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ROBERT RULES DOING THINGS RIGHT IS THE ORDER OF THE DAY FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS

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TONIGHT'S MINUTES describe the last meeting and include a lengthy passage on the minutes of the meeting before that. And the first minutes, Helen Anderson says, misstate something in the second minutes - something actually uttered two meetings back, a month ago.

The minutes say the club's delegates to the state convention were told "not to vote for" a boost in the organization's dues. Wrong, Anderson says. They were instructed to "vote to oppose" the increase. In any other gathering, that kind of hair-splitting might warrant a groan. Here, however, arcane i-dotting gets the members fired up. In the Golden Gavel Unit of the National Association of Parliamentarians, pulses quicken.

Secretary Ray Duke flips through his notes. "Not to vote for" is the way he has it. Barbara Eaton raises her hand and notes that she remembers the motion the way the minutes have it.

"Tell me what to do, folks," Duke says. "Leave it alone or change it."

Ken Carpenter, across the room, raises his hand and tells the chairman he remembers it the way the minutes have it, too. Roland Seel, the president, hasn't kept his notes from two meetings back, and he doesn't remember how the motion was worded. Anderson, who made the motion, says she recalls exactly what she moved.

"To change or not to change," Duke says. "That is the question."

Change, Anderson says. She moves to correct the minutes by striking "not to vote for" and inserting in its place, "vote to oppose." She waits for another member to second the motion. There's a long silence.

Well, says John Eaton, the Golden Gavel's treasurer, this certainly underlines the importance of having written motions.

Seel agrees. "I guess we've all learned a lesson," he says.

Still no one seconds the motion. It awaits a mate like a jilted lover, until finally Seel declares it dead.

Drama is typically low-key at the Golden Gavel's twice-monthly meetings in Virginia Beach. Maintaining order is, after all, the group's focus.

Specifically, Robert's Rules of Order, the bible of American parliamentary procedure. Every other Wednesday, the Golden Gavel's 26 members convene in a snug cinder block classroom at Thalia Lynn Baptist Church to discuss the rule book's intricacies, nuances, tricks.

Together they're honing the skills one needs to run effective meetings - a valuable asset these days, as America's corporate culture grows ever more reliant on worker get-togethers and consensus problem-solving.

``People might wonder, `Well, how on Earth did you get interested in that?' " says Ray Duke of Newport News, who runs a process service when he's not serving the parliamentary process. ``But the more you get into it, the more interesting it gets."

``It's wise to be aware of the rules," says Barbara Eaton, a Golden Gavel charter member from Virginia Beach who's wrestled with parliamentary procedure for nearly 40 years. ``There are so, so many people out there who will tell you something that is absolutely wrong."

In her hand she holds ``The Book," as members of the unit call it, a blue-jacketed volume loaded with the what-ifs of assembly decorum. It lays out the rules for making motions, and for discussing motions, and for amending motions and amending the amendments. It referees which motions get first attention, which trump others, how a meeting should be called to order, recessed and adjourned.

``Everybody, as long as they don't sit in a house and just close themselves off from the world, is going to be involved at some point in their lives in some sort of organization," Barbara Eaton says, ``whether it's a hiking club, or a canoeing club, or a condo association.

``The more they know about parliamentary procedure, the more they can give that organization, the more input they will give, and the more influence they will have."

The namesake of Robert's Rules was Henry M. Robert, a 19th century U.S. Army engineering officer who became a mover in local church and educational groups as he bounced among posts scattered across the country.

While recovering from malaria in New Bedford, Mass., in 1863, Robert was asked to preside over a meeting and realized he didn't have a clue about how to do so. He faked his way through the assignment, but it so rattled him that he set out to arm himself before his next engagement.

What he found was that parliamentary procedure was a decidedly local affair. Congress used one set of rules, the British Parliament another, and every civic organization on both sides of the Atlantic, its own.

Four years later, Robert was transferred to San Francisco, then a rough-and-tumble town of fortune-seekers and ne'er-do-wells. Everybody there was from someplace else, and each brought his or her own brand of parliamentary procedure to the meetings Robert attended.

``Friction as to what constituted parliamentary law," he observed, ``was no uncommon thing."

To end such free-for-alls, he realized, the young country needed a set of rules that applied everywhere. So while stationed in Milwaukee in early 1874, Robert began writing a manual founded on courtesy and common sense, and the principle that meetings should handle just one item of business at a time.

His manuscript, finished that autumn, aimed to protect the will of the majority while safeguarding the rights of the minority and the absent. It wasn't compelling reading - The Book's most strident advocates don't recommend cover-to-cover visits - but it accomplished its mission.

Unable to find a publisher, Robert had 4,000 copies printed himself. They quickly disappeared. In 1876, he landed a contract for 3,000 copies of a fleshed-out version. The publisher inscribed its cover: ``Robert's Rules of Order."

Robert expected to have two years to revise the book before all the copies sold, but he never enjoyed that luxury. The first edition sold out in four months.

Its ninth edition was published in 1990.

On to new business: the story of how John and Barbara Eaton came to rely on Robert's Rules.

It was 40 years ago, give or take, while the Eatons were living in Florida, that John was piqued by the way parents and officials argued over the rules at his sons' swim meets. They spent more time arguing, in fact, than the kids did swimming. It took 20 minutes to do what should have taken one. Wasted everyone's time.

That planted a seed. A while later, the Eatons moved to Washington, D.C., and John, now a wheel in the old Amateur Athletic Union, was elected president of a big D.C. swimming association. He had no clue how to run it, but Florida had shown him how not to.

``Barbara called and found some people involved in parliamentary procedure," John recalls. ``She was interested in learning it, too, because she was involved in organizing synchronized swimming.

``Robert's Rules does not create problems. It solves problems. There's nothing in The Book that tells you you can't do something - it shows you how to do it."

And so the Eatons took their first tentative steps into dividing the question, and raising questions of privilege, and laying matters on the table.

These were not uptight sticklers for by-the-book living: John, now 84, spent his youth in seat-of-the-pants adventuring across Depression-era America, working as a ranch hand in west Texas, nearly becoming a tramp steamer stowaway, vagabonding. Barbara, 75, was an athlete, a competitive synchronized swimmer as well as a coach and meet organizer.

But their growing expertise in Robert's Rules, as much as anything, carried them to the highest echelons of amateur sports - John has been parliamentarian to the U.S. Olympic Committee for 16 years, and Barbara has been parliamentarian of U.S. Synchronized Swimming Inc. for 14.

``Parliamentary procedure has opened doors for us that would never have been available," John says.

Its value isn't restricted to their public performance. ``I do think we have developed a skill for discussion," John says. ``Discussion's really an art. So many people take sides so quickly, without knowing the facts. This really helps you stay on track."

Today, John Eaton is one of three Golden Gavel members certified as professional registered parliamentarians, the highest level of competence recognized by the national association. And tonight, he's delivering the regular program at the Golden Gavel's meeting.

His topic is amendments, which he says are ``just abominably abused" by meeting-goers.

Eaton stands at the room's front and writes, ``I move that the club purchase a new chair for the club president" on a board. I'll entertain amendments to this motion, he says.

It's practice, not a bona fide motion, but to a group like this, it's raw meat, nonetheless. Helen Anderson, another professional registered parliamentarian, raises her hand. She moves to insert the word ``mahogany" in front of the word ``chair."

She's seconded by Victoria Epps, who further moves that the word ``Honduran" be inserted before ``mahogany." Before she finishes that motion, however, Peggy Moss interrupts - she wants to add a phrase to the end of the sentence.

John Eaton rules her out of order: Anderson's original amendment is on the floor, and until its fate is decided, it's the only thing that can be modified with another amendment. Epps now raises her hand and moves her amendment to Anderson's amendment.

The group votes first on Epps' amendment, which passes, then on Anderson's amended amendment, which passes as well. Moss raises her hand and moves that the phrase ``not to exceed \$500" be added to the original motion, as amended.

Barbara Eaton raises her hand. That \$500 seems a little steep, she says. She moves that the number be struck and replaced with ``50."

Debate erupts.

Squabbling ensues.

But everyone raises a hand before speaking.

Everyone plays by the rules.

Description of illustration(s):

MARTIN SMITH-RODDEN color photos/The Virginian-Pilot
Member John Eaton...

Barbara Eaton

John Eaton

``The Book" has been...

MARTIN SMITH-RODDEN / The Virginian-Pilot
With gavel at hand, president Roland Seel presides over a meeting of
the Golden Gavel at Thalia Lynn Baptist Church in Virginia Beach.

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