

Civitan History and Founders

Civitans in the United States

In 1917, a group of business and professional leaders were meeting in Birmingham, Alabama, as a part of a national civic club. They were concerned about their community and world, but they thought that the club focused too much on personal gain. These men wanted to make a difference, and they believed that their actions could help build a better world.

Giving up the charter they had purchased, they set out to make a more suitable club. On March 17, 1917, these men formed an independent service organization. Eventually, they settled on the name Civitan, coined from the Latin word *civitas*, meaning, "citizenship." "Builders of Good Citizenship" was a natural motto for the civic-minded group.

World War I began just one month after the club formed. Civitan continued on a purely local basis during these frantic war years, with many of the club's early efforts supporting soldiers. Returning veterans were warmly welcomed back into the club after the war, and Civitan's service activities broadened.

The dream of an international organization began with Dr. Courtney Shropshire, a local surgeon and the club's third president. He shared his vision with a few close friends in the Birmingham Club, and the proposal was given unanimous approval. The process to incorporate was begun. When the group met at the Southern Club on April 15, 1920, Civitan International was born. Officers elected included Dr. Courtney Shropshire, president; Rev. J. A. MacSporran, vice president; John Fry, treasurer; and John Mix, secretary. Charter Number One went to the Birmingham Civitan Club, later designated as "The Mother Club of Civitan International."

Clubs were chartered across the country in the following months. By June of 1921, when the first international convention was held in Birmingham, there were 30 clubs and more than 300 delegates in attendance. At the second convention in Chattanooga, Tennessee, delegates from 115 clubs attended. By this time, there were more than 3,300 Civitans throughout the United States. Delegates to the 1925 convention bestowed the title "Founder of Civitan International" on Shropshire, the only person to ever serve two terms as president.

From the very beginning, Civitan encouraged its clubs to seek out and fulfill needs within their communities. Some truly outstanding projects were undertaken by these early Civitans. Knoxville, Tennessee, Civitans raised \$100,000 to build a three-story hospital for indigent tuberculosis patients in 1923. When the local school committee was deadlocked, Rogersville, Alabama, Civitans secured \$40,000 in funding to build a new high school in 1929. Other Civitans paid for operations so that crippled children could walk, built parks, served as big brothers to troubled boys, and registered voters. Their dreams were big, their sights high, and their accomplishments great.

Aid to those less fortunate was a significant factor in early projects. Concern for developmentally disabled children was a natural extension of the early efforts to assist crippled children. By the 1950s, Civitan work in this area had made giant strides. A significant milestone was reached with the decision to adopt the developmentally disabled as a major service focus.

One of Civitan's signature fundraisers began in 1951. Civitan Earl Carver stopped by a small bakery in Claxton, Georgia. He purchased a loaf of the bakery's fruit cake. It was so good that he purchased others to take home to Florida. He suggested that his club sell the cake to raise money for projects. His club liked the idea - and the sample cakes! Since then, Civitan and Claxton Fruit

Cake have become synonymous during the holiday season in the United States and Canada.

In 1960, the Civitan International Foundation was established. When Courtney Shropshire died in 1965, a scholarship fund for deserving college students was established in his memory. Since 1965, hundreds of students have benefited from this program.

An informal ladies' auxiliary had been a part of Civitan since the late 1920s, but women had never been true members of Civitan. Membership was formally opened to women in 1974, making Civitan the first major, all-male service club to accept women. Soon Civitans were building all-female clubs, and most established clubs began accepting both men and women.

Civitan's other well-known fundraiser began in 1976. Louisville, Kentucky, Civitans approached the executive board about a project to place candy boxes in restaurants. Patrons would deposit loose change in return for a mint. Since then, the Candy and Coin Box Project has raised over \$50 million for Civitan's charitable projects.

Civitan's flagship project is the UAB Civitan International Research Center. Dedicated in 1992, the Research Center is located at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. It is the first institution of its kind in the United States to focus solely on researching developmental disabilities. Civitans are once again reaching out to those in need in new ways—this time not only by providing treatment but also by searching for ways to prevent mental and developmental disabilities.

International Club Growth

Dr. Shropshire always envisioned Civitan as a truly international organization. Unfortunately, early attempts at international growth were not successful. Civitan's first club outside of the United States was chartered in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1922. In May 1925, the Hamilton Civitan Club was chartered in Ontario, Canada. Both of these clubs failed to survive the worldwide Depression of the 1930s.

The first successful international club was chartered in Toronto, Canada in 1932, when a former president of the Birmingham Civitan Club moved to Toronto for business reasons. Civitan was now in two nations—Canada and the United States. Due to the high cost of maintaining clubs in foreign countries and poor economic conditions worldwide, Civitan would concentrate on these two countries for growth during the next decades. It would take Civitan 37 more years to venture outside North America.

The first European club was chartered in Norway in 1969, sponsored by the Mother Club of Civitan in Birmingham, Alabama. The new Norwegian clubs spread the Civitan message to other countries. In 1970, clubs were chartered in Germany and Sweden.

Civitan's growth in Asia began in 1974 when an army officer was transferred from Georgia to South Korea. Before leaving for his new post, the Georgia North District Governor-elect asked him to establish a new Civitan club in Korea. After seeking outstanding Korean business and professional people, he quickly connected with the president of Kyung Hee University. The Seoul Civitan Club was chartered in August 1974. The first Japanese club was established after a Coca-Cola executive and Civitan member was transferred back to Japan; the Nippon Civitan Club chartered in June 1975.

Civitan growth has continued around the world. Clubs are now found in dozens of countries, including Bangladesh, Jordan, India, Russia, Nepal, Ghana, and Pakistan. Courtney Shropshire's vision of an international organization that would create "builders of good citizenship" around the globe has finally become a reality.

Civitan came to North Carolina and South Carolina in 1921 and 1922.

The clubs in these sister states were designated by Civitan International as the Carolinas District. Judge Junius G. Adams of the Asheville, North Carolina, Civitan Club was its first Governor. In South Carolina, the Greenville Civitan Club was chartered in 1922 and in turn assisted in the chartering of clubs in Columbia and the upstate area. These early years of Civitan grew rapidly in membership and service to communities in the Carolinas District. Enthusiasm for Civitan continued into the depression years when economic conditions caused a heavy loss of members. In 1933, the Greenville, Easley, Greer and Pelzer Civitan Clubs surrendered their charters. Civitan survived the depression setback and by 1947 there were 41 active clubs in the Carolinas District. Fourteen (14) of these were in South Carolina.

Also, during these early years the District had twenty-six (26) Governors and of these five (5) were South Carolinians as follows:

- 1924 T. M. Norris, Greenville
- 1936-37 O. E. Black, Columbia
- 1940-41 Arthur Knight, Chesterfield
- 1943-44 Dr. Coyt Ham, Columbia
- 1945-46 Dr. A. S. Gilmore, Nichols

In 1946, the challenge to oversee and administer forty-one (41) clubs covering such a large geographical area lead to a proposal to divide the Carolinas District. In Convention at Myrtle Beach on May 25-26, 1947, the delegates approved the division of the Carolinas Civitan District. The Civitan International Board approved this action and the South Carolina District became a separate entity with fourteen (14) clubs and a membership of six hundred thirty-nine (639).

THE SOUTH CAROLINA DISTRICT

Charter member clubs of the new district were: Charleston, Chesterfield, Columbia, Greenville, Hartsville, Loris, Marion, Mullins, Myrtle Beach, Nichols, Olanta, Pageland, St. Phillips-St. Michael, and Spartanburg.

During the First ten (10) years (1947-1957), the South Carolina District increased its number of clubs to thirty-one (31) with a membership of twelve hundred (1200). From 1957 to the present, membership has fluctuated considerably but the number of clubs has remained around 30 while District project activity has accelerated.

PROJECTS

The first major District project was adopted in 1948 in cooperation with local clubs. Governor A.C. Bowie proposed a Scholarship Program to assist young people in South Carolina orphanages toward a college education.

Applicants were screened by competitive examination and selected annually. The project was funded through contributions of one and half-dollars (\$1.50) per member from clubs in the district. The first two students to graduate were Gaynelle Kernell from Winthrop College and Dennis Dellinger from the University of South Carolina in 1953. This project was continued for many years and benefited many young people.

Fund raising in support of Civitan service projects is a very important activity and the South Carolina District joined Civitan International in promoting the sale of Claxton fruitcake in the early fifties. Fruitcake sales remain a dependable source of income for District and Club projects.

Other District promoted fund-raisers past and present are the sale of Halloween candy, trash bags, and the Civitan Candy Box. The latter is now a major source of income for projects for the retarded and handicapped and for support of the Civitan International Foundation and the Civitan International Research Center.

In 1965, the South Carolina District renewed interest in the Junior Civitan program for high school students. Under the leadership of Ed Jones of the Five Points Club, the interest in forming Junior Clubs was greatly stimulated and the first Junior Civitan District Convention was held in 1967.

The South Carolina District began participation in an ongoing camping/conference for youth program with North Carolina East and North Carolina West Districts in 1967. Known as the Civitan Youth Conference and held in the mountains of North Carolina near Little Switzerland (Wildacres), it was moved in the early 1970's to Hendersonville, North Carolina, and finally to Cleveland, South Carolina. Suffering for financial support, the camp was closed in 1989 and from it evolved the Junior Civitan Leadership Conference first held at Francis Marion College in Florence, it is now held at Presbyterian College.

The third annual conference in 1993 attracted 113 youths in three weekly sessions. Local club scholarships are the principle support. Activities are similar to the original concept...except for location. Weekly workshops, planned by staff and campers, provide opportunities to develop skills in goal setting, organization, communications, problem solving and self-discovery. Thousands of young people have been positively influenced in this program. South Carolina Special Olympics support is a major District project in promoting the annual Summer Games at Ft. Jackson. Contributions from clubs and District account for approximately ten thousand dollars (\$10,000) per year. In addition, Civitans from all over the State volunteer thousands of service hours to area, state and International Special Olympics. Other District projects include promotion and support for Clergy Appreciation, Scholarships and Grants, Club Officer Training, Club Building, Membership Growth and Retention and Civitan Education.

ORGANIZATION

The South Carolina District is unique among Civitan Districts as one of only a few that have a central administrative office. In 1971, the District established an office in Columbia, South Carolina to support the activities of the District Governor, Directors and Program managers in providing services to local Civitan Clubs, and as place and means for information and records. The first secretary was Virginia Sibauste who worked under the supervision of a District Administrator. For ten years Civitan Otis Jeffcoat served in this position until his retirement in 1981. Joyce Westbrook now serves as Administrative Assistant to the Governor and Board. Joyce's association with Civitan began in 1977.