

Have you ever done a jigsaw puzzle with half of the pieces missing? During the last eight months while I have been trying to write the history of Space Center Rotary my life has consisted of trying to put the pieces together. Many are the questions I have asked to illuminate various aspects of the history; not many answers have been forthcoming. So here is a fractured account of the development of the club since its establishment in 1964.

Rotary is its own universe. Founded by a lonely young man named Paul Harris in Chicago in 1905 with four friends who rotated their meetings among their places of business, the club in 1998 exists in \_\_\_\_\_ countries with a total members of \_\_\_\_\_. All of these clubs operate on the same principles and organization. The four-way test is used world-wide. The four categories of service: Club, Community, Vocational, and International are the foundation of every club.. Each club is part of an area district. Interaction among clubs occurs in district, national and international conventions and conferences

What makes Space Center Rotary so special? Organized like all Rotary clubs, about the same size as most, the major difference is that it was formed at the beginning of the nation's space program, in the same area where the Johnson Space Center (originally the Manned Spacecraft Center) is located, where the whole world was soon be tuned into radio and television to follow the first landing on the moon from which astronauts could talk to Houston! It's a fascinating story to trace the history of this club, which parallels the success of our space program.

Let's set the stage. Back in 1960 and 1961 the newly formed NASA in Washington appointed a committee to look into finding the right area in which to build a manned space center.. There was a list of about eighteen criteria which the site must meet: i.e., close to a body of water, access to an international airport, a large city, a university, etc. After months of weighing the various criteria, NASA announced that Houston, Texas, had been selected for the site.

Congressman Albet Thomas learned that NASA was seeking a site for the new center; he steered the NASA people to the Clear Lake area where Humble Oil Company owned a parcel of 20,000 acres. Humble had purchased the West Ranch in the 1930's in order to develop its oil resources. Humble gave Rice University 1,200 acres of this land, part of which Rice then gave to NSA.

The site was a piece of prairie land, sparsely inhabited, flat, close to Clear Lake which empties into Galveston Bay and on into the Gulf of Mexico. Ellington Air Force Base was close to the site. There were several small towns in the area: Kemah, Seabrook, La Porte, League City and Webster. Temporary Office space was found in nineteen buildings in Houston for NASA and contractor employees while the Center was being built. Hurricane Carla had hit the area in October 1961, and there were still many remnants of its devastation.

Suddenly this area of small towns boomed. NASA and contractor employees began to flood into the area with their families. Housing developments sprouted; restaurants and businesses were established. Newcomers made friends easily because most of them had no built-in families or friends in the area. When strangers met they asked each other "Where are you from?" It was rare for the answer to be, "Texas."

Looking back thirty-six years ago TO 1962, it is easy to see why such an institution as a Rotary Club took root. Men were looking for new friends; some of them had been Rotarians before they moved to the Clear Lake Area. The excitement generated by a major complex being erected in an undeveloped area which would soon be known around the world spurred the thirty-five men who would become the charter members of Space Center Rotary.

In 1963 Fred Lane, then president of the La Porte Rotary Club, conceived the idea that the territory around Seabrook would possibly support a Rotary Club. Accordingly, at the suggestion of the District Governor, a preliminary survey was made. Lane contacted Ellis Bareiss of the Rotary Club of Pasadena to see if he would assist in the organization of such a club. After a few visits it was Lane's opinion that Seabrook could not at that time support a Rotary Club. With the rapid development of the Space Center area it was felt by District Gov. Virgil Lee that a survey should be made to determine if a club could be organized IN that area. Ed Bracher and Bill Avery, both past District Governors, made a preliminary investigation and felt that a Rotary Club would prosper there. However, other than some visits with interested parties, not too much was done until May, 1964.

In May 1964 District Governor, Virgil P. Lee, asked Ellis Bareiss of the Pasadena Rotary Club to make a survey in the area of the Manned Spacecraft Center to determine the possibility of forming a new Rotary Club.. Following is his report:

"Having visited this area on several occasions, I am literally overwhelmed with the vast amount of building and new businesses moving into the area. As you know, predictions are that by 1970 there will be 250,000 people living in the immediate area. It is equivalent to a city the size of Austin, Texas. New places of business are opening just as rapidly as space is available. It appears from a brief discussion of its possibilities that there will be at least 200 good solid Rotary classificatins in the area within the next five years. Many large companies, professional men, and smaller businesses have signed contract for space just as rapidly as arrangements can be

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made to accommodate them. I have reference to such companies as Joske's, Foleys, perhaps Sakowitz, and others. Also several new churches and schools will be in operation in the area soon. This looks like an idea area to start a really fine Rotary Club. The people I have met and taked with will make good Rotarians. It is my recommendation to proceed as rapidly as possible."

This survey was sent to Erwin Heinmen, president of the Rotary Club of Houston, which, at that time, had jurisdiction over the area in the vicinity of MSC. In the covering letter Bareiss outlined the territory to be encompassed by the proposed club and requested that the area be released by the Houston club:

Genoa-Red Bluff Road on the North  
The Gulf Freeway on the West  
Clear Creek, Clear Lake and Taylor Lake on the East  
Red Bluff on the East

In less than three months Space Center was sponsored by La Porte, received a preliminary-club status, potential members indoctrinated in Rotary procedures, and granted a charter on August 6, 1964 with thirty-five charter members.

In the club archives will be found some of the correspondence and instructions from Rotary International. The thirty-five charter members were well-indoctrinated by representatives from both La Porte and Pasadena. The charter night was held at the Houston Yacht Club in La Porte, September 28, 1964.

Waymon Armstrong, a member of the La Porte club that sponsored SCR was quoted in The Rotarian, May 1966: "The Reach for the Moon." "It's the strangest Rotary Club in the world--and it has ome ot the strangest classifications. If anything sets the club apart, it is the members themselves. A recent sampling showed that their average age is 43, nine years younger than the average Rotarian worldwide; at least 95 per cent (30 percent more than Rotarians generally) have college education, many holding advanced degrees; 22 per cent now hold or have held pilots' licenses (about 15 percent more than the average for all Rotarians)." Articles also appeared in two other Rotarian issues ("Club in Countdown Country, Oct. 1961 and "Building Tomorrow's Spaceport, Nov. 1964. (The 1961 date cannot be right, but, in talking to Rotary Int'l they do not keep back copies of The Rotarian!!!) That plus the worldwide excitement of the space program itself has made the club known worldwide.

There have been many requests over the years from Rotary clubs far and near for an astronaut to speak to their club, requests for some sort of memorabilia, etc. In the club's archives can be found several examples of how clubs around the world share in NASA's triumphs and identify Space Center Rotary with those triumphs.

Tracing the beginning of Space Center Rotary has been easy to do because there was so much material about the early days. After 1964 the archive material becomes very spotty. Writing a narrative about the years from 1965-1998 became very difficult. The main source for what was happening during those years was copies of Blastoff, and they were not complete. After weeks of mulling over how to approach the problem I found it was easier to trace the history chronologically in two ways:

First--Programs listed in the Blastoff were listed by the club year.

Second-- Whatever material was available was organized in folders for each club year. When all the information was arranged that way, a chronology was developed so that a reader could browse through it, finding what material is available for each club year. Special events were highlighted by underlining.

Finally, there is a short list of miscellaneous folders covering the following subjects:

- Archives and how to maintain them
- Awards
- Blastoff Records
- Brochures and "Making a Difference" collection by Tom Weir used in THE Red Badge Program
- By-Laws and Constitution of Space Center Rotary
- Clear Lake Park: map of the park and a marvelous letter about the park in the 1920's that has nothing to do with Rotary, but such fun to read!
- Committees: 1964-1998
- Conferences
- Foundations and Paul Harris Fellows
- Interesting Correspondence: letters from Peru, Chile, Argentina, Israel, Mexico
- Logo for SCR
- Membership: new members, problems, undated roster
- Memorabilia: notes from Barbara Jordan, John Tower, etc.
- Presidents and Governors: 1964-1999
- Rotary International History
- Shrimporee--Major Fundraiser
- Territorial Limits of SCR: Original and 1982 Changes
- Undated material: New Club Feasibility Committee Report, Free Enterprise Program, Mentor-Friend Program