

Preserving Our History: The Rotary Club of Greensboro, North Carolina, Oral History Project

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Smith, Kathlene McCarty and Hermann J. Trojanowski. (August 2008). Preserving Our History: The Rotary Club of Greensboro, North Carolina, Oral History Project. *Dialogue: The Newsletter of the Oral History Section* (Society of American Archivists), 4(3), 11-12.

*****Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

In the fall of 2006, Bob Cone, President of the Rotary Club of Greensboro, spoke to fellow Rotarian Patricia Sullivan, Chancellor of The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, about his growing interest in preserving the city's history by interviewing club members. Cone asked Sullivan about the possibility of the University conducting an oral history project in collaboration with the Rotary Club. The University Archives and Manuscripts department, under the guidance of University Archivist Betty Carter, had been successful in developing similar projects, including the Women Veterans Historical Collection, which includes numerous oral histories. Soon the partnership was underway.

As Greensboro approached its bi-centennial, it seemed particularly fitting to focus on an organization made up of individuals who have been so important to the city's leadership. The first Rotary Club was established in 1905 by Paul P. Harris and three friends who rotated their meetings between their Chicago offices, thus the name Rotary Club. The Rotary Club of Greensboro began just a few years later in 1917. This oral history project joins other Rotary Clubs such as the Las Vegas Rotary in seeking to gather the recollections of the members, thereby preserving the history of their organization.

In the fall of 2007, Carter concluded that the best way to approach the Rotary Club members was through Rotarian and Director of the Greensboro Public Library, Sandy Neerman. Carter recruited Assistant University Archivist Hermann Trojanowski to conduct a couple of sample interviews and then train graduate student Kathelene Smith to take over the interviewing. This process has developed into an effective system. Neerman makes the initial contact with the Rotary Club member to determine their interest in the project. Once this connection is established and the member agrees to participate, Smith calls to set up a date for the interview. To increase the comfort level of the person who is to be interviewed, a set of general questions and a project brochure is sent with a letter of introduction. This brochure was created to explain more about the specific goals of the Rotary Club of Greensboro's project as well as to familiarize members with the general theories and procedures of oral histories. After the interviews have been conducted, audio copies are sent to the Rotarians and the interviews are transcribed and returned to the members for verification. Finally, when corrections are made, the transcripts are bound and a copy is sent to the member.

So far the interviews have been a resounding success, documenting Greensboro's unique history of the textile industry, civil rights movement, cultural development, and higher education. The city has grown rapidly and seen many changes, including the almost complete disappearance of the textile industry upon which it was built, as well as the transformation of the cultural and political landscape of the community. These changes are reflected, each from a unique point of view, in the oral history accounts of the Rotarians. Members share memories of last streetcar rides, the Great Depression, and incredible stories of the nation's wars. The project includes recollections from journalists,

members of law enforcement, and attorneys concerning the civil rights events, which took place in Greensboro during the '60s and '70s. Stories from textile and tobacco industrialists recall times that are gone forever.

Interesting accounts of the growth and accomplishments of the Rotary Club also emerge from these interviews. For example, one member recalled the beginnings of the Rotary Club of Greensboro in 1917 in the office of his father. His family has been represented in the Rotary ever since. Others remembered how the Rotary Club of Greensboro led the movement to fight tuberculosis in the 1920s, later expanding its philanthropic endeavors to fighting polio and AIDS. The first woman Rotarian in Greensboro, and one of the first in the nation, recounts the transition of the Club as it incorporated women.

Without exception, members speak of their love and hope for the city. They have no intent of letting Greensboro rest on its laurels. Thoughtful recollections of successes and mistakes of the past are always taken into account when discussing current and future projects. The energy and enthusiasm of those interviewed is contagious.

Currently, we have completed over fifteen interviews with Greensboro leaders. Recently the Rotary Club of Greensboro allocated additional money to continue the project through June 2009. In the future we hope to develop a Web site, which will incorporate not only transcripts but also audio clips, photographs, and perhaps selected manuscripts donated by Rotary members. Jackson Library at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro will permanently house the Web site with links to the Rotary Club of Greensboro and Greensboro Public Library home pages.