



A Brief History of “The International Association of Lions Clubs”  
(A.K.A., Lions International)

Dr. William P. Woods of Evansville, Indiana originally founded (chartered) the “Royal Order of Lions” as a fraternal organization (and as a secret society) on August 8, 1911. However, after only a few years, that organization would be disbanded in favor of a more service oriented organization. Dr. Woods had already begun forming new Lions Clubs as early as 1915 for the new purpose of being a community service oriented organization. On January 18, 1916, the Austin Lions Club (today’s oldest continuously operating Lions Club) was chartered by Mr. E.A. Hicks of Indiana on behalf of Dr. Woods.

On October 24, 1916, Dr. Woods, Carmi Hicks, and C.R. Conen officially chartered (incorporated) this successor organization to the “Royal Order of Lions,” as the “International Association of Lions Clubs” by filing Articles of Incorporation for this non-profit organization with the State of Indiana. By June 1 of 1917, the International Association of Lions Clubs, which had been founded and chartered by Dr. Woods, already consisted of at least 27 clubs in no less than 9 states. *(Records, from the State of Indiana, actually reflect that 35 Lions Clubs had been issued charters by June 1, 1917.)*

Around this same time a young businessman from Chicago, named Melvin Jones, had also decided that what the world needed was more compassion ... more caring about others and less concern about one’s own self. Assisted by his wife, Rose Amanda, Mr. Jones began writing letters to other men's organizations of that day - some of whom already held this same philosophy of service to others. Would they be interested in meeting to discuss a new organization, one that would utilize the resources of businessmen and other professionals to benefit communities and people in need?

Melvin Jones first became interested in serving humanitarian needs after he became a member of the Business Circle of Chicago in 1913. As a young insurance executive, he was, in many ways, like his fellow club members. Jones, however, had a desire to serve more than just his own business interests, and after four years in the Business Circle, he realized that he had much more to offer his fellow men. His wife agreed, and they both set out to find others who would join them in their quest to make the world a better place.

On June 7, 1917, Melvin Jones called an organizational meeting of what would later be known as today’s “Association of Lions Clubs International” at the old La Salle Hotel in Chicago, Illinois. Present for that organizational meeting were representatives of several

other community service oriented clubs of that day, notably, Dr. William P. Woods, a physician from Evansville, Indiana, who was then serving as the President and Founder of the International Association of Lions Clubs. At the time of Melvin Jones' invitation, there were already at least 27 Lions Clubs listed as members of the International Association of Lions Clubs. Dr. Woods, as President and Founder of the International Association of Lions Clubs, was invited by Mr. Jones, according to Mr. Jones' own written records of the time, "with a view to lining up our organization with yours."

Other clubs, to which an invitation was also extended for this organizational meeting, included the Vortex Club of St. Louis, Missouri, the Business and Professional Men's Association of St. Paul, Minnesota, the Optimist Clubs, and the Exchange Clubs. (However, no representative of the Exchange Clubs attended the organizational meeting.) Subsequently, representatives of the: Lions Clubs, Optimist Clubs, Vortex Club, and the Business and Professional Men's Association of St. Paul, Minnesota all met with the Business Circle of Chicago to discuss the formation of an international service organization.

According to the minutes of that meeting, the following resolution was introduced by Edwin J. Raber and W.J. Livingston (seconded by A.F. Sheahan) and then unanimously adopted by the Business Circle of Chicago:

***"That the Board of Directors of the Business Circle of Chicago enter into negotiations with Dr. W.P. Woods of The International Association of Lions Clubs, and other clubs with reference to the affiliation of these clubs and that said Board of Directors have full power to make and complete all arrangements for said affiliation and any act they do on the premises shall be the act of this club and binding thereon."***

Also, according to those same minutes, Dr. Woods invited each of the various clubs in attendance to join the International Association of Lions Clubs. Dr. Woods is quoted in the minutes as saying:

***"Whereas all clubs represented here today have different names, and whereas the Lions clubs have an international organization, with approximately thirty clubs in different parts of the United States, and whereas the Lions clubs are not now represented in any other cities represented by the other clubs: therefore, as president of The International Association of Lions Clubs, I hereby extend an invitation to these clubs to accept charters in The International Association of Lions Clubs and become a part and parcel of our organization. If you accept this invitation, there will be no membership charged, and all we ask is to adopt our name and pay dues to The International Association, which are at the rate of \$1.00 per member, payable semi-annually in advance."***

The Vortex Club of St. Louis immediately accepted this offer of membership and received their Lions Club charter on July 25, 1917. The Business Circle of Chicago also resolved to become a Lions Club and their charter was issued on August 2, 1917. The Professional Men's Association of St. Paul, Minnesota also accepted Dr. Woods' offer to

join The International Association of Lions. *(The Optimist Clubs representatives chose not to accept this offer of membership into The International Association of Lions that had been extended by Dr. Woods. Instead, they immediately left the organizational meeting that Melvin Jones had called to order in Chicago and the Optimist Clubs organization still continues under its own name today.)*

While the La Salle hotel has been gone many years - a victim of changing times and the wrecker's ball - Lions Clubs International has since flourished well beyond either Melvin Jones' or Dr. W.P. Woods' wildest dreams that day... becoming the largest community service club organization in the world.

On July 31, 1917, Dr. Woods, as President and Founder of The International Association of Lions Clubs, issued a call for the organization's first official (annual) convention from his Evansville office, which called for "the first convention of Lions Clubs, to be held in the city of Dallas, Texas, on October 8, 1917."

First Annual Convention:

Of the twenty-four Lions Clubs represented at this first convention at the Adolphus Hotel in Dallas on October 8-10, 1917, ten were from Texas. (Texas actually had twelve Lions Clubs in existence at the time, but, two were unable to send delegates to that first convention in Dallas.)

Existing Lions Clubs that sent delegates to that first convention in Dallas included:

<u>State</u>	<u>Lions Clubs</u>
Arkansas	Little Rock and Texarkana
Colorado	Denver and Colorado Springs
Illinois	Chicago
Indiana	Evansville
Louisiana	Shreveport
Missouri	St. Louis
Oklahoma	Ardmore, Chickasha, Muskogee, Oklahoma City, Tulsa
Texas	Abilene, Austin, Beaumont, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, Paris, Port Arthur, Waco, Wichita Falls
Tennessee	Memphis

Lions Clubs that were not represented at that first convention in 1917, but which are still counted today as "Founder Clubs," due to their existence at that time include:

California	Oakland
Colorado	Pueblo
Oklahoma	El Reno and Okmulgee
Texas	San Antonio and Temple

The delegates to this first annual convention of Lions Clubs officially adopted the name, "The International Association of Lions Clubs." They also adopted: a Constitution and By-Laws, objects, a code of ethics, and an emblem - a lion's head with a club in its mouth. Among the objects which they adopted was one that read, "No club shall hold out the financial betterment of its members as its object." This call for unselfish service to others remains one of the Association's main tenets. It was also at this first convention that the delegates first voted to open membership to women as well as men.

At this first Convention, Dr. W. P. Woods was officially elected by the delegates as the organization's first President, after Dr. L.H. Lewis, President of the Dallas Lions Club, had declined the Presidency of the "new" organization. Dr. Lewis was subsequently elected 1st VP, and he went on to serve as our association's second President. *(It is also important to note that Dr. Woods had already been serving as President and Founder of the organization from its official founding on October 16, 1916, when the organization's articles of incorporation were issued, until that election, as well. Therefore, Dr. Woods actually served as the first President of the International Association of Lions for two successive terms (years). He served as President from the organization's original founding in 1916 until 1918, when Dr. Lewis took office.)* Melvin Jones was elected Secretary-Treasurer of the Association, and St. Louis, Missouri, was selected as the site for the organization's second annual convention, which would be held in 1918.

The United States had entered World War I in April 1917, and helping out the soldiers had gained the support and attention of many Lions Clubs. Selling war bonds and collecting reading materials to be shipped out to servicemen was a national effort at this time, and one that Lions also embraced. From our current worldwide perspective, it's difficult to imagine a fledgling Lions Clubs International. Yet, in 1918, those early founders had a vast amount of work to do after each had returned home. In addition to helping out in their own communities, Lions were immediately faced with contributing to the war effort.

#### Second Annual Convention:

In 1918, at the Association's second annual convention, in St. Louis, Missouri, Dr. L.H. Lewis of the Dallas Lions Club was elected as the second President of the organization, and Melvin Jones was retained as the organization's Secretary-Treasurer. A third annual convention was planned to take place in the city of Chicago in 1919. It was also at this second convention that the delegates voted to rescind the option of membership in the organization to women.

Lions were beginning to become well-known for their compassionate and caring activities in hometowns across the land. As more and more men joined the ranks, it became apparent that there was a need for a major communication link between them. THE LION Magazine filled that need - in November 1918, Volume 1, No. 1 was published, with Melvin Jones heading the masthead as editor. Today, there are 32 separate editions of THE LION, published in 22 languages.

### Third Annual Convention and Re-Organization:

The International Association of Lions Clubs was re-organized at its third convention in Chicago in 1919, following a rather heated disagreement between the Association's Secretary-Treasurer, Melvin Jones and its Past President and Founder, Dr. W.P. Woods, regarding the issue of allowing women to have membership in the organization. Several women had been accepted as Lions in the beginning of the organization, which had been originally founded by Dr. Woods, and he felt that the Association should restore the option of extending membership in the organization to women. Melvin Jones (and a sufficient number of delegates at that convention) felt otherwise, and the constitutional amendment to restore the privilege of membership to women as Lions was defeated. This issue would not be corrected until 68 years later at the International Convention that was held in Hong Kong in 1987, when women were once again approved for membership as Lions. Melvin Jones went on to devote the rest of his life to the support of the International Association of Lions, until his death on June 1, 1961, at age 82.

The Association was subsequently re-incorporated under a new charter from the State of Illinois on August 25, 1919, which then named Melvin Jones as the official founder of the organization. (It was at about this point that all records which recognized Dr. W. P. Woods as the founder of the International Association of Lions Clubs began to disappear from official Lions publications.) New charters from the Illinois Corporation that was created in 1919 were then issued to thirty-four previously established Lions Clubs which were already active at that time. Nine of the original twelve Texas Lions Clubs received their new charters at that time.

Another crisis was soon facing the United States - the influenza epidemic of 1919, which claimed so many lives. Regardless of the dangers they faced to their own health, Lions cooperated fully with public health officials and hospitals, serving in any capacity in which they were needed in their communities.

### The Roaring 20s

The Roaring 20s were years of rapid growth for the Association of Lions Clubs. The war was over, and a decade of prosperity and confidence lay ahead for the world. As a sense of balance and normalcy returned to a world that had been held captive by a war which had spanned the oceans on several continents and claimed countless lives, the collective mood of people everywhere was lifted and lightened.

The United States Lions extended their hands in friendship to Canada, establishing the Border Cities Lions Club in Ontario in 1920. With that first extension of a new Lions Club in another country, the Association of Lions Clubs truly became an international organization. Although the Border Cities Lions Club's name later was changed to the Windsor Lions Club, this Club paved the way for many more to follow. Lions Clubs in Toronto and Hamilton, Ontario, came immediately after this first chartering of a Canadian Lions Club.

While the world moved ahead with dizzying degrees of progress, one group of citizens still faced undeniable walls of prejudice. The handicapped still had not achieved true independence and public acceptance.

In 1925, however, a most eloquent plea from Helen Keller, noted around the world as a symbol of courage and humanity, pointed the Lions in a direction that would change the lives of millions. When she was invited to address the international Convention in Cedar Point, Ohio, Helen Keller challenged each of the delegates (and their Clubs) to become "Knights of the Blind," this extraordinary individual became the inspiration for millions of Lions, past and present.

Indeed, before the delegates left that convention in Cedar Point, they collectively voted to adopt Sight Conservation and Work for the Blind (later amended to "with the blind") as a major service activity for the organization. Of course, many Lions Clubs had already been working toward this goal in order to make life more comfortable for the sight impaired. What Helen Keller's moving words at that convention did was to provide the impetus for every Lion, and for every Lions Club in the entire association to unite with a common goal - a fight that they would strive to win together.

It was also in 1925, at the convention in Cedar Point, Ohio that the Lions chose to make not one, but, two exceptions to their constitution and by-laws with regard to women members by honoring Helen Keller as the "First Lady of Lionism" and making her an honorary Lion. They then followed that up by making Anne Sullivan an honorary Lion as well, calling her the "Second Lady of Lionism."

One of the most famous Lions of the 1920s was polar explorer, Admiral Richard E. Byrd, a member of the Washington, D.C. Lions Club. When Admiral Byrd and his noted aviator Floyd Bennett flew over the North Pole on May 9, 1926, they carried the Lions flag with them.

On October 01, 1926, China became the third nation to join the Association of Lions Clubs, International. The Tientsin Lions Club in China initially included 55 members – they consisted of: Chinese, British, German, Italian, French, Japanese, Austrian, Hungarian and American citizens. This was also the year that the Association of Lions Clubs passed the 1,000 Club mark.

Mexico came next as an international member nation when the Nuevo Laredo Lions Club was formed in 1927. Shortly after, the Havana, Cuba Lions held their first meeting. The Havana Lions Club remained strong for more than 30 years following their charter date, but they were forced into inactivity following the Cuban revolution in 1959.

Broadening its international role, the Association of Lions Clubs International helped the United Nations form the Non-Governmental Organizations (N.G.O.) sections in 1945 following World War II, and the Association continues to hold consultative status with the U.N. today.

In 1968, the International Association of Lions Clubs began the Lions Clubs International Foundation (LCIF) as its grant-making arm. LCIF is Lions helping Lions serve others. It is the only Lions' foundation that serves the entire world and all 1.4 million Lions.

Working with Lions, LCIF prevents blindness. It provides food and clothing to victims of natural disasters. It also gives youth the tools to succeed through programs such as Lions-Quest; it empowers the disabled through vocational training, and promotes health by equipping clinics and hospitals around the globe.

LCIF is an efficient and effective charity. All administrative costs (which were only 10.8 percent in 2003-2004 - a low ratio for any non-profit organization) are paid out of interest on investments. Every dollar that is donated to LCIF goes to a grant. LCIF receives no Lions Club dues. LCIF has awarded more than (U.S.) \$356.9 million in grants since it began in 1968.

In 1989, the Lions launched their most aggressive and successful sight preservation effort to date, "Sight First". It was launched to battle preventable blindness. Sadly, about 80 percent of the world's blind were needlessly without sight at that time. Through SightFirst, the Lions have prevented blindness by supporting cataract surgeries, helping to build or expand eye hospitals and clinics, distributing sight-saving medication, and training eye care professionals.

Thanks to SightFirst, the Lions have restored sight to 4.6 million people through cataract surgeries, prevented serious vision loss for another 20 million people, and improved eye care services for hundreds of millions. SightFirst has not only been stunningly effective, but, also startlingly efficient. On the average, the cost for a person to have their vision restored, or saved from blindness through this program, has only been about (U.S.) \$6 per person. SightFirst has also been especially effective at helping children. Recently, in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO), SightFirst launched the world's first-ever global initiative to combat childhood blindness. The project is creating 30 centers for pediatric eye care around the world.

SightFirst's efforts against river blindness have been particularly impressive. Working with The Carter Center, national ministries of health, and other groups, our SightFirst program has helped to distribute more than 60 million treatments of Mectizan, which have been donated by their manufacturer, Merck. Virtually no new cases of river blindness are being reported in areas with widespread treatment coverage throughout nearly all of Africa and much of Latin America. With continued efforts, it is felt that the disease could also be eliminated in Latin America by 2010.

The accomplishments of our SightFirst program will increase for years to come because of its investments in eye care facilities and the training of medical personnel. SightFirst has built or expanded 207 eye hospitals, clinics or wards, upgraded 314 others with equipment and educated more than 83,500 people in eye healthcare.

In addition to our sight programs, Lions Clubs International is very committed to providing services for youth. Lions Clubs also work to improve the environment, build homes for the disabled, support diabetes education, conduct hearing programs and, through their foundation (LCIF), provide disaster relief around the world.

On Christmas morning of 2004, the Lions faced one of the worst peacetime disasters in modern history, when a series of huge Tsunami waves swept across the Indian Ocean area. Thousands of lives were lost in the initial storm and millions were left homeless and at the mercy of the elements. Thanks to the efforts of Lions around the world, more than \$12,000,000 was raised for LCIF's Tsunami Relief effort in only a few short weeks. Through the efforts of Lions and others, millions of lives were saved that might otherwise have perished following the Tsunami disaster of that Christmas morning.

Since its humble early beginnings, the International Association of Lions Clubs has grown to include approximately 1.4 million community service minded men and women in more than 46,000 clubs located in approximately 193 countries and geographical areas.

What began as the good intentions of a small group of civic minded men and women more than 90 years ago has evolved into a global force for good - a world class organization of men and women who recognize needs that go beyond their own, who work on behalf of others whom they may never see, speak with, or meet.

Membership in Lions Clubs International is by invitation only, from the members of a local Lions club. To learn more, or to be considered for membership, a candidate should contact a member of a local Lions club. If there is not a Lions Club nearby, a candidate should contact a Lion from another area to help them start a Lions Club in their own community. If anyone is unsure of who to contact, they can always call the Membership Department at Lions Clubs International at 630-571-5466, ext. 356 and someone there will be able to refer them to a local Lion for further assistance.