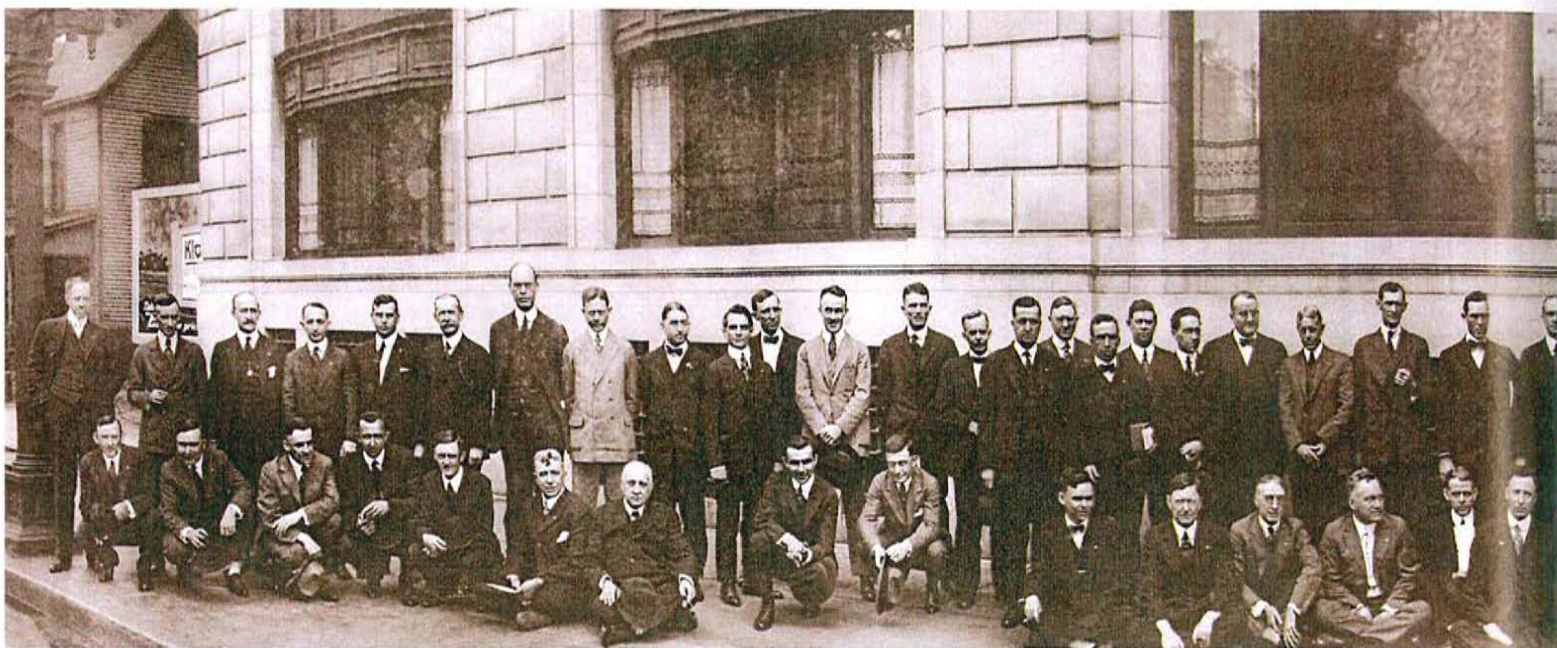


THE 1919 INTERNATIONAL KIWANIS CLUB CONVENTION

A MISSION TO SERVE

In Alabama's Magic City, the Kiwanis Club transformed its ideal of service from illusion to reality.

By JAMES L. NOLES JR.



THEY BEGAN ARRIVING BY TRAIN AT BIRMINGHAM, Alabama's Terminal Station on Monday, May 19, 1919, hailing from hometowns across the United States—and, in a few cases, even from Canada.

Some came in groups of two or three, likely visiting the so-called Magic City for the first time. Other delegations were larger; the group from Dayton, Ohio, hoped to set a record when twenty alighted from its passenger train. Their numbers were soon eclipsed by the boisterous Chattanooga club, resplendent in matching “white duck trousers, white shoes, blue serge coats, straw hats, and blue bands.”

By the time they had all arrived, there were some 1,200 of them in Birmingham—all men (some accompanied by their wives), all white, and all engaged in some form of business or profession. They were earnest, clean-cut, and ready for the

fourth annual convention of their civic associations that they called, collectively, Kiwanis Clubs.

In Birmingham the unfolding Kiwanis Club International Convention would arguably be the largest such convention that the city, in its nearly fifty-year history, had witnessed to that day. But as much of an impact that the arrival of 1,200 visitors might have had on Birmingham that spring week, the effect of the Birmingham convention on their growing international organization would be even more dramatic.

THE DELEGATION OF KIWANIS CLUB MEMBERS FROM Detroit, Michigan, brought to Birmingham the honor of claiming that it was the first Kiwanis Club in the nation. Kiwanis is the brainchild of Allen S. Browne, a “personable, persuasive supersalesman” according to author Larry

Hapgood. Browne made his living organizing and recruiting for such associations as the Loyal Order of Moose. Under his guidance, the first club that would eventually be called a Kiwanis Club formed in Detroit in 1915 and christened itself the “Supreme Lodge Benevolent Order Brothers.”

Soon, however, the initials of the Benevolent Order Brothers—BOB—were causing consternation among its members. “Who wants to be a ‘Bob’?” one member grouched. Therefore, the club ultimately picked the name “Kiwanis”—a term of uncertain origin or meaning even to this day. It was derived from the phrase “*Nunc Kee-wanis*,” which in the language of Michigan’s Ojibwe Nation supposedly meant “we have a good time,” “we make a noise,” or simply “we trade.”

four months later, on May 19, 1917, it received its charter from the national organization.

William C. Bonham, who hailed from Wilcox County, Alabama, was the Kiwanis Club of Birmingham’s first president; he had come to the city to work in the wholesale grocery and cigar business. A list of his fellow charter members reveals names that resonate in Birmingham’s business history even today—Bromberg, Loveman, Warren, and others. The requirements for membership in the Birmingham club were relatively simple and straightforward: “Any white adult male of good moral character, and who is an American citizen, who is engaged as a proprietor, partner, corporate officer, agent or manager in full charge in any legitimate pro-



This portrait of the Birmingham Kiwanis Club, taken the year after its formation, shows an organization that had already tripled in size. (Birmingham, Ala., Public Library Archives)

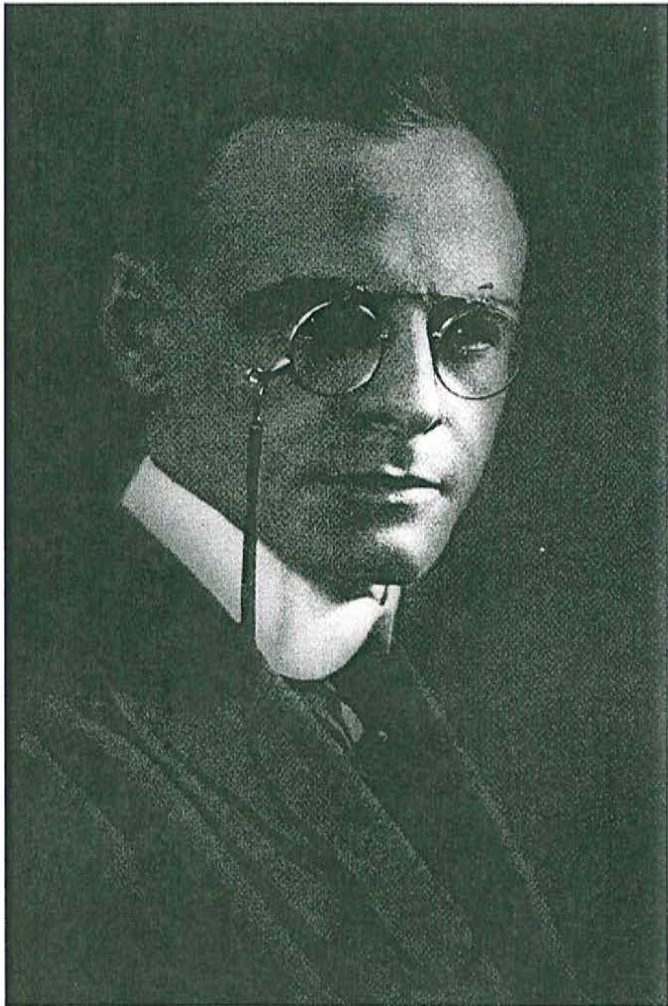
The phrase “we trade” appealed to Browne, because, unlike past clubs that he had organized, he envisioned this one not relying on the appeal of offering mutual sickness and accident insurance benefits to its members but rather providing the opportunity for businessmen to come together to socialize and network—something one would hope could lead to business and trade between the members. Browne’s idea caught on quickly, and before long, new clubs were springing up around the country in Pittsburgh, New York City, Chicago, and Dallas. On January 14, 1917, a newly organized Birmingham club held its first meeting at the Hillman Hotel;

professional or business undertaking in the City of Birmingham shall be eligible for membership unless engaged in an occupation already represented by a member.”

Eufaula native James Mercer Barnett, the proprietor of the Barnett Lumber Company, soon succeeded Bonham as the club’s president, and, as the months passed, the Birmingham club thrived. A panoramic photo from 1918 depicts some seventy-five members of the club posing on a city street, and, as minutes from the club’s records indicate, they were an industrious lot. By 1919 the club numbered two hundred.

In those early days, luncheons at the Southern Club—where an alarm clock sat on the head table, ready to ring at the end of the meeting to foil any long-winded speakers or voluble clubmen—consisted of organized singing and guest speakers or performances. Reflecting the times at hand, the

When the United States entered World War I, the club's membership pledged to individually buy Liberty Bonds in support of the city's commitment to raise \$100,000 for the war effort.



ABOVE: *Allen Browne conceived the concept of Kiwanis in 1914. (IUIPLUI University Library Special Collections and Archives) RIGHT: William Bonham, who worked in the wholesale grocery and cigar business, was the Kiwanis Club of Birmingham's first president. (Kiwanis Club of Birmingham)*

training center for the Birmingham Boys' Club. When the United States entered World War I, the club's membership pledged to individually buy Liberty Bonds in support of the city's commitment to raise \$100,000 for the war effort.

The political and economic issues of the day also captured the interest and, at times, angst of the Kiwanians. At one meeting, they resolved to cooperate in investigating the ongoing exodus of African American coal miners from the Birmingham district. At another they voted their opposition to continuing restrictions on a forty-hour workweek during the ongoing world war and called for outlawing strikes for the duration of hostilities. The club's willingness—literally from its inception—to be more than simply a business networking exercise was shared by Kiwanis clubs across the country and



club's first speakers were delegates from the US Good Roads Association. Other guests in those early days included Elinor Fell, an organizer of French orphanages during the ongoing war in Europe, and California's Columbia Park Boys' Club Chorus. Equally telling were the various charitable and civic causes the club supported. Its first civic contribution was a raffle that raised funds for Birmingham's Anti-Tuberculosis Camp; later, its first major fundraiser raised \$37,000 to build a vocational



Mercer Barnett served as the Kiwanis Club of Birmingham's second president. At the convention, Barnett played an important role in the negotiations with Allen Browne and arranged the cash payment. In 1920 he became president of Kiwanis International. (Birmingham, Ala., Public Library Archives)

Canada. This philanthropic focus stoked a growing tension between the clubs and “super salesman” Allen Browne—and proved to be tinder for the organizational fires destined to ignite in Birmingham in the spring of 1919.

THE BIRMINGHAM CLUB'S NASCENT SUCCESS WAS SUCH that, when the clubs voted in Providence, Rhode Island, on the site for its next convention, they chose Birmingham.

The three-day convention began there on Tuesday, May 20, 1919, at the city's Tutwiler Hotel—and at the top of most delegates' minds was the question of what to do with Allen Browne.

In the four years since 1914, Browne had secured almost exponential growth. By the time of the Birmingham convention, there were some 120 clubs in total. But Browne's skill at recruiting new clubs for Kiwanis was not matched by his organizational acumen, which was a point of increasing frustration for the various clubs. Equally troubling was the apparent disconnect between Browne's mercantile impulses and the clubs' desires to be more than simply an early-nineteenth-century version of today's career social networking site LinkedIn. Finally, adding injury to insult, under Browne's contract with Kiwanis International, he claimed a bounty of up to \$15 for each new member recruited. By 1919 the various clubs had enough. The problem those clubs faced in Birmingham, however, was that Browne, when faced with similar complaints and insurrections in the past, displayed no inclination to go quietly. If the clubs wanted to gain freedom from Browne and claim the name Kiwanis for themselves, they would have to pay dearly for it. And as the annual conven-

tion approached, it became clear that the matter would come to a head in Birmingham.

Despite the whiff of rebellion in the air, the early hours of the Birmingham convention were uneventful. One can imagine the smoke of ten-cent cigars hanging heavy in the air of the lobby of the Tutwiler Hotel as the convention-goers discussed the news headlines of the day—the convening of the Republican-dominated 66th Congress in Washington, DC; the bold bid by a flight of the Navy's three Curtiss NC flying boats to complete the first transatlantic flight; and the return of American troops from overseas.

Reporting on the convention to his hometown newspaper, Alva Cummins, a delegate from Lansing, Michigan, recalled among his fellow delegates “an eagerness for the

“Listen, Browne,” Hammerschmidt said, “I am going to be perfectly blunt and tell you that if we can’t work out a satisfactory agreement with you, Kiwanis will take steps to disband and create a new club, under a new name.”

prompt ratification of the treaty of peace with Germany and the assumption by the United States of all the obligations arising out of the League of Nations.” Indeed, for the week of the convention, hospitality seemed to be the byword in Birmingham. A downtown church hosted a musical performance by a chorus comprised of singers from the city’s African American churches. Birmingham’s Rotary Club took the visitors out into the country for a barbecue lunch that served an estimated 1,500 people. More formally, the Civitan Club hosted a grand ball at the Country Club of Birmingham, “where the beauties of Birmingham turned out en masse to delight the vision and entertain this big body of men from all over America.” Understandably, Cummins would return to Michigan with high praise for his time in Alabama. “I want to bear testimony that the boasted hospitality of the South is not a boast at all, but a very tangible reality,” he would later declare. “Birmingham is a big, busy city, but not only the Birmingham Kiwanis Club but the Rotary Club, the Civitan Club, and all the other organizations and the people of Birmingham in general seemed to make it their main business for the week to see that we had a great time.” Another delegate from Louisville, Kentucky, reflected afterwards, “We really didn’t have the heart to go after the convention for 1920. Birmingham set such a hot pace for hospitality and good time that the city that gets the convention next year is going to suffer by comparison.”

BEHIND THE SCENES IN BIRMINGHAM, A GREATER DRAMA played out. The Kiwanis International president, Perry Patterson, had been detained in Springfield, Illinois, arguing a case before the Illinois Supreme Court. In his absence, the organization’s vice president, Al Dodge, led a negotiating committee that included, among others, Birmingham’s Mercer Barnett. For the first day of the convention, and into the second, the committee strived in vain to corner the elusive Browne, who clearly knew that pressure was forthcoming to sell out his interest in Kiwanis.

But Browne could not avoid the Kiwanians for the whole convention, even as he let it be known that he was considering seeking a judge to obtain an injunction should Kiwanis try to usurp his power under the name he controlled. For



The 1919 International Kiwanis Club convention was held in the Tutwiler Hotel at the corner of 5th Avenue North and 20th Street in downtown Birmingham. The hotel was named for Maj. Edward M. Tutwiler, one of the investors, and opened on June 15, 1914. It was demolished in 1974. (Birmingham Wiki)

their part, the Kiwanians rejected his bluff and continued to press for a meeting. Sensing that his options were diminishing, Browne offered to surrender his contract and his right to the name “Kiwanis” for \$20,000. At that point, negotiations commenced in earnest, stretching into the evening of the convention’s first day.

For a time, stalemate reigned—until Louis Hammerschmidt, an attorney from South Bend, Indiana, “put his cards



One of the goals of severing ties with Allen Browne was to steer the organization from trade to service. In 1938, as in years past and subsequently, the Birmingham Kiwanis Club hosted the Boys' Club for a Christmas party at the Tutwiler Hotel. (Birmingham, Ala., Public Library Archives)

on the table," in the words of his contemporaries. "Listen, Browne," Hammerschmidt said, "I am going to be perfectly blunt and tell you that if we can't work out a satisfactory agreement with you, Kiwanis will take steps to disband and create a new club, under a new name. That's how we stand, so take it or leave it." The look on Browne's face upon receiving that ultimatum signaled that he had not considered the possibility of Hammerschmidt's threat before. But he took it seriously, and the negotiations resumed until, at 2:00 a.m. on Wednesday, May 21, an agreement was revealed. For \$17,500, Browne would sell out his interest in the organization—but he wanted the payoff in cash, and he wanted it by noon that same day.

In response the negotiating committee briefed the organization's board at a special early-morning meeting and

explained the proposed deal to them. As they did, Hammerschmidt put pen to paper to draft the requisite legal documents; meanwhile, Barnett worked to make the necessary banking arrangements. At 10:00 a.m., the convention met and, in short order, heard a resolution to "ratify and confirm the actions of its Board of Trustees in settlement and arrangement with Allen S. Browne, and the contract covering the settlement in its form as before this meeting approved." With respect to such a contract, Hammerschmidt then explained that, when Browne received the \$17,500, he would give the organization "the use of the word Kiwanis or any idea connected therewith" and "absolutely and forever sever all relations that have at any time existed between the parties hereto as fully and completely as though the same had never at any time been actually or impliedly entered into." In response the convention's delegates voted to ratify their board's decision without a single dissenting vote. Then a flurry of frenzied check-writing began as the delegates worked to meet Browne's payment demand. In the space of a half-hour, enough checks had been collected to meet

With a satchel of cash in hand, young Brady returned to the Tutwiler Hotel and passed off his precious cargo to his boss. With a minimum of formality, the Kiwanians presented the cash to Browne.

the obligation and stuffed into a variety of passed hats.

But Browne had demanded cash, so now the checks had to be cashed. Barnett personally endorsed each check and summoned his young assistant, Joseph H. Brady. Upon Brady's arrival, Barnett directed him to cash the checks at the Birmingham Trust & Savings Company. Brady trotted the four blocks to the bank, where he was met by Col. Thomas O. Smith. Smith, a veteran of the Spanish-American War and one of the city's banking community's leading men, ran the bank. He also happened to be a fellow Kiwanian. In short order, the collection of checks was converted to cash.

With a satchel of cash in hand, young Brady returned to the Tutwiler Hotel and passed off his precious cargo to his boss. With a minimum of formality, the Kiwanians presented the cash to Browne, who wasted no time in catching a Louisville & Nashville train to parts unknown. In his wake, he left the Kiwanis name finally and forever in the hands of the Kiwanians.



On May 21, 1979, Birmingham mayor David Vann proclaimed the day Kiwanis International Independence Day in recognition of the accomplishments of the organization at the Kiwanis International convention in Birmingham sixty years earlier. (Kiwanis Club of Birmingham)

THE BIRMINGHAM CONVENTION DREW TO A CLOSE ON Friday, May 23, 1919. Despite the campaigning of sombrero-dispensing Texans, it was decided that Portland, Oregon, rather than El Paso, Texas, would be the site of the next convention. In other electoral action, the delegates picked Canadian Henry J. Elliott as president of Kiwanis International and Birmingham's Barnett as first vice president. Barnett would become the international organization's president in 1920. It was said that "his friendly personality, earnestness, and belief in and respect for Kiwanis helped him to lead firmly and effectively."

Having bought their freedom from Browne's control, the Kiwanians cast about for a new motto. Within a year after the Birmingham convention, Roe Fulkerson, the first editor of *Kiwanis* magazine, proposed the slogan "We Build." He explained that choice at a later convention. "I have written for

you probably 100,000 words," Fulkerson said, "every one of which has been forgotten save two: We Build. I am prouder of them than any other accomplishment in my life. I believe that those two words perhaps justify my Kiwanis activities." Barnett would later share his own thoughts on the topic. "Kiwanis, organized on a basis of trade, has found for itself a basis of service," he declared.

The shift in the Kiwanians' focus would not slow down the international organization's growth. At the time of the Kiwanis Convention in Birmingham, there were some 13,000 Kiwanians. That number would double in two years; within a decade, there would be over 100,000. Today, Kiwanis clubs worldwide count over 600,000 members. Each year, those clubs undertake more than 150,000 service projects, invest over 6 million hours in community service, and raise approximately \$100 million for families, communities, and endeavors.

Internationally, it partners with UNICEF in its Eliminate Project aimed at eradicating maternal and neonatal tetanus and also continues to pursue worldwide eradication of iodine deficiency disorders, which are considered to be the leading preventable cause of mental and developmental disabilities across the globe.

AS THE YEARS PASSED IN BIRMINGHAM, THE KIWANIS Club of Birmingham embraced the motto “We Build” with a similar passion—even as it grew to boast over five hundred members and claim the title of the world’s largest Kiwanis Club. Along the way, the club left a number of marks, both literally and figuratively, on its home city’s philanthropic landscape.

Of its many such endeavors, perhaps the most enduring—or at least most visible—was the club’s involvement with Vulcan, Birmingham’s most iconic symbol. The cast-iron statue, forged for the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis, had returned home from the fair to be relegated, as an ignoble afterthought, to the Alabama State Fairgrounds in Birmingham.

In 1935 Kiwanians Barnett and Thomas Joy convinced their club to find a more prestigious abode for Vulcan. Working in concert with the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration (WPA), which was led in Alabama by fellow Kiwanian Thad Holt, they acquired the donation of some five acres atop Red Mountain from the Tennessee Coal & Iron Company. They also obtained a commitment from the WPA for the \$50,000 necessary to develop a park on those acres as well as funds to disassemble, move, and reassemble Vulcan atop a 123-foot-tall pedestal of native Alabama sandstone on the donated acreage. By May 9, 1939, the move and reconstruction was complete, and the Kiwanis Club of Birmingham, the city, and Jefferson County celebrated Vulcan’s successful relocation to his new home. The event was, in many ways, symbolic of the Kiwanis’s successful transition from a focus of “We Trade” to “We Build.”

During the Great Depression, the Birmingham Kiwanians played a key role in the placement of Vulcan on a pedestal atop Red Mountain. (Library of Congress)

Other undertakings of Birmingham’s Kiwanians, while perhaps less visible, were equally impactful in the years that followed. For years, the club hosted a much-anticipated Christmas party for the local Boys’ Club at the Tutwiler Hotel, sponsored a bed at Birmingham’s Crippled Children’s Clinic for polio victims, and funded a number of initiatives supporting Army and Navy units during World War II. It even raised tens of thousands of dollars for a drug treatment facility by sponsoring a series of AFL-NFL professional football exhibition games at Legion Field. In more recent years, the club’s fundraising helped finance not only a massive renovation of Vulcan but also of the Birmingham Zoo and the construction of Birmingham’s McWane Science Center. As Kiwanis International’s motto changed in 2005 from “We Build” to “Serving the Children of the World,” Birmingham’s Kiwanians continued donating tens of thousands of dollars to local children’s charities and scholarships.

Today the Kiwanis Club of Birmingham, an organization no longer restricted to “white adult males,” houses the Birmingham Business Hall of Fame and hosts the Mayor of Birmingham’s annual State of the City Address. In fact, Birmingham’s mayor, Randall Woodfin, is a member of the club. And when the club celebrated its centennial in 2017, it chose to do so by spearheading the design, funding, and construction of the Kiwanis Centennial Park on the northern slopes of Red Mountain below Vulcan. Along with the park, the Kiwanis Club also funded the two-mile Vulcan Trail along the mountain and a state-of-the-art illumination package for Vulcan itself. In total, the centennial project cost approximately \$4.5 million.

Such achievements and generosity are not, of course, limited to the Birmingham Kiwanians. Scores of other Kiwanis Clubs, which can now be found in eighty nations across the globe, play similar critical roles in their communities. And while it would be too much to credit such accomplishments solely to 1919’s convention in Birmingham, it is certainly fair to respect the role that Mercer Barnett and his fellow Birmingham Kiwanians played when they helped set their fellow clubs on a new course to a brighter, bolder future. ah

