perkins talked to the club about “the world-wide implications of President Nixon’s visits to Russia and China.”

Perhaps the most unusual luncheon program was the receipt of a flag belonging to President Warren G. Harding who had recently died. It was being passed from club to club. District Governor, Edwin Weeks brought the flag from Geneva to Canandaigua in November, 1923.

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Almost as soon as the Canandaigua club was organized it put the motto, “**Service Above Self,**” into action. The club’s first project was establishing a loan fund for needy local students. That effort was renewed several times. In 1971, money given in memory of Rotarians Philip Thomas and Conrad Muehe was placed in a student loan fund at FLCC. As part of another early project, Rotary provided milk for indigent students in the local schools and paid the costs of a visiting nurse.

The Canandaigua Rotary Boy’s Band was established in 1926. While there was already an orchestra at Canandaigua Academy, the schools had no band and no music classes in the elementary grades. The Boy’s Band filled the need for an organized instrumental music program in the schools and was very popular. The legacy of the Boy’s Band was felt for decades. Several of its members became music teachers in later years. They included Emory McKerr, who later directed the Shortsville and Academy bands; Burton Stanley, who later taught music in Cortland High School and SUNY Potsdam; and Stuart B. Patterson, music teacher in Cheshire and instructor with the American Legion drum corps. While attending the Ernest Williams School of Music in Brooklyn, Patterson composed the “C.A. Band March.” Henry Miller, who owned Miller’s music and appliance store on Main St. for many years was also part of the Boy’s Band. After a few years, the Canandaigua school district gradually took over the music program.



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Then Rotary supported a marching band program at the Academy. On May 10, 1933, the local Rotary Club took the lead in a local effort to raise several thousand dollars to pay the cost of Academy band participation in a contest at the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago. The CA band had just won the Class B state championship in Syracuse the previous week. Support of the local school music program has been a century-long mission for local Rotarians.

Early in the Twentieth Century, one of the most feared diseases was tuberculosis. Just as Rotary has focused on the eradication of polio since 1979, it worked to alleviate and prevent tuberculosis in the years after World War I. Already in 1906, Mrs. Mary Thompson funded a bacteriological laboratory behind Thompson Hospital. Ontario County had also opened a special Tuberculosis sanitarium in East Bloomfield in 1909. The Canandaigua and Geneva Rotary Clubs worked together to promote the sale of Christmas Seals in 1919 and later years. Money from that sale funded the work of the county tuberculosis committee.

The Canandaigua Rotary Club went even further, however. In 1922-23, it funded and built a “preventorium” on the grounds of Thompson Hospital, near the old nursing school building on Wilcox Lane. Club members raised the entire \$6000 cost of erecting the building by “passing the hat.” On December 17, 1922, the club received a letter from Mrs. Thompson, herself, commending it for its “public spirited generosity.” A year later, in November, 1923, the Canandaigua Rotary Preventorium was a feature story in *The Rotarian* magazine. It served the children of Ontario County for twenty years. It later served the Girl Scouts; FLCC; and the Co-ordinated Child Development organization and was finally demolished in 2011.



Painting the outside walls during construction of the Canandaigua Rotary Preventorium

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In 1920, Canandaigua Rotary members began a tradition that continues to this day. President John Handrahan (1927-29) announced that the club's Christmas cheer committee had arranged to have an entertainment for a hundred poor children at the Community Building (the first YMCA) during the holiday season. There was a gift distribution, dinner and a special program. First, however, the children were treated to a show at the Liberty Theatre. Along with this holiday program, the club also provided dinner for the children suffering from tuberculosis at the Thompson Hospital annex.

Now the club's Holiday Cheer committee, jump-started by Rotarian, John Wilcox, takes up two collections in November and December. A committee of school nurses and counselors distributes the funds (generally around \$2000) to the needy families of children in the Canandaigua schools.

As the years passed, the Canandaigua Rotary Club took on a wide variety of service projects. In the 1960s, the club raised money for project "Hope," a hospital ship that traveled the world providing medical assistance to those in need. With the dawn of the television age, the club provided a TV set for Thompson Hospital in 1954. In fact, as early as 1940, Frank Beaucaire of the Rochester Rotary Club spoke to the club about "Merchandising Trends and Television." It was a look into the future at a time when few people in the audience had even seen a picture of a television set. In recent years, Rotary has supported the United Way campaign and raised money to assist the local work of the Hochstein School of Music.

Junior Rotarians selected from local high schools began attending club meetings in 1940. The local Interact Club continues that tradition. Over the years, the club has supported American Legion Boy's State and paid the costs of half a dozen campers at the 4-H camp. Club members support the Salvation Army red kettle collection each holiday season and provide a community meal in December. Students in the primary and elementary grades also receive trees to plant and dictionaries; and they are offered a bicycle safety program. Together with other clubs, Canandaigua Rotary supports a Rotary district oratorical contest providing high school students in western New York with the opportunity to hone their speaking skills and compete for significant college scholarships.

Throughout its history, the Canandaigua Rotary Club, like its partners in service, has raised most of the money needed to complete its projects. For twenty-five years (1956-1980), the annual Rotary Pancake Supper raised money to support programs for youth and the disabled. Together with nearly two dozen clubs, Canandaigua Rotarians created (1956) and supports what is now called Camp Onseyawa for special needs children. In recent years, the club has raised money for current community projects at its annual pier dance; the annual RPO concert; and Festa Italiana.

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Rotarians have always loved parades. The local club's participation in the 4th of July parade continues a long tradition. The local club went all-out for the Canandaigua Sesquicentennial Parade in 1951. The club built a unique float around a truck body. 40,000 people watched the parade.



Rotary parade float in 1951

After World War II, Canandaigua Rotarians joined with others in their district to sponsor foreign students who wanted to study at local colleges. At about the same time, the Rotary Exchange program began, sending local high school students overseas for a year and welcoming others from around the world. The exchange program is now nearing its half-century mark.

A major change in Rotary membership, long overdue in the minds of most members, took place in 1989. The Rotary International Council on Legislation voted to eliminate the requirement that Rotary clubs be limited to men. Women were welcomed into local clubs around the world. Women were admitted to some US and Canadian clubs as early as 1987 as a result of court challenges and changes in Canadian law. Not long after women were officially admitted to American Rotary clubs they began joining the Canandaigua club. Today, women comprise about half of the membership. Nine women have been president of the Canandaigua club since Cathy Coots first picked up her gavel in 1995.

As the Canandaigua Rotary Club has grown, it has spread the word about Rotary service to nearby communities. Just as it was sponsored by the Elmira Rotary Club in 1919, Canandaigua Rotarians have sponsored clubs in Honeoye Falls (1929); Naples (1939); and Gorham (1951).

The more things change, the more they stay the same. The principles of Rotary's "Four Way Test," and the concept of "Service Above Self" are never out of fashion. As it celebrates a century of service, the biggest change in the Canandaigua Rotary Club is that its membership is now six times as large as it was in 1919.