

Early SI History

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.

As with most worthy endeavors, Soroptimist had a slow start. In the spring of 1921, Stuart Morrow, an organizer of men's service clubs, visited Oakland, CA. In search of a potential member for an Optimist club, Morrow called on the Parker-Goddard Secretarial School, presuming it was run by men. He found instead that 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 in order 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"¹¹—the best.

A number of Soroptimist traditions began to take root under the first club president, Violet Richardson—who had refused to become a member until she had Morrow's assurance that there would be international clubs. Expansion began with the chartering of new clubs in San Francisco (March 1922) and Los Angeles (July 1922). The first three clubs organized new clubs in Sacramento (March 1923), Long Beach (March 1924), and San Jose (December 1924), while Morrow established clubs in New York, NY (June 1923), London, England (February 1924), Paris, France (October 1924), and Philadelphia, PA (April 1925). Morrow then turned his attention to the Pacific Northwest and organized clubs in Seattle, WA (October 1925), Portland, OR (February 1926), Spokane, WA (February 1926), and Vancouver, British Columbia (April 1926). In 1926

As Morrow was organizing clubs in the Midwest, clubs along the Pacific coast, he began to consider the idea of forming some type of federation to bring the clubs into closer association with each other. With Morrow's assent, the nine clubs along the Pacific coast met in August, 1926 to consider whether, and how, to federate. The consensus of the meeting was to federate and to obtain from Morrow all rights to the Soroptimist name and chartering new clubs. Violet Richardson Ward was instructed to contact Stuart Morrow and request him to make a proposition to relinquish complete control of Soroptimist. The delegates determined to invite representatives from all Soroptimist clubs in North America and Europe to a meeting in 1927, where Morrow's proposal would be considered.

San Francisco provided the location for the 1927 meeting, referred to in the printed reports as "The First International Conference of the Soroptimist Clubs of the World." In actuality, the title was more grandiose than the actual representation. Only clubs from the Americas were represented. Invitations had been sent to clubs in England and France, but these clubs did not have enough time to arrange trips to the Pacific coast. Two major themes dominated the conference: determining a way to separate the organization from Stuart Morrow, and establishing an international alliance of clubs.

After some debate, delegates decided to pursue a complete buy-out. A committee was appointed to negotiate with Stuart Morrow, the committee was instructed to try to reduce Morrow's \$56,000 figure. They returned the next day with an option agreement from Morrow, who consented to a settlement within 30 days for \$5,500.

With the Soroptimist name exclusively in the hands of its members, the delegates turned their attention to crafting a constitution and bylaws. For the 1927-1928 year, the club pin of Sacramento, CA, was chosen as the design, substituting the city's name with "Soroptimist International." Clubs were instructed to submit designs for a permanent organization emblem and pin for action at the 1928 convention. Region directors were elected for the main geographic areas of the Americas—North Atlantic, South Atlantic, Northwestern, South Central and Southwestern. ([link to logo story](#))

The 1928 convention was the first true international meeting of Soroptimists, with representatives from the newly formed European federation in attendance in Washington, DC. Since the European clubs had formed themselves into a federation, the clubs in North America felt they should follow suit, and then the two federations together could form an international organization.

Meanwhile, the delegates picked a new emblem and hotly debated the meaning of the word "Soroptimist." The consensus of the meaning was to use "The Best for Women," but Leora Stewart, a member of the Seattle Soroptimist club asked, "Is our word to describe us or to describe the service we do? Would not 'Service for Womanhood' describe what we do, and 'Leaders Among Women' describe us? Is there not a distinction between the type of service and the women who propose it?"

The two-year-old American Federation of Soroptimist Clubs met in its first biennial convention during June 1930 in Philadelphia, PA. Most of the convention was spent fine-tuning the federation's laws, discussing the pros and cons of having a federation magazine, and the best number of new members necessary for a club to receive its charter. With the convention adjourned, the first decade of Soroptimist's existence passed into history

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