Jean Harris Remembered

Rotarians remember the wife of Rotary’s founder 100 years later

March 4th 2005
Scottish Rotarians headed by President of Rotary International in Great Britain and Ireland Gordon McInally (below right) and Southern Scotland District Governor David Buchanan (below left), today laid wreathes at the grave of Jean Harris, the wife of Paul Harris, who founded Rotary International in February 1905.

In 1910 Paul Harris married Jean Thomson, a girl from Edinburgh. To whom he always referred as his “bonnie Scottish lassie”. Jean after his death, returned from America to Edinburgh and died here in 1963. She is buried at Newington Cemetery.

Rotarians all around the world are celebrating a century of service to their communities. Paul Harris in Chicago, USA founded the first Rotary club on 23rd February 1905. Ever since, Rotary’s work has spanned the globe, with clubs in 166 countries and a membership of 1.2 million men and women from professions and business.
Why is Jean Harris buried many thousands of miles away from her husband?

In short, it is because her family are all buried in Newington Cemetery, including her parents.

Paul Harris, in 1935, told the story of how Jean's parents aged around 90 both said farewell to their daughter to return to Scotland in order to be buried in the "old soil". They had stayed in the USA for over 25 years but never became "American". Jean's mother wished to return in order to be buried in Newington next to her mother. So, now we have three generations of daughters at rest in this cemetery.

Mrs Jean Thomson Harris (the wife of Rotary founder, Paul) was made an honorary member of the Edinburgh Inner Wheel club in 1946, in fact, its first honorary member.

Founder President of the Edinburgh Inner Wheel Club, Mrs W Winkler and her Committee, knowing that Jean was born and bred in the city decided that she should be invited to become an Honourary Member.

Replying to Mrs Winkler, Jean wrote from her home in Chicago in 1946 immediately accepting the honour. She said: "I have been keeping in touch with Inner Wheel activities through the Rotary Service Magazine. Paul and I are amazed and thrilled at the magnitude of its benefactions. It seems miraculous after all you have been through. (A reference to WWII) May God bless your endeavour".

The First Lady of Rotary

"True to the traditions of her ancestors, she permits no cause which she deems unworthy to go undefended, and she can mobilize her spiritual forces in a second's time. Alleged Scotch (sic) parsimony is conspicuous in its absence from the heart of bonnie Jean."

From the book entitled The Founder of Rotary by Paul P Harris, Rotary International 1928

Jean Harris's was born on the 8th of November 1881 and her birthplace is commemorated at 9 Cumberland Street, Edinburgh with this plaque donated by the Rotary Club of St. Louis, Missouri, USA in April 1978 on the suggestion of Alex C. West, a past President of Edinburgh Rotary Club.

Inner Wheel

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In March 1934, the Harrises returned to Scotland to stay for a time in Ayrshire with Jean’s brother who was now a minister at nearby Annbank. While there, they were greeted by members of the Rotary Clubs of Edinburgh and Dunfermline who had come to ask Paul if he would attend their weekly meetings. So, on April 4, they travelled to Edinburgh where Lord Provost Thomson had invited Rotary’s President Emeritus to attend and speak as the guest of honour at the banquet of the Assembly of the Lords Provost of Scotland. Highland pipers played the plaintive ‘Road to the Isles’ as the Harrises ascended the steps to the City Chambers. For the 52-year-old Jean, who had left her city 25 years earlier, it was a most memorable homecoming. Unsure what to say to the Assembly, Paul decided that the most appropriate topic would be ‘Chicago’.

From “Paul Harris in Britain” by Basil Lewis

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**Paul and Jean visit the City of Edinburgh Chambers 1934**

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**Paul and Jean ‘held up’ in Australia**

Fund-raising—Oz style!

The masked man on the right is past RI President Sir Angus Mitchell.

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**At the 1955 Convention in Chicago—50 years ago**

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“Of a’ the airts the wind can blow
I dearly like the west
For there the bonnie lassie lives
The lassie I lo’e best;
There wild woods grow and rivers row
And monie a hill between;
By day and night my fancy’s flight
Is ever wi’my Jean”

“There’s not a bonnie flower that springs
By fountain, shaw or green;
There’s not a bonnie bird that sings
And mins me o’ my Jean”

Robert Burns