

# History of the San Antonio Founder Lions Club 1915-

**BY: LION PAST PRESIDENT HENRY SIMMS - HISTORIAN**



In 1915 San Antonio was the largest city in Texas. It was a thriving, bustling city of commerce and trade. Industry was booming in the traffic of cattle, horses, hides, and wool. San Antonio was a dominant banking center, and was better known for its fine mercantile stores, hotels, and saloons than it was for being the home of the Alamo.

It was at this time in history that a group of prominent San Antonio business and professional men had been gathering together for a weekly luncheon at the Gunter Hotel. They called themselves "Lions". Their format was not too unlike the Rotary Club that had been founded a few years earlier. This Lions Club membership contained several doctors. To name a few, there was Dr. W. O. Fryberger, Dr. A. Sachs, Dr. J. W. Goode, and Dr. M. J. Mooney, with Dr. Frederick Terrell serving as president of the group.

Perhaps it was through the fraternity of medical doctors that our club made contact with Dr. William P. Woods, a surgeon in Evansville, Indiana, who had been working on the idea of forming a national association of clubs that he had named "The Royal Order of Lions Clubs". At any rate, Dr. Woods sent Elbert A. Hicks, a native Texan, to organize dens in Texas. Mr. Hicks chartered the first Royal Order of Lions Clubs in Texas at El Paso in June, 1915. By agreement, our Lions Club was the second to be chartered in Texas under the Royal Order of Lions banner. We received Charter No. 0005 at a banquet in the Gunter Hotel on the night of October 8, 1915, with a membership of 53. Charters 0001, 0002, and 0003 were in Indiana, and 0004 was in El Paso. Although the Royal Order of Lions was a fraternal and benevolent society, it was unique in that it was rather difficult to become a member. Only one member from a profession was permitted to join, and who this should be was left to the members to decide. The creed of the Order was Friendship, Confidence, Faith, and Honesty. After our charter night, Mr. Hicks went on to Galveston to establish a club there in November.

By mid-1916, it is recorded that Dr. Woods encountered some internal friction among the dens in his Royal Order of Lions; but since he was the originator of the idea and owner of the charter, he proceeded to change the name of his organization to "The International Association of Lions Clubs". His Association prospered because a total of 20 clubs were set up in 1916 and 1917.

Apparently our Club was a part of the internal friction because we founded The City Club of San Antonio. This new club was built around the nucleus of 30 members who formerly belonged to the Lions Club. Frank W. Patton, Sr. was elected the first president at a noon luncheon in the Gunter Hotel on Thursday, January 25, 1917. The membership was listed as being about 70.

Meanwhile, Melvin Jones was an insurance man in Chicago that was active in a local club called "The Business Circle". He had heard of Woods and his Lions organization and was fascinated with the idea of forming a national association of "service" clubs as opposed to the Rotary style of "business" clubs. Melvin corresponded with organizations like the Concordia Club of Omaha, Vertex of St. Louis, Business and Professional Men of St. Paul, Lions Clubs of Indiana, and others. To further discuss the idea, a meeting was arranged for June 7, 1917, at the Hotel LaSalle in Chicago. At this meeting most of the representing clubs agreed that an Association be formed, but they could not agree on many things; not even on what to name the new organization; but they did agree to call a convention to be held at the Adolphus Hotel in Dallas, starting October 8, 1917. At this point it should be said that with the exception of our Club, the other two Texas Royal Order of Lions Clubs in El Paso and Galveston that were originally established in 1915 had ceased to function, and there were no Lions Clubs existing in the State of Indiana when the Dallas convention took place.

Little did the pioneering members of 1915, 1916, and 1917 know that their efforts to hold weekly meetings, recruit new members, maintain fiscal responsibility, and exert a combined influence for the betterment of the community were, in fact, laying the foundation for our club to meet nearly 88 years later.

It is true, our Club did not send a representative to the first convention in Dallas in October, 1917. After all, our country was at war. We had declared war with Germany on April 6, 1917, and for the past six months we had been involved with the war effort. With San Antonio being the military city that it is, you can imagine all the work to be done; recruiting soldiers, gathering food and clothing, assisting the Red Cross by making bandages, organizing relief funds, selling war bonds, and the list goes on. It probably was not practical or possible for us to send a representative to Dallas, but we did send the word that we would go along with whatever the other Lions Clubs of the Woods group gathered there did. We kept that promise. When the Dallas convention adopted SERVICE and LOYALTY as the key theme words in its Code of Ethics, this was nothing new to our Club because we had been promoting and practicing Service and Loyalty since 1915.

The first recorded activity of any Texas Lions Club during the first year after the October 1917 convention was then our San Antonio club sent a telegram to the Fort Worth club, asking their help in the recruitment of citizen-soldier candidates for the Leon Springs Officers Training Camp as a patriotic duty in World War I. Incidentally, this camp just outside our city was the first officers training camp in the world.

In 1921 our Club met with the San Antonio Advertising Club and at that meeting, it was decided to take the necessary steps to establish a Better Business Bureau. This Bureau still functions today.

In 1922 we sent our President, William G. Higgins, to the International Convention in Oakland. Higgins presented his idea of forming a Lions Club in Mexico. To assist him in accomplishing this purpose, he was elected Second Vice President of Lions International. Our Club sponsored the first Lions Club in Mexico City, and later a club in Monterrey. For many years the Monterrey club has been the largest in the world. When their membership reached about 1,500, the Club decided to split and form anew club in the city. Today the original club is still the largest in the world with about 1,700 members, and the newly formed Monterrey club is the second largest club in the world with about 1,300 members. In this same year of 1922, we were blessed with a new member by the name of Louis Rodriguez. He became out tailtwister which is often said to be the lowest job in the world. Louis developed it into an art form that brought fame and recognition to him and our Club.

It was in 1923 that our Club raised \$10,000 for the development of an athletic field and playground for the youth of San Antonio. The City donated about 10 acres on Broadway at Brackenridge Park. By agreement with the City, we built a club house at a cost of \$30,000, fully equipped the playground, and hired John Bradford from the Playground and Recreation Association of America in New York to supervise its construction and operation. Lions Field was the first supervised playground in the United States this side of the Mississippi. It still exists as a playground, thanks to Lions Arthur Biard and J. Andrew Smith, who in late years appeared before our City Council to prevent its sale to private interests.

In those early years as a member of Lions International, our Club played a predominant role in the affairs of the Association. With "Colonel" William G. Higgins as our president for more than seven years, from January 1920 to July 1927, we were active at each annual convention. We provided program entertainment by conducting a grid, or roast as it is now called, of the Association bigwigs which included Melvin Jones. Also, Mary Stewart Edwards, a gifted singer from San Antonio, graced several convention stages, compliments of our Club. It is also recorded that our Club was the first to include the cost of the weekly luncheons with the quarterly dues. Furthermore, our Club was the first to conduct an induction of new members ritual that was said to be "worthy of its name". In fact, Lions International placed us on the program of the 9th convention in Cedar Point, Iowa, to demonstrate our induction ritual as a model for other clubs to follow. The entire ritual, word-for-word, was published in the August 1925 Lions Magazine. It can be said that the International Association looked to our Club for leadership; and the records will show we responded. It is even recorded that in February 1922, when our President Higgins was on the International Board, he and others on the Board who were less affluent, signed a note at a Chicago bank for \$5,000 when funds ran short at the Chicago headquarters of Lions International. William Higgins was nominated for president of Lions International at the 1924 convention in Omaha, but he did not make it. What a shame. We had to wait until 1950 to elect Herb Petry.

By January 1924 we were the largest Lions Club in the world with 215 members. Regardless of the successes our Club enjoyed, the Great Depression brought us to our knees. Our membership dropped to 67 and the

Club's chief activity was collecting dues. The paid secretary was asked to resign, and J. Andrew Smith became the active secretary. He collected dues, made the reports, wrote the bulletin, and printed them with a mimeograph on his kitchen table at home.

With Dr. H. O. Wyneken as Chairman, the club's Committee for the Blind was responsible for accelerating passage of the first City ordinance to recognize white canes as a symbol of the blind.

– Lion Henry Simms, May 2003