

# Man for the Individual

Rotary's new President is a seasoned businessman and world traveler. Warm yet disciplined, he stresses the strength of the individual Rotarian.

by Edward B. Tait

**W**ILLIAM R. ROBBINS ("R" for Rice), a member of the Rotary Club of Fort Lauderdale Florida, and an honorary member of the Rotary Club of Miami, Florida, takes office as the 64th President of Rotary International on July 1.

A successful businessman, he brings to the position leadership qualities derived from the discipline demanded of the head of an enterprise and from a quarter-century of dedicated Rotary service. Not that he is a disciplinarian who seeks to dominate those around him. On the contrary, he is friendly, easy to talk with, and easy to understand—the kind of man you readily call "Bill."

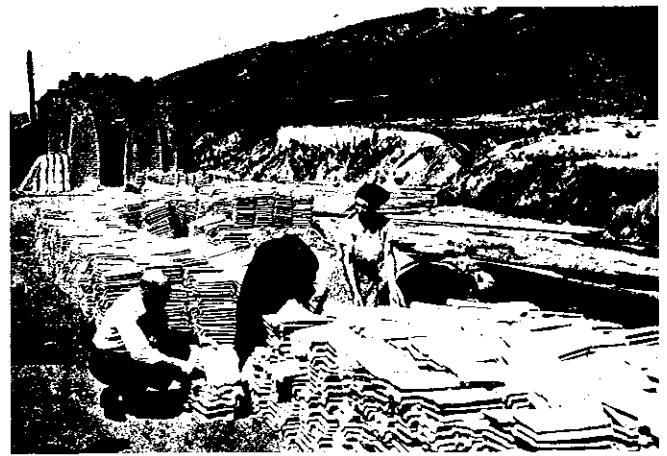
Soon after he became a Rotarian, Bill grasped that the strength of Rotary is based on the individual member. His Rotary work has confirmed this point of view. He believes that when a member is given identity and knows he is accepted as a responsible individual, not as a part of a mass of men, he becomes aware of the true purpose of Rotary. Bill clearly expressed his feeling of individual dedication at the 1973 R.I. Convention in Lausanne, when he said, "Rotary's strength can be the greatest ever known if each of us uses the strength in his hands and, perhaps most of all, uses the strength of his heart." This sense of individual responsibility will form the basis of his theme (see page 16) for the program of Rotary International in 1974-75.

Bill's forebears were pioneers of the type so closely associated with the growth and development of the United States. His father's family were farmers in western Pennsylvania. The father, left motherless as an infant, was raised by his grandparents. Successive crop failures brought hard times, and while still in his teens, the boy struck out for himself. He became a traveling salesman, and while traveling through Texas met the young schoolteacher he later married and who would

PHOTO BY BENNETT YELL



Edward B. Tait, a senior partner of his own accounting firm, is a long-time friend and Rotary associate of Bill Robbins. A member of the Rotary Club of Miami Shores, Florida, he was governor of District 699 in 1957-58. For many years Ed has been district historian.



Bill the world traveler inspects tiles made by women workers during a family visit to Russia in 1956.



Above: Bill the staunch Rotarian, flanked by R.I. directors Sarsfield, Sarjeant, Parrish, Lambeth.

Below: Bill the devoted husband, with wife, Mary Frances, whose pioneer heritage matches his own.



BENNETT YELL

Bill Robbins the farmer, in his natural element, a sun-kissed corner of his citrus and cattle ranch near Fort Lauderdale.

become Bill's mother. Her family, also farmers, had moved to the Fort Worth area in 1872 from Cobb County, Kentucky, making the trip in true pioneer style in a covered ox wagon, a trek of 62 days.

Bill's mother attended a one-room school, which her father helped build in a corner of the family farm, and returned to the school to teach after attending North State Normal School in Denton, Texas. She taught there for 10 years on a starting salary of \$25 a month—later increased to \$50. She was a devoted student of Texas history and even now, at age 95, can recite almost verbatim Pennybacker's 1888-vintage *A New History of Texas*.

But the pioneer spirit stirred again and Bill's parents migrated to Eaton, Colorado. There fate took a hand. During the deepest snows of their first winter, they came across a copy of a Miami, Florida, newspaper. Stories of great growth—in a warm climate—motivated them to move to Miami. Taking a ship from Galveston, Texas, to Key West, they completed their trip in a small fishing boat that took them to the end of the railroad south of Miami in the Florida keys. Miami in 1910 was little more than a fishing village with a population of about 5,500. The little house in which they settled had no electricity, so they used kerosene lamps for lighting. Bill has one of those lamps in his office—a valued souvenir.

During his growing-up days, Bill did the things boys in a small town do—a mixture of Sunday school, scouting, fishing, selling newspapers, and playing saxophone in the boys band. He worked after school and on Saturdays in a roofing and sheet metal business his father had established in 1917, serving his apprenticeship in the metal department. He majored in public speaking, and was president of the debating team.

He enrolled at his state university but left at the depth of the great depression of the early 1930s. Back home, with the building industry paralyzed, he took a job in an ice cream factory, putting in 80 hours a week—for 20 cents an hour and all the ice cream he could eat! He later worked as an adjuster for a credit bureau. During this period he studied law at night and was about ready to pursue a career in law when his father's health failed. By 1935 the building industry was beginning to recover so he reorganized and expanded his father's business and operated the company for a number of years, bringing it to a high level of success. For quite some time the Robbins company was a leader in manufacturing and installing water heaters operated by solar energy. Water could be heated efficiently and economically for homes and commercial buildings. This is believed to be one of the few significant commercial applications of solar energy. Today solar heating is again attracting attention [see *Solar Energy: A New Day Dawns*, THE ROTARIAN, September, 1973].

In 1967 Bill sold the business to his son Bill Jr., and since then has devoted his time to citrus and cattle farming and the construction and operation of commer-

cial properties. He first became attracted to citrus farming in 1937 when his former college roommate, and later brother-in-law and fellow Rotarian, the late Charles F. Chaplin, planted a 10-acre orange grove near Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and urged Bill to do the same. Today the two interests total some 1,800 acres.

In 1935 Bill married Mary Frances Whiteside. Born in Apalachicola, Florida, Mary Frances has lived most of her life in the Miami area. They have two children—Bill Jr. and Mary Anne. Bill Jr. owns and operates his father's former firm, now W. R. Robbins and Son, and is a member of the Rotary Club of Miami. He is married to the former Betsy Liddle. They have two sons and a daughter. Mary Anne is married to Richard Romfh, a physician. They live in Tucson, Arizona, with their three young daughters. Both Bill and Mary Anne have long shown an interest in Rotary, and as a part of her travels Mary Anne has attended several International Assemblies and Conventions.

**B**ILL ROBBINS became a member of the Rotary Club of Miami in 1949. His interest and ability were quickly recognized by the members of the largest Rotary Club in Florida, and they elected him club president for 1953-54. During his year he became interested in a youth program which the club had started under the title of Wheel Club. It was a modified, miniature Rotary Club for boys in high school. The idea caught on and a number of Wheel clubs were founded. In time the Wheel club program came to the attention of Rotary International, and this led to the adoption of Rotary's Interact program.

Bill attended his first International Convention in 1953 and has attended all but one since then. He has been to 15 International Assemblies and Institutes at Lake Placid, New York. He has served as a group discussion leader for six years and has served as moderator of the Group Leaders' Seminars. He was aide to R.I. President Richard L. Evans in 1966-67. Following his year as governor of District 699 in 1955-56, he was appointed Rotary information counselor in 1956-57. He was elected as R.I. director from Zone IV in 1958-59 and first vice president of R.I. in 1959-60. He has been chairman of the Executive Committee, the Finance Committee, 1964 Rotary Institute Agenda Committee, Interact Committee, Planning Committee, and is currently chairman of the Committee to Study the Future of Rotary. He has also served as a member of the Youth Committee, Nominating Committee for President of R.I., 1968 Convention Committee, and the 1956, 1964, and 1972 Councils on Legislation.

Throughout his business and Rotary life, Bill has devoted time and effort to the advancement of his community. He has served as director of the Chamber of Commerce and Family Service; as president of the Metropolitan Miami YMCA and the Southern Area (U. S.) Council of the YMCA, and as president of two

trade associations representing his business interests. He received an Outstanding Service Award from the Miami Rotary Club in 1956, and in 1967 the club named him Rotarian of the Year.

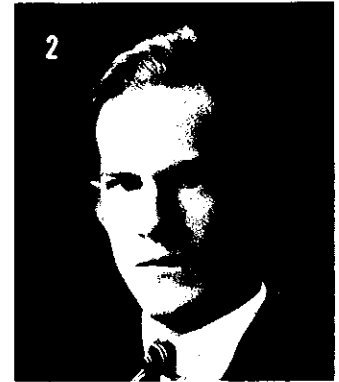
**B**ILL IS quick to admit that a great many persons have contributed to his success in business and Rotary careers. Some stand out more clearly than others. The late Charles F. Chaplin influenced him to enter the citrus grove operation and taught him to see beauty in growing things. He credits the late Kermyt Callahan, a family friend who sponsored his membership in the Rotary Club of Miami, for explaining to him the purpose of Rotary and the responsibility of the individual member. Much of his early interest in Rotary activities came from Harold McCay, longtime career secretary of the Miami club. Fellow Rotarian Harold B. Heath, now retired, was Bill's business manager for 28 years. Carol H. Magee, his personal secretary for 19 years who is known to many Rotarians, will be serving as "managing director" of his many business interests during his year as R.I. President.

When people ask about his hobbies, Bill replies that he really doesn't have any—because the things that interest him are tied in with his day-to-day duties. As an apprentice in his father's metal working shop, he learned blacksmithing, and his work may be seen around his office and home. He designed and built the office building on the grove property with his own hands. Development of the grove led to an interest in landscape design and setting out of trees and plantings in harmonious order. Working with landscape architects, he developed a master plan for the property, including nurseries for growing ornamental trees and shrubs.

Travel might qualify as a hobby. He started early. When 12 years old, Bill and another boy set out on a two-week bicycle trip up the east coast of Florida, camping out along the way. Later he and his family visited all 50 states of their own country. In the 25 years since joining Rotary he and Mary Frances, and frequently the two children, have visited 70 countries. Traveling by auto where possible to get a better "feel" of the country, they have driven 18,000 miles through 16 countries of Europe. Unescorted travel in Russia covered 6,000 miles and 14 major cities. They have visited the major areas of Asia and the Pacific and parts of South and Central America.

Every Rotarian in District 699 is certain that the welfare of Rotary International will be in competent hands during 1974-75 under the leadership of William R. Robbins. They take for granted that Bill will devote all his physical and mental resources to the task before him and complete a year of meaningful effort to climax a long and successful service to the Rotary movement. Bill's many friends in the Rotary world welcome him because they know him, appreciate his capabilities, and see him as a true leader. ☉

*Below: (1) Bill at 5, a precocious kindergarten graduate. (2) At 17, a serious senior at Miami High. (3) Bill the executive, in the office he built himself on his Florida farm. (4) Daughter Mary Anne, her husband, Dr. Richard Romfh, with Libby, Laura, and Ginger. (5) Son Bill Jr., his wife, Betsy, with Warren, Pam, and Will (standing).*



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