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Soroptimist – A Brief History

Soroptimist works hard to promote its programs, with the ultimate goal of helping to increase its membership ranks so that even more women and girls can receive the assistance they need. At the beginning of the 1920s, women in North America had established themselves in the political arena through suffrage and in the professional world as a result of World War I. The time was right for women actively engaged in professions and careers to come together for mutual support and friendship, and to serve the communities to which they belonged. The time was right for Soroptimist.

In the spring of 1921, Stuart Morrow, an organizer of men's service clubs, visited Oakland, California. In search of a potential member for an Optimist* club, Morrow called on the Parker-Goddard Secretarial School, presuming it was run by men and found instead Miss Adelaide Goddard and Miss Mabel Parker owned the school. Explaining his mistake, Morrow excused himself. As Morrow left, Miss Goddard remarked she would be interested in joining such a club for women if he ever considered forming one.

Goddard's remark set the wheels in motion for Stuart Morrow. He contacted a number of business women in the community, and invited them to a preliminary meeting on May 21. Of the six women in attendance, only one showed real interest. This woman began recruiting her acquaintances and on June 21, a luncheon meeting with 10 women officially launched the club toward its goal of 80 members to receive a charter from Morrow.

This core group met once a week, and continued to gather the names of eligible women from Alameda County; they also chose the name Soroptimist for the organization, coining a word from two Latin words "soror"—woman and "optima"—the best.

On September 26, the charter was closed and officers were elected with Violet Richardson Ward serving as the president. The presentation of the charter and an installation ceremony took place on October 3, 1921, the day officially celebrated as Founders Day.

In 1927 Stuart Morrow agreed to sell all rights, title and interest in the name "Soroptimist" and all the rights in the corporation for \$5,500. While eight clubs underwrote the purchase, all clubs, including those in Europe and Great Britain, contributed. The American federation was formed at the Washington, DC, conference in 1928. (The federation was to be self-governed and self-supported, but was united with the European federation as the Soroptimist International Association.)

Soroptimist continued to grow and thrive for decades, expanding into several countries and territories around the world. In 1985, the first mission statement of Soroptimist International of the Americas was adopted. The mission focus of improving the lives of women and girls, in local communities and throughout the world, was implemented in 2004.

Today, Soroptimist International has almost 95,000 members in about 120 countries and territories who contribute time and financial support to community-based and international projects that benefit women and girls.

* Original documentation in the Soroptimist Archives suggests Morrow was attempting to organize an Optimist club, but additional evidence obtained by the archives shows that Morrow organized numerous Rotary clubs, and was most likely forming a Rotary club when he stopped into the Parker-Goddard Secretarial School.