

Dr. Ralph C. Smedley



Out of the Past

Americans firmly believe that it's possible to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. Self-improvement -- be it in the form of a face lift, motivational seminar, morning jog, or new low-cholesterol diet regimen -- is our ticket to Valhalla.

It's not too surprising, then, to find Toastmasters International, the world's premier self-improvement club, in Orange County, where sheep ranches blossom into million-dollar corporations and swap meets spawn national clothing chains. What is surprising is that the club -- which dedicates itself to improving leadership skills, self-confidence and communication through public speaking -- originated in Orange County 75 years ago.

Off to a Rocky Start

Toastmasters was the brainchild of a Midwesterner named Ralph C. Smedley. In 1903, after graduating from Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Illinois, Smedley took a job as director of education for the local Young Men's Christian Association. Realizing that the older boys who visited the YMCA needed training in communication, he began a public speaking club.

Smedley called his group, "The Toastmasters Club" because the activities resembled a banquet with toasts and after-dinner speakers. The boys enjoyed taking turns making speeches and evaluating them, as well as presiding at the weekly meetings. Smedley's club blossomed, but soon he was promoted to general secretary of the YMCA and transferred to Freeport, Illinois. After his departure, the Bloomington club died.

In the following years, Smedley organized other Toastmasters clubs wherever he was transferred. In Freeport, businessmen and other professionals who recognized the benefits of communications skills became members. Yet these older members did not save the organization either. The club operated successfully while Smedley was there but disappeared when its founder moved on to Rock Island, Illinois. Subsequent clubs in Rock Island and San Jose, California, suffered the same fate.

Smedley must have despaired of ever seeing his creation blossom into a self-sustaining organization. "I observed a tendency among my fellow secretaries at the YMCA to regard The Toastmasters Club as a sort of peculiarity -- an idiosyncrasy of mine," he later said. "Perhaps it was not altogether orthodox as a 'Y' activity."

A New Beginning in Santa Ana

Finally, the YMCA director arrived in Santa Ana. Once more he organized a Toastmasters club, holding the first meeting in the Santa Ana YMCA basement on October 22, 1924. In Southern California's optimistic climate, the concept caught on. Men from neighboring communities sought out the group and liked what they saw. Smedley was quick to help them organize their own Toastmasters clubs. The new clubs were united in a federation designed to coordinate their activities and ensure uniform methods.

In 1932, the federation was incorporated as Toastmasters International, following the establishment of a club in New Westminster, British Columbia, Canada. Districts were created later, as the number of clubs increased.

For many years, Smedley held the position of general secretary of the Santa Ana YMCA, handling finances, fund raising, program planning, membership matters and the supervision of a number of YMCA employees. In addition, he served as liaison for the local and national YMCA organizations.

Somehow Smedley managed to find time to spread the gospel about Toastmasters, serving as its executive secretary and editor of The Toastmaster magazine, while also maintaining his busy YMCA schedule. He corresponded regularly with members and club officers, encouraging and guiding them in club matters.

International Growth

By 1941, Smedley realized that Toastmasters needed his full-time attention. He resigned from the YMCA and opened a 12-by-16-foot office in a downtown Santa Ana bank, with a desk, typewriter, telephone and second-hand address machine. He hired a secretary to handle the correspondence while he wrote materials for the club's use.

The organization began with two manuals -- Basic Training and Beyond Basic Training -- written by Smedley in the office after business hours. He also found time to write several tomes on public speaking and parliamentary procedure. The Voice of the Speaker, Speech Evaluation and The Amateur Chairman found a ready audience in Toastmaster members. (Smedley also wrote The Great Peacemaker, a biography of Henry M. Robert, author of the famed Robert's Rules of Order.)

Toastmasters continued to grow. The single-room office expanded to four, and past international president Ted Blanding took over the position of executive secretary, while Smedley became educational director and concentrated on learning processes and materials.

Smedley was involved in the educational program of Toastmasters International until shortly before his death in 1965 at the age of 87.

New Directions

Toastmasters has continued to flourish. In 1962, Toastmasters -- by then an organization of 80,000 members and 3,500 clubs -- built its own 27,000-square-foot office building in Santa Ana. Smedley took part in the dedication ceremonies. A second growth spurt came following the decision to accept women as members in 1973.

By 1985, the Santa Ana building was serving 120,000 members and 5,300 clubs worldwide. Expansion and remodeling were necessary to provide 5,000 additional square feet of warehouse space. But within four years, the organization had outgrown the headquarters. In June 1990, Toastmasters International moved into a new world headquarters in Rancho Santa Margarita.

Today, more than 170,000 members take part in 8,300 clubs in the United States, Canada and 67 other countries. Thousands of corporations and government agencies, including Rockwell International in Downey and Irvine's Fluor Daniel, sponsor in-house Toastmasters clubs as communication training for their employees. Specialized clubs meet at military bases, colleges and universities, churches and prisons. There are Toastmasters clubs for senior citizens, professional groups, bilingual groups, singles and visually impaired.

Recognition

Ralph Smedley's contributions to society have not gone unnoticed. In 1950, Wesleyan University granted him the honorary degree of doctor of humane letters, and Santa Ana named a junior high school after him in 1955. In 1956, Toastmasters itself honored him with the title of honorary president and lifetime board member. The Santa Ana Toastmasters Club even renamed itself the Smedley Number One Club in honor of its founder.

But perhaps the best tribute is one that takes place at every meeting of the Smedley Number One Club: A photograph of Smedley and the original club charter are placed in an empty chair near the lectern to represent his continuing inspiration.

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