

CLUBS ARE TRUMPS

BY OREN ARNOLD



The Rotary Club of Winsted, Conn., opens its meeting by singing America. L. to r.: Ted Vaill, the Rev. Roderick MacLeod, the Rev. Murray Hunter, Arthur K. Pelkey (hardware dealer), and Leader D. Fletcher Alvord (insurance)

Once a week a million members of the "service clubs" meet for a meal and conversation. This mass group is growing more powerful every year and is now strong enough to control the nation. Fortunately it works only for good

ANY typical business or professional leader in any American town will tell you that a certain hour-and-a-half period this week is almost sacred.

He has to go somewhere. He has to be there on time. He knows what will happen when he gets there, and that he may even be a little bored with it, but he wouldn't think of giving it up. He is a club member, who will join 25 to 150 *compadres* in what he calls an *eatin' meetin'*. Next week, and every week, he will repeat; he has been at it for years.

Since about 1930 the rest of us have watched his ascendancy with growing awe. In the aggregate he now totals about 1,000,000 men, in some 15 separate organizations. Suddenly we realize that these are perhaps the most important groupings of men in the world today; the most influential, the most impervious to criticism. If they wish to, they are now strong enough to control this nation. It is comforting to know that they work only for good.

Their club names, as with the names of church denominations, are relatively unimportant; the separate groups have almost identical ideals. Oldest is Rotary International. Close to it in general prestige are Kiwanis International and Lions International. They are the big three of America's service clubs, each with more than four times the membership of the next largest, the National Exchange Club.

At least 12 others, including such better-known groups as Optimists, Civitan, Co-Operative, Round Table, Gyro, Twenty-Thirty, Ruritan (which is primarily for farmers and meets monthly) and Kinsmen (which is only in Canada) have more than 5,000 members each. Somewhat similar is the large National Junior Chamber of Commerce, yet this has a program uniquely its own and many of its members also join the other groups.

We knew them for years as luncheon clubs, but almost a third now meet at night instead of noon, and their program of service to humanity has far

exceeded their original purpose, which was simply the enjoyment of food and fellowship.

Their meetings are seldom distinguished. As the men gather they shake hands, slap backs, talk much and laugh much. They eat mediocre food without complaint. They go earnestly through a somewhat stereotyped program—salute to the flag, a mumbled prayer, nostalgic singing (Home On The Range is far and away the most popular club song) and a fair-to-middlin' speaker who runs six minutes overtime. They utter many trite phrases and generally appear so conventional and self-satisfied as to set outside sophisticates a-twittering.

But such surface mores are forgotten when we check the club committee reports. One item alone shows that 1,220,000 needy children were helped by these men in just one month, apart from all church, community chest and other charity work. The records are rich with heart stories.

In Chattanooga a Lion went to in-



Ladies' Day at the Phoenix Kiwanis Club. Most towns have Rotary-Anns, Kiwanis-Anns, Lionesses and other such groups for wives, but they are relatively inactive. Ladies who are more service-club minded have at least six groups—somewhat similar in ideals and requirements to the men's—with which they can affiliate

investigate the report of a blind Negro girl who was in need. His club had a fund for the necessary aid, but the man himself ended up by financing the girl through school, paying all medical bills and securing a job for the father. That's almost routine.

Clubmen at Sapulpa, Oklahoma, discovered a sweet kid who had musical talent but lacked the funds for study. They sent her to school. There she made progress; and she also met an aggressive chap named Tom Dewey who fell in love with her and married her. Together they have done right well in New York.

In Phoenix, Arizona, one May noon Kiwanians were awarding gold watches to high school graduates who over the years had shown the most progress toward knowledge and citizenship. A handsome, well-poised lad stood up to receive his, then walked gracefully to the microphone. "You gentlemen will not remember me," said he, earnestly, "but I am the same boy whom you held up on this same table 15 years ago, as one of the club-footed orphans you were helping. My gratitude is beyond words."

Few clubs permit any sort of "charity appeal" to be made during the sacred 90-minute sessions: such things must be handled by directors or committee. But there is the true story of Harry Hansen, now a distinguished orchardist at Chico, California. He was president of a club when a program chairman led him into meeting and openly passed the hat for him.

Disguise Fooled the Members

Over fifty dollars was put in for him, in all seriousness. Harry had simply made a facial change; he had put in a set of false teeth which protruded a little over his regulars, and he had pulled his usually neat hair down over his forehead. He looked like the poor needy wretch that the chairman said he was. The deal cost them another fifty dollars, for charity.

Just one club organization, the smallest of the big three, last year conducted 745 specialized aids to business and industry plus 40 major regional activities in conservation of natural resources. Others served in proportion. No town today dares launch a

drive for anything, whether it be a simple get-out-the-vote effort or a campaign for a new harbor, without being sure the clubs will back it.

Even nonmembers feel that there is something "solid" about service clubs, that the selectivity in memberships is a good thing. Many citizens vaguely resent the secret rituals of fraternal organizations, but the fact that any person can attend practically any service club meeting as a guest has contributed to popularity here. Hundreds of clubs have been made beneficiaries in private wills. At Spokane, Washington, the same doorman greeted Kiwanians at their luncheon hotel for years, and when he died they had been given his home and two vacant lots that he owned. Even more touching, however, was this letter received one day by Kiwanians in Philadelphia:

"Dear Sirs I am six and a one-half. I am going to have a serus oper—oper—" (she never quite finished the word operation). "Auntie says you will have to pay for it goody but if i die and go to heaven you can have my wagon and purse the blu one i may not die . . . love Alise"

The real pay-off came a few months later, however, when Alise wrote what obviously was a dictated note of thanks for the clubmen's generosity. To it she had added her own post-script:

"I did not die so I will keep the wagon and purse."

As a significant generality it can be said that service club members now combine the best industrial work of the chamber of commerce and the best spiritual work of the church. This is possible because, unlike the chamber and the church, membership in the clubs is selective. A potential member must be an owner or an executive in his business, must have demonstrated both moral and business success, and can join only on invitation. Thus the clubs get only the outstanding men in their fields, citizens who are willing and—more important—able to accept community responsibilities. In addition, the various clubs have almost no sense of serious competition one with another, and are so co-ordinated that their activities seldom overlap.

On the other hand, these same pub-

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lic-spirited leaders have served only in a small, indirect way to control politics.

"It is our shame," said one of their distinguished officers this year, "that we don't do more toward cleaning up the graft and inefficiencies in city, county and national governments." His thrust went home. Already many individual clubs are putting "clean politics" on their agenda.

Any enthusiasm is contagious, and if this one spreads, it may become the most important club service for the ensuing decade.

Babbitt Proves a Blessing

In his Babbitt, famed novel of the 1920s, Sinclair Lewis conceived his main character as a financially successful but exceedingly fatuous, conceited and narrow-minded individual, then thrust him at us as America's typical Rotarian. To a degree the indictment was accurate, hence valuable. All service clubs, suddenly put on the defensive, began to clean house.

Lewis himself came to recognize this improved situation after a stranger knocked at his door at seven o'clock one morning a few years later. A servant let the eager caller in. The author stumbled sleepy-eyed from his bed into his living room.

"Who're you?" he demanded.

"I'm the new editor of The Rotarian magazine," the stranger replied. "I came to learn what you've got against Rotary. Also I want you to write an article for me to publish."

The sheer audacity of it won Lewis. Similar approach ultimately won the other two major cynics of the day, Henry L. Mencken and George Bernard Shaw. All three "enemies" of service clubs became cordial contributors to The Rotarian, which was edited then as now by an exceedingly keen student of current affairs, Leland D. Case.

Any mistake made by the clubs today seems inevitably to react in their favor. As recently as July, 1947, Kiwanians in small Ahoskie, North Carolina, suddenly found themselves on page one of papers throughout the nation. One of their committees, a scant

dozen men, had conducted a "car raffle" in direct opposition to Kiwanis ethics. But worse—a Negro won the car and they wouldn't give it to him, but drew another number that awarded the car to a white man instead.

It made sensational news for a week. But the indignation which flared everywhere was almost entirely from Kiwanians. The Ahoskie men were quickly contrite. They apologized, gave the Negro a check for \$3,200—in lieu of a Cadillac, at his request—and begged the world to forgive them. Meanwhile the editorial writers and radio commentators were defending Kiwanis International, saying—accurately—that the mistake in Ahoskie did not reflect Kiwanis standards, and in millions of words airing Kiwanis' good deeds. It was free ballyhoo which the national organization could never have purchased.

Nobody knows precisely why the service clubs have been so successful, unless it be that they are a part of the deeper Christian ideal, which politically is the American ideal. Some alarmists will tell you that the clubs are replacing the church as a working "religion" for men, and it doubtless is true that any preacher would dearly love to have church efficiency comparable to the clubs'. Much less than 50 per cent of all church members in America attend church regularly, whereas service-club attendance is above 80 per cent. Fewer than 30 per cent of the nation's church members are regularly active in church work, the direct giving of personal time and talent. But fewer than 30 per cent of the clubmen are inactive.

Many clubmen have records of 5, 10, even 20 years of perfect attendance, week after week. A few have been perfect for more than 30 years. Kiwanis by-laws flatly authorize each club secretary to dismiss a man who has four unexcused absences in a row. Among those who have received this form letter is a likable, hearty, semi-Babbitt type of Kiwanian from Missouri. It seems that his haberdashery business encountered hard times so that he just couldn't afford to keep up club attendance. Subsequently he has

done better in another business classification and has been reinstated; Harry Truman is perhaps the most typical service-club personality in America today.

In Russell, Kansas, a club organizer got 25 men in to a meeting one night, but they came through a terrific dust storm. One man was pessimistic about it. "Why do we bother to start a service club?" he demanded. "This region is doomed anyway. Russell is small. What could we find to do that is worth while?"

"We could fight the dust, if nothing else," said another.

"How?"

It was challenging, as most service programs are. The men talked it out until midnight. Next day they went to the state agricultural college and got 50,000 seedling trees. These were sold at one cent each to school children, who planted and tended them. The whole state then took up the idea, so that plantings moved into the hundreds of thousands. "Cover" for Kansas soil has been a vital factor in controlling the wind erosion there.

Hammering on Sunday Morning

A club in Spokane, Washington, was erecting a home for widowed mothers in need. The men themselves did most of the actual construction. The site happened to be across the street from a church, and when the men stopped their Sunday-morning hammering so as not to disturb worship, the preacher came over.

"Keep right on with it, gentlemen," he ordered. "I am only talking about the Lord's work, you are actually doing it. We'll have a hot meal in our church dining room for you at noon."

Those who would be mere knife-and-fork members can be sadly embarrassed. The president of a Kiwanis group in a California city suddenly called an accounting after he had been in office six months.

"Joe Blank," he addressed a prominent banker member, "come up here to the head table. Stand there so your fellow members can see you. Now tell us what your committee has accomplished to date."

He was chairman of a committee that hadn't even met. He turned pink. He tried a sheepish grin, and mumbled some stock alibis. The president struck his gong, then called three other culprits.

All three were guilty, with Joe, of simply being "busy" with private affairs.

"But twelve other committees have been doing community work," the president charged. "For the remainder of the year, therefore, you are hereby bonded a hundred dollars each, to be deposited in the crippled children's fund. If your committee reports are acceptable six months from now you can have your money back."

Their reports six months later were excellent, but they didn't dare claim that money. They were all well able to leave it. And they had learned club policy the hard way.

Clubmen seldom allow any important rivalry between clubs in any one city or state, but intersectional competition is encouraged. One month during the war, clubbers in Washington State sent 40 boxes of their choicest apples to as many clubs in other sections of the country, to be auctioned off. They brought a total of \$4,500,000 in War Bond sales. But when Georgia heard about it, she retaliated by sending out one box of her equally famous peaches, ordering that they be auctioned individually. These brought \$2,500,000.

The basic idea of "men's clubs" is as old as man himself—we can be pretty sure that Pithecanthropus Erectus and his pals assembled in a cheerful cave to chew the fat literally and figuratively. The polished Athenians had clubs. So did Sparta of Lycurgus' time, where the tables sat 15 each and all vacancies were filled by ballot. Cicero referred to election of a club president. Those Greek and Roman clubs differed in many respects from our clubs of today. Still they were clubs where men assembled and discussed various matters. In England the Rota Club, not unlike our Rotary, was founded in 1659 for the purpose of changing magistrates and legislators by rotation. Pepys and

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Cartoonists doing their stuff at the annual cartoonists' luncheon party and variety show sponsored by the Lions Club at the Hotel Biltmore, New York City, for the benefit of the blind



Everett Bowman, Arizona cattleman, inspects the badges of the Valley of the Sun Kiwanians, just before a luncheon





"Find out how many dates she has—what was the first time she ever was kissed," Mr. Bolliver said. "But of course you know what the average girl is like, Jimmy"

BY COREY FORD

H E R L

JAMES LOVERING II rested an angular elbow on the grocery counter of Lovering's General Store and waited patiently while Mrs. Libbey tapped her teeth with the knuckle of her right forefinger. Mrs. Libbey's teeth-tapping, he knew from experience, signified an effort to concentrate; and there was no use popping questions at a customer who was trying to think. Her eyes rose at last from the shopping list in her hand and came to rest on an upper shelf. "Oh, yes," she recalled, "and I want some coffee."

"Coffee," said Jimmy Lovering with alacrity, uncoiling his lanky six feet four and picking off a jar with the ease

of a giraffe cropping the top of a tall palm. He glanced surreptitiously at a notebook on the counter beside him. "Speaking of coffee, Mrs. Libbey," he inquired, "does it ever keep you awake at night?"

Mrs. Libbey was engrossed in her list. "Why, no, Jimmy, I never noticed."

He stole another glance at his notebook, and his smile became even more disarming. "Speaking of sleep, Mrs. Libbey, what time do you and Mr. Libbey usually go to bed as a rule?"

"I guess about ten," Mrs. Libbey said absently, "but sometimes Mr. Libbey likes to look at the papers—he don't come upstairs till after eleven."

She folded the list. "I guess that's all today, Jimmy."

He began piling her purchases into a bag. "Speaking of bed, Mrs. Libbey, I was just wondering," he persisted, his manner elaborately casual, "do you and Mr. Libbey use twin beds or do you still prefer a double—"

"Jimmy!" the elder Mr. Lovering interrupted, sticking his head out of his private office and beckoning. "You're wanted here on the phone."

Mrs. Libbey, struggling to retain a grip on her purchases and her composure, expelled her breath in an indignant "We-ell!" She watched darkly as Jimmy vaulted the counter and hurried across the store. "I declare,"

she declared. "That's the most inquisitive young man I ever met in my life."

"Always asking questions, everybody comes in the store," a neighbor agreed indignantly. "You know what he asked me just now? If I used twin beds."

"That's what he just asked me," another customer nodded. "And last time it was how often I listened to the radio, and before that it was my favorite laxative." She lowered her voice significantly. "Do you suppose that he's, I mean, all right—?"

Certainly Jimmy's behavior at the moment would have justified a certain amount of suspicion. He replaced the

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