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## 'Up to GOOD'

*Service clubs have a heart in an often heartless world, and they should be honoured for the splendid work they do. They embody idealism and the community spirit, two qualities that are needed more than ever today...*

been left to its overnight echoes by its workaday inhabitants. Anyone hearing of this conclave might be forgiven for thinking that, in the grand tradition of men getting together after dark, these fellows were up to no good.

But as Paul Harris and his three companions talked into the night of February 25 in Room 711 of the Unity Building on Dearborn Street, they defied the cynical view of human association as a conspiracy of particular interests against the general welfare. In a reversal of all-too-common form, they were "up to good." For there and then they launched the service club movement, which has since mobilized millions of volunteer workers for the improvement of living conditions for people virtually everywhere on the planet. Today, service clubs are striving to eradicate childhood diseases, prevent blindness among hundreds of thousands of Third World children, provide medical

The occasion was more suspicious than auspicious, coming as it did in 1905 in Chicago. Though that city had yet to gain its reputation as the gangster capital of the world, it was nonetheless home to the extortionist Black Hand society, various anarchist cells, and the powerful industrial cartels that were then ruthlessly preying on the American economy. And here you had four dark-suited men meeting in an office building that had long

equipment and personnel, promote literacy, and do a thousand other things to benefit the mass of humankind.

It all started with Harris pining away for the sense of fellowship and community he had known growing up in a small town now that he was living as a lawyer in a big city. So he brought together three acquaintances to propose that they meet regularly for purposes of camaraderie, enlightenment, and mutual encouragement and support. They agreed to form a club of like-minded business and professional men, and decided that their meetings should rotate among the members' business premises. Hence its name: the Rotary Club.

As its membership grew, Rotary assumed the form of a modern service club, hosting convivial weekly luncheon meetings featuring guest speakers. But the defining point in its evolution came in 1907 when it undertook its first community project, the provision of comfort stations (public toilets) at Chicago City Hall. The concept of reaching out into the community set Rotary apart from the great majority of associations that had gone before it. There was no shortage of clubs at the time, but their membership tended to be specialized as to religion, political affiliation, sports, occupation and what-have-you. Many did good works, but they were inclined to keep the fruits of their benevolence to themselves.

Even religious groups dedicated to aiding the sick and poor either confined their activities to their own communicants or acted in self-interest by seeking converts. The closest approximations to service clubs were fraternal orders such as the Masons, Odd Fellows and Elks. Members of these lodges supported one another, but by and large they did not then see their role as lending support to entire communities. (A more recent exception is an offshoot of the Masons,



*"The only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found out how to serve."  
Dr. Albert Schweitzer*

the Shriners, who sponsor children's hospitals and other good causes.) Chambers of commerce bore similarities to service clubs, but they tended to concentrate strictly on commercial matters. Whereas traditional charities gave money to worthy causes, service club members rolled up their own sleeves to work on charitable projects, or gave their time to raise funds which they passed on to those in need.

#### **A can-do, sky's-the-limit attitude**

The idea of performing community service through a non-partisan, non-denominational and socially inclusive club was catching. Rotary spread to other cities; the first Canadian service club was a Rotary chapter opened in Winnipeg in 1910. In 1915, the world's second major service club, Kiwanis (an Amerindian word for "we make ourselves known") was formed in Detroit, to be followed a year later by a chapter in Hamilton, Ontario. Most service club organizations today have the word "International" as part of their official titles. Almost always, they first reached international status when affiliates in Canada sprang up.

What is now the world's largest such organization, Lions Club International, was founded in 1917 by insurance agent Melvin Jones. Jones belonged to the Business Circle of Chicago. Seeking a way to extend its activities into the community at large, he and 11 other Circle members organized the Lions, the name being an acronym for "Liberty, Intelligence, Our Nation's Safety." Its first national convention put a distance between its aims and those of existing business organizations. Delegates passed a resolution affirming that "no Club shall hold out the financial betterment of its members as its object."

As a present-day Lions International publication observes, this stance "was startling for an era that prided itself on mercenary individualism." It is indeed remarkable that the age of the great tycoons (who had their own very exclusive and self-interested clubs) should see the birth of a movement with selfless altruism at its core. Yet in a way, service clubs could only have been born in the heady atmosphere of early 20th-century Midwestern America, with its lusty enthusiasm, its passion for progress, its can-do, sky's-the-limit attitude. It was in the ebullient spirit of the times that, when another group came together in 1922, its founders called it the Optimist Club.

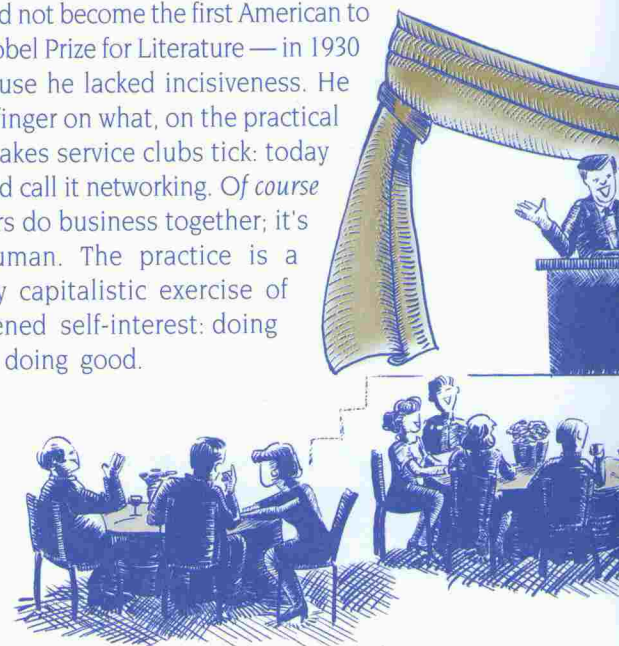
Though the major service club organizations had their roots in big cities, they found their most fertile ground in smaller communities and the suburbs.

At present, they are not generally prominent in downtown urban affairs. Perhaps because of this, their tremendous social influence has been largely ignored by the urban media and academia. Their activities get plenty of play in the media in small towns and cities, but they are pretty well ignored by the big daily newspapers and national television networks. For the most part, sociologists have treated their prominent role in community affairs as if it did not exist.

Their boyish bonhomie, sing-songs, constant kidding and ritual pranks are seen as irredeemably corny by urban sophisticates. In 1922 novelist Sinclair Lewis subjected service clubs to the send-up of the century in *Babbitt*, his savagely funny critique of Middle American mores at a time when the U.S. was full of adolescent "pep," as George Babbitt himself would have said. Babbitt is a partner in a real estate firm in the fictional Midwestern city of Zenith, and a member of the equally fictional Boosters Club. At a luncheon meeting which he attends, a ten-cent fine is levied for calling a fellow Booster by anything but his nickname, and much ponderous raillery flows from the fact that it is a member's birthday. A Booster makes a speech urging the formation of a symphony orchestra, not for its cultural value — he describes classical music as "junk" — but because it will "impress the glorious name of Zenith on some big New York millionaire that might — that might establish a branch factory here!"

#### **Doing well by doing good**

Printed in the club booklet is the admonition: "There's no rule that you have to trade with your Fellow Boosters, but get wise, boy — what's the use of letting all this good money get outside of our happy family?" Lewis did not become the first American to win a Nobel Prize for Literature — in 1930 — because he lacked incisiveness. He put his finger on what, on the practical level, makes service clubs tick: today we would call it networking. *Of course* members do business together; it's only human. The practice is a typically capitalistic exercise of enlightened self-interest: doing well by doing good.



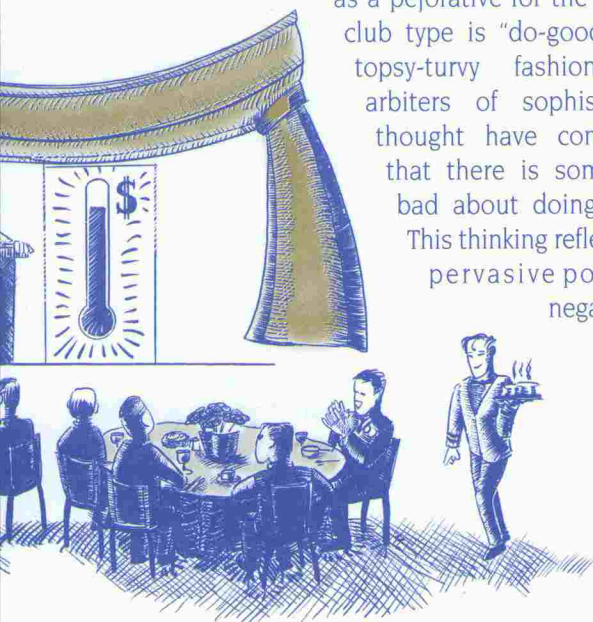


A most engaging book, *Babbitt* had a strong influence on what might be called the liberal arts perception of service clubs. This was especially so since it became a stand-by on university reading courses in American literature. It has the distinction of having added at least two mild pejoratives to the English language, "boosterism" and "babbitry." But Lewis was a caricaturist of the written word, and in using hyperbole to make his points, he was unfair to his subjects. He did not take sufficient account of the sheer good will and honest idealism of the people who wear those service club pins, and he offers no reason why they should not enjoy themselves in their own boisterous way.

**'The community at its best'**

Not that the service club movement is above reproach. Lewis's Boosters are all white male middle-class Americans of right wing views, and they are furious when a strike breaks out among the ordinary working people of Zenith. The movement's colour and gender bars have long since been dismantled, but it remains largely a white-collar phenomenon. One simple reason for this is that business and professional people are able to take time out to attend luncheon meetings, and blue-collar workers usually are not. This apparent social discrimination has been instrumental in giving service clubs a reputation as "bastions of the smug bourgeoisie," as Southam News writer Susan Ruttan called them in a recent column. But, she concluded, "service clubs are the community at its best, providing bonds of friendship to their members and serving the larger community at the same time."

Still, the sniping persists. Up there with "booster" as a pejorative for the service club type is "do-gooder." In topsy-turvy fashion, the arbiters of sophisticated thought have concluded that there is something bad about doing good. This thinking reflects the pervasive power of negativism,



which seems to have grown ever-stronger over this century. Service clubbers are anything but trendy. Intellectuals criticize them for their naivety in sticking to a positive attitude in the face of negative realities.

It is true that they are hardly likely to be subscribers to modern philosophy, which tends to be complex and gloomy. Rather they follow that simple philosophical tenet, the Golden Rule, which decrees that you should do unto others what you would have done unto yourself.

**'To build up and not destroy'**

In terms of morality, it is difficult to fault the Rotarians' ethical touchstone, the Four Way Test: "Is it the Truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build goodwill and better friendships? Will it be beneficial to all concerned?" Or the Lions' code, which contains such passages as: "Whenever a doubt arises as to the right or ethics of my position or action, to resolve such doubt against myself... To hold friendship as an end and not a means... To be careful with my criticism and liberal with my praise; to build up and not destroy."

True to their name, the Optimists urge members "to look at the sunny side of everything and make your optimism come true" — also "to be just as enthusiastic about the success of others as you are about your own," to "forget the mistakes of the past and press on to greater achievements in the future," and to "give so much time to the improvement of yourself that you have no time to criticize others."

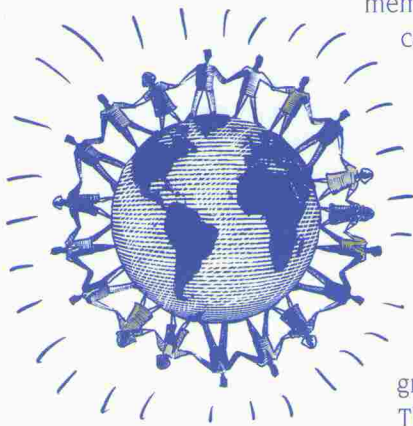
Dr. Courtney W. Shropshire, the founder of Civitan International, set the tone for its intense community involvement when he wrote: "A working force for civic betterment such as this is a thing more valuable to mankind than great riches." Among the aims of the Kinsmen and Kinettes is that "a spirit of co-operation, tolerance, understanding and equality among all nations and peoples be fostered and stimulated and that unity of thought and purpose throughout Canada be established toward this goal."

**The made-in-Canada clubs**

That phrase "throughout Canada" in reference to the Kinsman and Kinettes is what distinguishes them from the big American-based international service club organizations. Kinship is a distinctive part of Canadian culture conceived by wounded World War I veteran Hal Rogers in 1920. After going into his father's plumbing supply business in Hamilton, Rogers applied to join the local Rotary Club. He was turned down because Rotary's rules allowed only one

*"What we need most, is not so much to realize the ideal, as to idealize the real."  
Frederick Henry Hodge*





member per club per employment category, and the club already had a member in plumbing supplies — Hal's father. That suited the younger man, who already had the idea of forming a club for men and their spouses in his own age group. His Kin movement became dedicated to public service, personal growth — and fun.

The Association of Kin Clubs now has an international dimension through the World Council of Young Men's Service Clubs, included in which are 20-30 Clubs in the U.S. and Mexico, Apex in Australia, and Round Table Clubs in the United Kingdom and Ireland. The Kin association itself says that its 600-plus clubs across Canada raise more money for their communities per member than any such clubs anywhere. In 1964 it began working to counter a relatively unknown disease which struck down very young children, and out of this grew the Canadian Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. Among a great many other activities, it sponsors the Kinsmen National Institute on Mental Retardation at Toronto's York University.

At least one Canadian-based organization has grown into an international movement all on its own: Richelieu International, a francophone group founded in 1944 in Ottawa. In addition to more than 200 clubs in Quebec, Ontario and the Maritimes, it has 18 chapters in the United States, 44 in France, Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland, and affiliates in Africa, Eastern Europe, South America and the Caribbean. Richelieu International is responsible for a wide variety of cultural, social and humanitarian works throughout the French-speaking world.

#### *Around the world and close to home*

The big international organizations do some of their most effective work in developing countries. While Rotary's massive vaccination programs are steadily making the five main preventable childhood diseases things of the past, the Lions' SightFirst program has saved countless children from blindness. The Kiwanis Worldwide Service Project is working to eliminate iodine deficiency disorders, the greatest cause of preventable mental retardation and learning disorders in the world.

The service clubs' transparent good works and idealistic aims have made them phenomenally attractive to people outside of North America. Lions now has 1.4 million members in 43,000 clubs in 181 countries; Rotary, 1.2 million members of more than 29,000 clubs in 160 countries; Kiwanis, 300,000 members in 7,000 clubs in 60 countries. Smaller movements such as Y'sdom International, Zonta International and Civitan also span the globe, as well as the youth clubs attached to all the major inter-national organizations.

But the big-heartedness of service club members is best seen close to home: in a young female Rotarian painting a holiday cabin for children with disabilities; in an affluent middle-aged Optimist going out in a city at night to see what he can do to help out drug-addicted street kids; in a Canadian Progress Club member jingling a tin on a corner in Newfoundland to raise money for the Special Olympics; in a Kinetite rising at dawn to coach a children's hockey team.

#### *Needed more than ever*

Jimmy Carter, who went from tail-twister in a Lions Club to President of the United States, got to the heart of the service club movement when he talked about life in his home town of Plains, Georgia. "Everything that happened in Plains, the Lions did," he recalled. "If a widow had a problem with her family, where did she go? To the mayor? No. She went to the Lions Club."

Despite efforts to recruit young members through clubs in high schools and the like, the movement has been hit hard by individualistic attitudes that linger on from the "me generation." Membership in at least some clubs in North America has been in decline, and the average age of members is rising.

This is happening at a time when, because of government spending cuts, the voluntary services the clubs offer are needed more than ever. With their hands-on approach, they always did a much better job than government agencies in the same fields anyway.

Any weakening of service clubs is tantamount to a weakening of the average community — and every nation, not only Canada, is "a community of communities." Perhaps the way to make these vital organizations more appealing to prospective members is for the public to stop taking them for granted — to put the men and women who wear those service club pins in the place of honour among us which they have so richly earned.

*"Amid life's quests  
there seems but  
one worthy one, to  
do men good."  
Gamaliel Bailey*