

William Perry Woods, MD
Founder of Lions Clubs International



As its founder, W. P. Woods originated, laid the basis for, and instituted the
Lions Clubs International, October 24, 1916, in Evansville, Indiana.

History of Dr. William Perry Woods¹ and His Founding of the Lions Clubs International

My grandfather Dr. William Perry Woods was a very important person to me, and despite his numerous and amazing accomplishments, I knew him simply as “Grandpa”; to my mother, Florence Woods Deems, he was “Papa;” to his wife, Anna, and his immediate Iowa relatives, he was “Perry”; and were he still with us today, you might call him “Dr. Woods, or Perry, or fellow Lion, or W. P.” In the following narrative, I hope to do justice to what an incredible man he was in so many facets of his life: in his devotion to medicine and his medical practice, in his love of his family, in his overriding concern for his community’s needs, in his commitment to community service, and thus the founding and establishment of the Lions Clubs International. Throughout Grandpa’s life, his strong Olivet Presbyterian faith was reflected in all he did.

William Perry Woods was born May 20, 1877, in Page County, Iowa, to Renwick and Nellie Tracy Woos. He was the oldest of four living siblings (a baby girl, named Eva, died in infancy). His dad and uncle (John) had been Civil War soldiers, and when the war ended, they worked on the Union Pacific Railroad and also raised horses. Each of them eventually purchased land in Page County and continued raising horses and growing crops. Grandpa’s niece, Carolyn Woods Beery, who is still living today, relates that young Nellie lived right across the road from Renwick’s farm and that she brought him fresh water daily. Renwick and Nellie subsequently married and began raising their children on the farm.

William Perry never liked farming much and instead preferred books. He became a diligent student, and education became his prime objective, much to his father chagrin—his father had toiled on the land to provide for his family and had intended to pass it on to his children, and they to their children, for generations to come. Also, early on, a very serious farming accident nearly cost William Perry his leg, due in large part to the lack of local medical care. My grandfather eventually recovered from the accident and from that time on was determined to become a doctor. Because his father refused to support him financially or otherwise, my grandfather put himself through school, including medical school.

William Perry and his siblings attended a one-room, rural school called “Lynn Point,” which was a five-mile walk from their home. He finished high school in three years and continued this pace of study by finishing his studies early at Amity College in College Springs, Iowa. William Perry earned an AB degree in 1899 at the

¹ This account was prepared by Sue Deems Tittle and was presented by Maggie Tittle Bowden and Scott Bowman Tittle April 29, 2017, at the Indiana 2017 State Convention of the Lions Clubs. Some of the original text was deleted and other text was revised in order to present it in a more narrative form for this website.

age of 22, after which he taught in a “country school” in Nebraska for a year to earn money toward financing his medical studies. He enrolled at the University of Missouri School of Medicine in 1900 and then migrated to the College of Physicians and Surgeons in Chicago.

He told people that he picked Missouri because it had just opened its medical school and was offering free tuition to anyone outside the state who wanted to pursue the study of medicine. What a fortunate find! He also described the hardships of funding his education and obtaining his medical degree.

The first Greek social fraternity was founded at the University of Missouri in 1900, and his college initiation into the mysteries of fraternalism began William Perry’s interest in other fraternal societies, which resulted in a thorough knowledge of the working basis of fraternalism and the immense good that could be accomplished. Those experiences provided the foundation for his desire to help others in need in the community and would be the root of his founding the Royal Order of Lions in 1911.

He finished fourth in his medical school class at the University of Missouri and then completed his surgical specialty training at the University of Chicago College of Physicians and Surgeons. He completed his internship at St. Mary’s Hospital in Chicago. It was then that he met Grandma Anna. He was earning additional money to support himself during his internship by waiting tables in a nearby boarding house, and she was living there while she taught at the nearby Chicago Business School.

Not only was Grandma a brilliant and lovely woman but also she was a great mate for my grandfather and a brilliant and visionary doer! My mother always said that her father was a genius *and* that her mother was a genius, too. They were married September 17, 1904, in Chicago, Illinois.

One of Grandma Anna’s brothers, Dr. Paul Rietz, had set up his own medical offices in Evansville, Indiana, and encouraged my grandfather to start his medical practice there. Because Paul was returning to school for postgraduate studies in Pennsylvania, my grandfather agreed to take over Paul’s medical practice in Evansville while he was away. Grandpa said that he had planned to hang his shingle in Portland, Oregon, but because his brother-in-law painted such a rosy picture of Evansville and its potentials, what else could he do? So off my grandparents went to Evansville in 1905. They moved into a house at 107 Howard Street where, like a large part of Evansville, their neighbors were of German descent and spoke a language that Grandpa hardly understood. But Grandma, being well versed in the German language and culture, promptly became his teacher, and being a fast learner, he picked it up very quickly. Grandpa took over his brother-in-law’s medical practice and settled in at the old Boehne Building at Eighth and Main Streets to do the work of doctoring, which he had long wanted to do! Later, he joined his brother-in-law in offices in the old American Trust and Savings Bank building at Sixth and Main Streets, the same location as the headquarters for the future Royal Order of the Lions and International Association of Lions Clubs.

In the good old days, when doctors made house calls, here is how William Perry did it. For the first few years, he made his rounds on a bicycle. He once said, “I did more work pumping the bike than I did among my patients.” After a while, he went “modern” and bought a horse and buggy. After driving a horse and buggy for

four years, he bought an automobile, only the twenty-fourth car in Evansville at that time. Ever on the frontline of things, Grandpa always adjusted and advanced with the times, and he always wanted to make things better, including in his medical practice. Mother often said, "Papa would never turn down a patient." He achieved great acclaim for his surgical skills throughout Vanderburgh County, as well as neighboring counties, and his medical talents were sought until his final days.

During this time, along with everything else my grandparents were doing, they made trips back to Clarinda, Iowa, to visit his family. While there, Grandpa was called upon to do all the necessary family operations, which over the years included removing his brothers' appendixes, removing a large tumor from his brother's wife, even doing a repair of a neighbor's hernia, all of which were done on kitchen tables with the local doctor giving the anesthetics. This seems pretty crude to us these days, but back then and in that place, people made do with whatever they had.

After Grandpa established his medical practice, it grew rapidly, particularly in women's health (OBGYN today) and general surgery. Grandpa worked in those early years delivering babies, performing surgeries, and managing his patients' needs, sometimes for a string of eighteen-hour days. It was during this time that Anna and William Perry welcomed their three daughters into their family: Evalyn Clarinda in 1911, Lorraine Virginia in 1913, and Florence Ester in 1915, each two years apart. When William Perry was at home, he had his daughters' attention as he read to them the funny papers and talked about their days' events. He was truly a loving and attentive father.

My grandfather reportedly had a special fondness for luncheon gatherings with a few fellow doctors and colleagues. Initially, the meetings occurred at luncheon spots in the downtown area and then continued years later in the Woods Drug Store on Lincoln Avenue across from Evansville College. Grandpa, along with his Rietz brothers-in-law, had originally purchased this building when it was called "The Best Drug Company." Grandpa later said that he "liked the atmosphere there and knew nearly all the old-timers who stopped in from time to time." It was in those early sessions downtown with his colleagues and buddies and later at the Woods Drug Store that they discussed all the events of the day, including the city's growth and the needs that came with that growth, including those of their patients.

Grandpa's personal experiences with the mysteries and bonds of fraternal orders were primed for application at this time. His individual spirit toward doing good for others manifested itself to the extent that he decided to build a new order based on fundamental principles more nearly perfect than those of any existing group. Thus in 1911, he founded the Royal Order of Lions, then destined to become the grandest of all fraternal orders.

Based on a significant review of available research from historians on the Lions Club and primary sources, including newspaper articles of the time, the following is a brief history of William Perry's involvement with the legal and organizational beginnings of the Lions Club. On August 18, 1911, William Perry organized the Royal Order of Lions. The creed of the order was Friendship, Honesty, Confidence, and Faith. William Perry

envisioned the spirit of brotherhood among the membership, and any member who might be experiencing a personal hardship of any kind could receive assistance, financial or otherwise, from his fellow members. To promote the new order, William Perry hired several organizers, and many dens were subsequently formed.

Mr. Elbert A. Hicks was an organizer in Ohio. Being a Texan and wanting to get back home, he was given permission to work the states of Oklahoma and Texas. Hicks began his swing through the Southwest in 1915. He formed a den in El Paso, Texas, in June, 1915. His next stop was San Antonio where he guided the application process and presented the Royal Order of Lions Charter No. 0005 to the San Antonio Den at a banquet held on the night of October 8, 1915, with fifty-three charter members in attendance. Although the Royal Order of Lions was a fraternal and benevolent society, it was unique in that it was rather difficult to become a member. Only one member from a given profession was permitted to join, and who this should be was left for the members to decide. Mr. Hicks went on to Galveston, Texas, where he formed a den in November 1915.

When Hicks discovered the Oklahoma/Texas region to be such fertile ground for development, William Perry reassigned an organizer by the name of G. M. Cunningham to this area to assist Hicks. Together, they organized eight Royal Order of Lions dens during the first nine months of 1916: one in Arkansas, two in Oklahoma, and five in Texas. During the last three months of 1916 and the first nine months of 1917, they formed a total of fourteen dens. Hicks's method of organizing was very successful, but it created a major problem for William Perry. Unbeknownst to the officials at the Evansville Supreme Den back in Indiana, Hicks was going to the main hotel in cities and telling the hotel managers that he was going to organize a businessmen's club that would meet regularly for lunch at their hotels. Hicks would then ask the managers for the names of some of their friends and prominent citizens whom they would like to see as members of the club. It was only after receiving their charter and other information and books about the Royal Order of Lions that some of the new clubs' members realized they had joined a fraternal organization, and not a luncheon club. The Supreme Den began receiving letters stating things like, "We have been misinformed. We were told that we were joining a civil luncheon club like the Rotary, or like the Kiwanis, but it seems that we have been taken into a fraternal organization."

To settle the dissatisfactions among the many new dens formed by Hicks, William Perry reasoned that if those dens in the Southwest wanted to be a "luncheon" club, the best thing to do would be to organize one cohesive effort, because it was obvious the two organizations could not operate very well under the same charter. He was quoted as saying, "If that is what they want, then we will give it to them."

To carry out his plan, William Perry formed a new corporation, which he registered under the name "The International Association of Lions Clubs." The Articles of Incorporation were filed October 25, 1916, with the office of the Indiana Secretary of State. While he established the new name, and thus organization, to separate the Royal Order of Lions' fraternal lodges from the Royal Order of Lions' "luncheon" clubs, William Perry was faced with the mammoth job of reorganizing each and every club. His medical practice in Indiana had grown

substantially, and he had little time to devote to the growing needs of all the clubs that resulted from the phenomenal growth taking place in Texas. Unfortunately, the lack of support from the Supreme Den caused many of the old dens to fold. Of the clubs organized by Hicks in 1915, only the one in San Antonio continued with regular weekly meetings, but even it subsequently made a decision on November 3, 1916, to change its name. The year 1917 was a difficult one for William Perry, as he tried to give of his time to properly support the Royal Order of Lions organization that had now splintered into two groups. Hicks and Cunningham continued to organize clubs using the "luncheon" format, but under the new name.

By midyear 1917, William Perry set about to fulfill his promise to reconstruct all the Hicks/Cunningham "luncheon" clubs. Because most of the clubs were located in Texas, a reorganizational meeting was scheduled to take place in Dallas, Texas. The selected site and date were the Adolphus Hotel on the eighth, ninth, and tenth of October 1917. William Perry drafted a letter and mailed it to a total of thirty-three clubs, requesting that each one send a delegate to the meeting. Most of the invited clubs were from the Texas-Oklahoma-Arkansas-Louisiana area, but some were from as far away as Colorado, Tennessee, Missouri, and Illinois. About ten days before the Lions Club delegates were set to convene in Dallas, a man by the name of Melvin Jones went to Evansville and called on William Perry at the Lions' headquarters. Mr. Jones introduced himself as being the secretary of the Business Circle of Chicago. He related his longtime effort to affiliate his club with some national organization.

Mr. Jones said that he had heard about the Lions and had come to Evansville to meet William Perry and learn more about his organization. The two men had a lengthy discussion that day, and Melvin stayed overnight to continue the conference the following day. William Perry had an organization in place that consisted of businessmen who were dedicated to helping fellow members if and when assistance was needed. Mr. Jones reported that his Business Circle had thirty-five members, and William Perry revealed that several days ago he had mailed invitations to thirty-three clubs, asking them to send a delegate to the upcoming organizational convention set to begin October 8. Furthermore, William Perry informed Mr. Jones that the purpose of the Dallas meeting was to restructure the clubs in the Southwest under charters that would be issued by the newly formed International Association of Lions Clubs in Indiana.

The two-day meeting in Evansville was an eye-opener for Mr. Jones. The opportunity to become associated with a large organization was about to take place in a few days in Dallas, and Mr. Jones wanted to be there. William Perry invited Jones to attend the meeting, but explained that only delegates from the Lions Clubs would be permitted to vote. As secretary for the Business Circle, Mr. Jones immediately began the process that would make his club a chartered Lions Club. As the day approached to board the train for the trip to Dallas, Mr. Jones returned to Evansville and met up with William Perry, and they traveled to the meeting together. Before the trip ended, Mr. Jones approached William Perry asking if he might run for corporate secretary. William Perry assured him the chances would be good "if you will get out and mix with the boys and be a good fellow, and try to boost your own stock. I'll get behind you, and I'll boost you also."

The details of the Dallas meeting were well documented at the time by newspaper reports, which gave an account of the first annual convention and stated that William Perry “has been at the head of the movement to form an international organization of Lions Clubs.” Over the span of the three-day meeting, the delegates hammered out a solid foundation for the newly formed association. The delegates argued, debated, and voted up and voted down various proposals, but the most rigorous debate was over the name to be used. After considering such names as Vortex, Concordia, Business & Professional Men’s Association, and others, the name finally chosen was The International Association of Lions Clubs, the name that William Perry had copyrighted twelve months earlier.

The convention ended with all clubs in harmony. William Perry was elected president, with the organization’s headquarters designated to be in the home city of the president, Evansville, and the association’s records were to be maintained by the newly elected secretary, Mr. Jones, in his home city of Chicago. To comply with the agreements reached in Dallas, all pertinent records were transferred from Evansville to Chicago.

It should be reiterated that diversity existed among the participating clubs, but the strength of those controlled by William Perry seemed to provide the stability and pattern of operation so essential to the success of the newly formed association. Like the one in San Antonio, the clubs formed in 1915 and 1916 had been chartered as Royal Order of Lions, whereas the later ones bore the new name. Both groups were commonly known as “The Woods Group,” which ultimately included all the “luncheon” clubs. The Dallas convention finalized the conflict between the fraternal clubs and the luncheon clubs when all the “luncheon” clubs were granted charter membership in the newly founded International Association of Lions Clubs.

The ending of the Dallas convention signaled a new beginning for The International Association of Lions Clubs. William Perry, serving as the first president of The International Association of Lions Clubs spent the remaining months of 1917 and the early months of 1918 keeping the existing clubs active, while adding new ones and making plans for the second annual convention in St. Louis in August 1918. At that St. Louis meeting, Dr. L. H. Lewis of Dallas, Texas, was elected president. William Perry provided the following statement as he turned the reigns over to his successor, and I quote:

Just a word or two before turning the convention over to my successor. In doing this, I do it with a feeling that there is great work before the association for the coming year, and I also feel that the nominating committee has made an excellent choice in all of the officers. I don’t see how they could really have done better, and I believe that you have a set of officers that will work for the upbuilding and the best interests of the organization. Let me urge upon each and every one of you delegates to go home to your club and give in every way that you can, your best and utmost and active support to the officers elected, for without the support of each and every club, they cannot succeed in the manner in which they ought; but if each and every

club will work conscientiously and faithfully for the upbuilding of the organization and will try to assist the officers elected to perform and discharge their duties, this organization will grow far more than you have any idea. Indeed, let us hope that when we meet a year from now, we will have twice the number of clubs and twice the number of delegates. I desire to thank you for the interest you have shown in the organization during the past year and for all the courtesies that you have shown me.

In those early years, William Perry faced many swirling challenges in the attempt to move the ship in the right direction, including the need to unify the luncheon clubs and the secret fraternal clubs, the impending World War that strained the nation, and his own family and professional obligations. The emerging organization that he began and that was successfully built upon by subsequent presidents and many others set the stage for the Lions to face amazing opportunities and challenges, such as the 1919 influenza, the KKK's attempt to take over the organization in the 1920s—the KKK was experiencing a resurgence and sought to infiltrate the Royal Order of Lions, ultimately helping to lead to its demise—Lions member Admiral Bryd flying the Lions' flag over the North Pole, Lions members accepting the challenge of Helen Keller to assist those with sight impairment at the 1925 convention, and the expansive membership growth into other countries, such as China and Mexico. The personal strength, integrity, and leadership needed to thread all the essential needles had to have been truly remarkable.

When my mother and her two-year-old sister, Lorraine, were ready for college in 1929 and 1932, it was the fashion in those days to attend junior colleges. They both chose Gulf Park in Biloxi, Mississippi. My mother, Florence, the youngest of the Woods' daughters, graduated from Evansville Bosse High School at age 16 and went to Gulf Park in 1932. Lorraine was already there. The oldest sister, Evalyn, had attended Stevens Junior College and was working in New York at the time. My grandparents, in their mid-fifties at the time, purchased land in Mississippi to be closer to their daughters' school. This ranch life consisted of raising horses and growing crops. The purchase of this large tract of land occurred around the time of the Great Depression, which meant that acreage could be bought at fifty cents for every dollar it was worth. The Woods family purchased a great deal of land then. Later, after my mother graduated from Gulf Park, severe drought conditions in Mississippi devastated the area, destroying all the crops and cattle. The Woods family eventually sold the land and returned to Evansville.

My parents, Florence and Myers, married in 1939 and later established themselves in Evansville in 1952, where Daddy set up his Eye, Ear, Nose, and Throat medical practice on Riverside Drive. Grandpa and Grandma were both 75. I was 9. Yes, William Perry was still practicing medicine, and as I noted earlier, he could not turn down caring for his longtime patients. In those last years, Grandpa did return somewhat to his farm life when he built a small farm plot in the back of their home on "outer" Lincoln Avenue in Evansville. I remember being with him while he tended to his vegetables, as well as his rabbits, some of them in cages stacked three high and

many others in rows. This was also a time when Grandpa bought and managed rental property on North Main Street, which I think my mother, Aunt Evalyn, and I spent more time doing! He still found time to hang out at Woods Drug Store, catching up on all the news of the day and keeping abreast of the goings on.

During a banquet held in Indianapolis October 7, 1954, my grandfather was honored by the Indiana State Medical Society for having administered to the sick and injured for fifty years. Asked what he thought was the biggest advance in medicine, he replied, “The advances have been terrific. They are too numerous to mention, but I believe the development of the new antibiotics along with new techniques in surgery and anesthesia are among the greatest.” Grandpa also dedicated himself to the continuing care of my grandmother who suffered from a disabling illness until her death in 1969 at the age 91. They shared the same room at the nursing home and celebrated their sixty-first wedding anniversary September 17, 1965.

William Perry Woods was hospitalized several times in his final years but did not completely give up his medical practice until age 86. I remember being with Grandpa on the last night of his life in Deaconess Hospital in Evansville when he told me he was dying. He passed away at the age of 88 on January 28, 1966.

This is the story of a great yet ordinary man, who in so many areas of his life exhibited vision, determination, leadership, and love. Grandpa always spoke of and acted on the drive for good, and he did so compassionately, softly, directly, and clearly. I hope I have given you a sense of this man you would call “fellow Lion, or W. P., or Dr. Woods, or brother” and his life of entrepreneurial grandeur.

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