

— Author of Order —

GEN HENRY MARTYN ROBERT

by Ann Jensen

"GOOD ORDER IS THE FOUNDATION OF ALL GOOD THINGS," said 18th Century English statesman and author, Edmund Burke. Indeed, he believed that liberty itself could not exist without order.

One hundred years later, a young Army officer was driven by the same belief to follow a course that was to affect hundreds of thousands of Americans to this very day.

By 1901, General Henry Martyn Robert was ready to retire from the United States Army, ending a career of 44 years in the Army Corps of Engineers. He left the Army as Chief of Engineers, and had been involved in some way with almost every major river and harbor improvement and fortification that had been undertaken by the United States since before the Civil War. Later, as a civilian, General Robert was one of a board of engineers who designed the sea wall for the city of Galveston, Texas, and the bridge and causeway that connected that city with the mainland in the early 1900's.

As much as there is to be said of General Robert's distinguished career as an engineer, that is not the story to be told here.

Henry Martyn Robert was born in a time that was to make him a part of one of the greatest upheavals this country has ever suffered. He was to mature amidst the country's wild westward growth. It was a time that must have seemed governed by disorder and discord. Henry Robert was not content to let that remain so, for as he said, "Where there is no law, but every man does what is right in his own eyes, there is the least real liberty."

For the better part of his life, Henry Robert worked to bring order in the often chaotic society in which he found himself. He was to lay that "foundation of all good things", good order. Today, his name is the last word in orderly procedures.

It is 100 years since the first publication of *Robert's Rules of Order*, and it has only been in that 100 years that this country has had a unified system of rules to govern the deliberations of just about every society, organization, and group assembled since.

With that 100th anniversary just past, perhaps it is a time to look at how *Robert's Rules of Order* came about.

Robert's Early Life

Henry Robert was born in 1837 in Robertsville, South Carolina, a town founded by his great grandfather. When Henry was 13, his family moved to Ohio, and three years later, Henry was appointed to West Point. He graduated 4th in his class in 1857, and entered the Army Corps of Engineers.

Soon the country was embroiled in the Civil War, and those war years became a time of mental and physical anguish for Henry Robert. His decision to remain with the Union, cutting strong family ties to his native South Carolina, was a painful one.



In rejecting the Confederacy, Henry Robert reasoned that if the South were successful in seceding from the Union, from then on, any state in the Confederacy would have the same right to secede and follow its own course. He envisioned the logical outcome to be a proliferation of independent states, fortifying themselves against each other to no constructive advantage.

At the outset of the war, the young lieutenant was placed in charge of constructing the defenses for the city of Washington. The pressure of the work, however, brought on a recurrence of malaria, which he had contracted in 1858, crossing Panama on his way to take part in the Indian wars in Washington and Oregon.

His failing health forced Henry Robert to take on less taxing assignments, and 1863 found him stationed in New Bedford, Massachusetts. There was planted the seed that was to grow into his consuming interest in parliamentary law. Because he was an educated man and a military officer in the most unsettled of times, Henry Robert was called upon to preside at a local meeting. He felt obliged to accept the task, but in no way prepared to do so. The meeting developed into a bitter fight that came to nothing, and Henry Robert was embarrassed by his inability to do anything about it. At the close of the meeting, he vowed never to undertake such a thing again unless he knew something more of parliamentary law.

Following the war, Henry Robert served at West Point, and then later was sent to San Francisco. There, Major Robert was again confronted with his own lack of knowledge of parliamentary procedure, and the growing awareness that there was no unified system of rules to which he could turn.

San Francisco in those days was a wide open town, ripe for social reform. Major Robert was very soon involved in several organizations intent on improving the social conditions in that tumultuous city. To his dismay, however, Major Robert found as much tumult in the organizations to which he belonged as existed in the city.

The Beginnings of Parliamentary Procedure

At that time, each state legislature had its own system of parliamentary procedure, and organizations within that state followed the system adopted by its particular legislature. In a new state such as California, no two people seemed to claim the same origins. Each person brought with them the practices of their home state. There were as many ideas on how to conduct a meeting as there were members of an organization.

It was this situation that nurtured the seed planted at the time of his embarrassing New Bedford experience. Again and again during the late 1860's, Henry Robert was faced with the lack of a system of rules. He could not stand to see the work of those groups to which he belonged come to nothing for lack of organization and order.

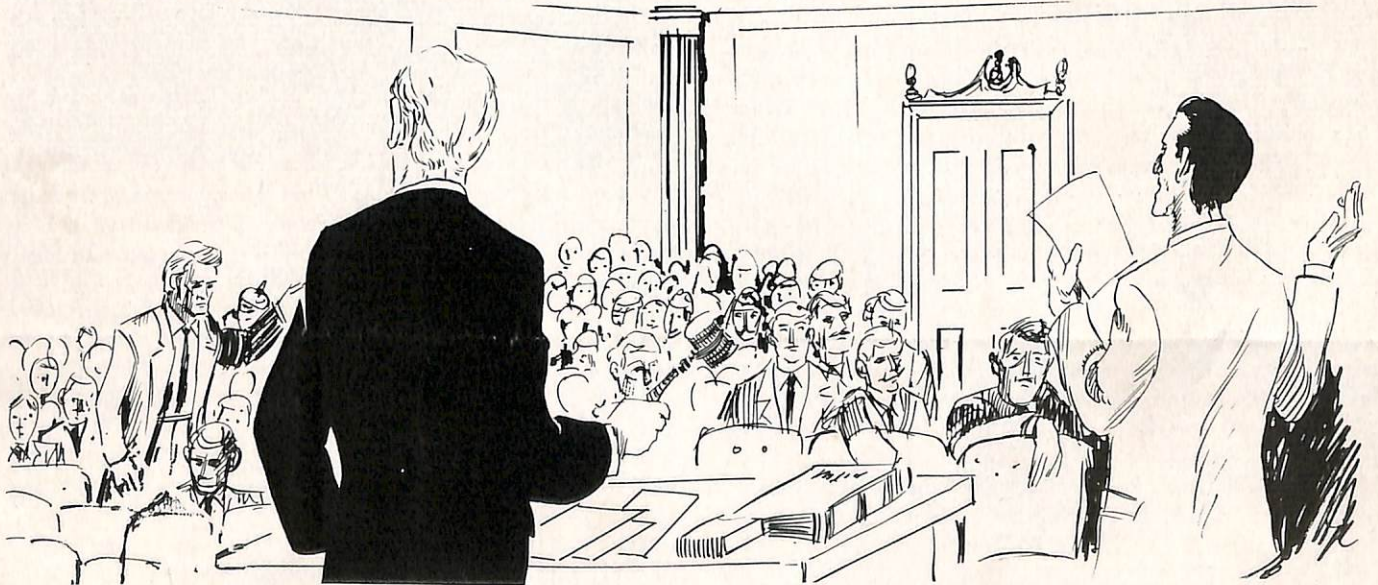
As a result, Henry Robert gathered together such books and manuals as existed to see what could be done. He found very little agreement among them, but was able to put together a 16 page pamphlet outlining certain basic rules for the use of the groups to which he belonged.



During the last 10 years of his life, General Robert continued his study of parliamentary law, and wrote two textbooks on the subject. Everywhere, his *Rules of Order* was becoming the basic authority and guide for procedure in meetings at all levels of society. He continued to receive and respond to as many as 30 letters a week on questions of parliamentary law up until 6 weeks before his death in 1923.

Clearly, Americans had been waiting for someone like Henry Robert to come along. Since the first 4,000 copies of *Robert's Rules of Order* were so eagerly received in 1876, nearly 3,000,000 copies of the book in its various official editions have been published.

Today's generations and those of the future need not know, in fact, most will not even wonder at the story behind *Robert's Rules of Order*. Unfortunately, like Noah Webster, Henry Robert's name, however common in use, does not



A severe winter in Milwaukee in 1874 brought the work of the Corps of Engineers there to a standstill, and Henry Robert used the time to work on a more complete manual of parliamentary law. He finished it that year, and had 4,000 copies of the book published at his own expense.

Henry Robert had faith in his book, but he was not quite prepared for what happened upon its publication on February 19, 1876. Within 6 weeks, it went into a second edition, and the first was sold out in 4 months. A third edition was published in 1893, and then in 1915, General Robert produced a rewritten and enlarged version, published under the title *Robert's Rules of Order Revised*.

carry with its popularity a knowledge of the man who gave it meaning. Nevertheless, Henry Robert continues to figure in the deliberations of groups assembled all over the country, and presiding officers must unconsciously bless him daily for his legacy.

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