

WHO WAS HARRY MORRILL?
Address to the Rotary Club of Asheville
September 10, 1998

An odd couple.

The Lady:

Mid-50s

Big-boned

Portly ... matronly ... earlier-generation plump

Not pretty in the face, but kind and grandmotherly in demeanor

Career American Red Cross

Enthusiastic

Surviving the end of an era before technological changes would sweep over the blood supply industry and put thousands like her to pasture prematurely.

The Gentleman

Everything she was not

Much older

Thin, even wiry

Stooped, even tired

Quiet; may have dozed off during our short time together

The Setting

She, headed "blood donor resources" for ARC

He, volunteer member of Donor Resources Development Committee

I, headed human resources department for a manufacturing firm

which hadn't participated in blood drives before

Visited my office

The Sale

Would we sponsor a blood drive in one of my plants?

We would; they left; we did. It went well

The Followup

I forgot the odd couple until one day he called me

He'd noticed ARC certificate on my wall; I must have an interest
in community service
Would I serve on his Donor Resources Development Committee?
I would.

The Friendship

24 years ago at age 82, worked every day for Red Cross
One day asked me to visit him at home
Invited me into Rotary - but not before carefully explaining
Rotary's purposes and responsibilities - and obtaining my
commitment to them
For 2 or 3 years, we sat together at Rotary meetings - always at
the table immediately in front of the lectern, since he was
hard of hearing
Got to know him; then wife Nan

The Youth

Born in 107 years ago in Wonewoc, Wisconsin, population 793 -
today
He never spoke of any family
As teenager, found work as hotel restaurant table waiter (don't
know where)
Attracted attention of a businessman who stayed frequently at the
hotel
Patron offered him "real" job with regular pay as salesman for
Ray-Lite Corporation (now Ray-O-Vac?)
But within 2 or 3 years, Harry contracted tuberculosis
Benefactor bought him train ticket to Denver - one-way, because
no one ever returned
On train, he met a companion with same ailment and same
destination
On arrival, his friend checked into a hotel
Harry bought camping gear and hiked up into mountains
Lived all winter in tent; ate eggs brought along, fish, nuts,
berries in season
"The next spring," he told me, "I wasn't dead. So I came back to
town and got a job."
That same day, they buried his traveling companion - dead of TB

The Salesman

Eureka vacuum cleaners - door to door
Then manager of three-state area including Texas, Oklahoma and (I
believe) Kansas

Depression!

Employer told him "We hear they don't know there's a depression
in California
Moved and "opened up" California for Eureka - 120 offices

The Dreamer

Harry Morrill was a man with flair
Bought small house on major travel route southwest of Los Angeles
Grand entrance
Elaborate front wall
Swinging decorative iron gates
Circular drive around massive fountain

15 years of Sundays on the porch
Contemplating vast undeveloped acreage between Los Angeles and
Santa Rosa Mountains
Bought up land at depression-era prices

Left Eureka vacuum cleaners in 1936 to become a builder &
developer
Developed Sun City - streets, homes, shopping facilities
Now on I-215, population 6,500

The Rotarian

Someone introduced Harry to Rotary when was 46 years old
Went at Rotary just as at everything else
Became governor of District 526 - districts then had 3 numbers -
for Southern California, Nevada, Arizona

The Good Life

Lived in Beverly Hills
Neighbor and friends to Gabor sisters, Debbie Reynolds, other big
"rich and famous" of that day

The Dream House

Built huge home in Palm Springs
Glass cost \$25,000
2 inside fountains
25 antique street lamps from Pasadena
Antique furnishings
Opened to private parties and special guests - President
Johnson stayed there on one visit
Permitted strangers to visit - and sign guest register

The Retirement

Retired in 1962
Lived in Las Vegas 3 years

But - "after you've seen all the shows once, there's nothing to do if you don't gamble."

He and Nan decided to find another place. Picked six cities

Asheville first. Had never been here

Flew in, took taxi into town, 3 days in motel, returned home

Never made the other 5 places

Back in Las Vegas, sold furniture, sold cars, sold home

Flew back to Asheville with suitcases

Bought home; bought cars; bought furniture

And joined Asheville Rotary Club in 1972.

The Visionary

Nan kicked him out of the house "so he wouldn't die on me."

Presented himself to American Red Cross

Quick thinker

Doer

Frustrated with slow pace of implementers of his ideas

Example: blood collection vehicle - *real* bloodmobile

Mind far outlived his body

"Doctor gave me bad news today," he once told me. "He said I might live another 10 years. I'll be out of money if I do."

The Rotarian

Harry thought everyone practiced the Four-Way Test:

In his 90s he went to renew his driver's license in his mint-condition 1966 Cadillac.

Examiner had him make an obtuse right turn from the parking lot down the street next to the Highway Patrol Station. Harry unavoidably crossed the center line of the street, thus giving the examiner an excuse for failing such an aged driver

The examiner failed the test, "is it fair to all concerned?" and a disappointed Harry challenged Charles Russell to make that turn without crossing the center line.

Two powerful and deeply-held motives drove Harry in his last years.

First, his love for Rotary. Second, he had no heirs.

So to celebrate his 90th birthday, he wrote a letter to Bob Armstrong and enclosed a \$10,000 corporate bond to provide initial funding for the Endowment which would carry his name forever in substitute for the son he never had.

5½ years later, Harry Morrill was dead at 95.

The Endowment received proceeds from his estate totaling \$137,350 before Rotarians took up the torch and began funding it in significant numbers.

Today, the Endowment is valued at upwards of \$¼ million.

And this is the man who sought out and befriended an obscure human resources manager, new to Asheville, and 50 years his junior.

This is the man who sponsored me into Rotary and who, really, introduced me to the concept of Service Above Self.

I can never say enough.