

A Few Random Notes on Changes in the Club

Change is one of the basic truths that never change. Time moves on. Circumstances differ. Fads and fashions come and go. What I want to tell about tonight are some of the changes the Literary Club has seen and undergone over the past 155 years.

There were at least a half dozen literary clubs in Cincinnati in the mid-nineteenth century. All of them but ours suffered the most drastic of changes— extinction. They shriveled out of existence in a few short years because of internal friction or when their dominant leaders died or left town. Our club had the good fortune to be started by a small group of young men blessed with the knack of infusing into its foundation the seeds of longevity. Instead of withering away, as the others did, our Club not only survived, but flourished and grew with amazing vigor.

Growth is the essence of change. Our Club began in 1849 with twelve founding members. The spirit and conviviality of this new club seemed to stir interest among other young men in the city. By 1861, only twelve years later, there were over fifty active members on the roster. Then came a serious change.

With the Confederate assault on Fort **Sumter** and the beginning of the Civil War, the Club was fired with patriotic enthusiasm and almost immediately adopted a resolution to form a military company. They began drilling as the **Burnet** Rifles. Their old flag still adorns the wall here in our reading room. Members began to leave to join the Union Army. Fifty became commissioned officers ranging in rank from Second Lieutenant to Major General. By the second year of the war there were so many military absentees that at the meeting of October 8th 1862 it was resolved that **Reuben Stephenson** and five other members, still able to attend, be appointed administrators and executors of the Club to wind up its affairs. Stephenson was appointed to act as sole executor to waken the Club from its wartime hibernation when he saw fit. Seventeen months later, on February 19th 1864, pursuant to his charge, Stephenson called a resurrection meeting of the Club at his office with a notice in the newspapers. At least a dozen old members attended. More returned later as they were mustered out of the service. A nominating committee was appointed to propose new candidates. Twenty-three were elected in 1864. The club continued to grow vigorously. The membership limit was advanced to sixty then to eighty and on November 6, 1875, was finally raised to 100 where it has been for the past 129 years.

There were many changes in meeting rooms over the years. After the initial 1849 meeting in Nelson Cross's dingy, second floor office at the corner of Third and **Hammond** Streets, adequate meeting space to accommodate the growing roster was found in eleven

different locations over the next forty-seven years. They met for a few months in a small room over the old [firehouse](#) at 20 East Fourth St. Later, they had rooms at 239-1/2 [W. Fifth St.](#) and in the Apollo Building at the northwest corner of Fifth and Walnut, then in the Moselle Building on Seventh St. By the 1880s, the Club 'occupied the third floor of the Smith and Nixon building on Fourth St. The floor was specially fitted for the Club. It included a suite of five rooms, the main hall being 35 feet wide and 38 feet long, with a lofty half-dome ceiling. The floors carpeted and the walls tastefully colored with a frescoed frieze set off with gilding.ⁱ In 1896 the Club purchased its first home of its own on 7th Street near Walnut between James Beard's house and [St. Louis Church](#). In 1930, we acquired and moved into our handsome clubhouse at 500 East 4th Street, and have enjoyed this delightful location for the past seventy-four years.

As might be expected, there has been a marked change in the average age of members. Our founders were bright youngsters averaging a month or two over twenty-five Today we average a somewhat fossilized seventy-three. I'm 87 and only the ninth oldest on the list. Members who love the Club stay on and naturally add years. John W. [Herron](#), for instance, was twenty-three when elected in 1849 and continued as a loyal, fruitful member until his death in 1912 sixty-three years later.

The young members in the early days were full of youthful exuberance. Their [last-Monday-of-the-month 'informals'](#) were joyous affairs, with songs, poetry and boyish hilarity. [Ainsworth Spofford](#) told how, back in the 1850s, James Beard, the artist, Edwin [Dodd](#), the lawyer, Henry [Blackwell](#), the hardware merchant, and William [McDowell](#), another lawyer, each had a song in which he specialized and would render, with great gusto, on the least provocation. Among their favorites were "The Tall Young [Oysterman](#)", "The Old Field Marshall Come Home From The Wars" and "The Widow [Machree](#)".ⁱⁱ

Most of you have heard the story of the "Great Literary Club Spoof of 1879".ⁱⁱⁱ Henry [Farny](#), John Woods and several other members formed the tongue-in-cheek, "Society For The Suppression Of Music". Henry [Farny](#) drew their coat of arms. It shows an angry member, foot planted firmly on a cello, [coattail](#) swirling in the breeze and brandishing an ax about to destroy a pile of hated musical instruments. They had great fun with this spoof. The newspapers got wind of it and covered it thoroughly. The November 20, 1879 issue of the Cincinnati Daily Gazette carried a cut of the insignia and several columns about the society. It began—"The organizers of this movement have been brought together by no feeling of malice, but by a growing sense of the danger in which we are living, and a desperate resolve to save the community from the Huns of Harmony - ----."

At the fiftieth anniversary meeting Spofford told of more early Club hilarity. "We were poorer then, had lunch once a month and it was meager compared with our present (1899) supplies.—for one informal we had nothing on hand, and we were without money or credit. On motion we adjourned to Glessner's", then the leading lager beer saloon 'Over the Rhine'. The large hall was filled with thirsty citizens when we arrived. We sat down on each side of a long table. After a round of beer it was suggested to proceed with the Informal. Billy McDowell was hoisted upon the table and requested to preach the 'Harp of a Thousand Strings' which he proceeded to do in his happy and admirable way, to the great astonishment of fellow citizens present. We had then and there one of our most enjoyable Informals".^{iv}

Patrick Mallon, another of the 1849ers, tells about another rather riotous Club outing. "In the early days we celebrated the 4th of July. For several years we went to an old fort of the mound builders on the Little Miami near Plainville. The table was placed within the fort, under the shade of the great trees. We amused ourselves with games and swimming until dinner. After dinner came seemingly endless toasts and songs. One member, in his enthusiasm, jumped upon the table and passed the whole length of it singing and dancing among the dishes.^v My how we've changed. How sedate we've become. Some of us can hardly walk much less dance on the table.

While puckish hilarity was the norm at Informals on the last Monday, meetings during the rest of the month were spent in serious business and hard-fought debates. After each debate, the president pronounced his judgment on which side prevailed. The members were then polled for their opinion, which at times disagreed with the president. Spofford said in his 1899 address. "We were great sticklers for the Club rules in those callow days, and had among us a few of those litigious fellows, such as have wrecked many a literary society, who fancied that our temporal and eternal welfare depended on the constitution and by-laws." The constitution and bylaws were changed and amended at least a dozen times during the Club's first year. Spofford went on to say. "But we soon outgrew that folly, and became absorbed, with growing interest, in the questions that always divide opinion, questions of government, society, history, literature and manners."^{vi}

On November 5, 1849 the Club conducted its first debate on the question, 'Ought a system of universal and liberal education be conducted at dinner. After dinner came seemingly endless toasts and songs. One member, in his enthusiasm, jumped upon the table and passed the whole length of it singing and dancing among the dishes.[^] My how we've changed. How sedate we've become. Some of us can hardly walk much less dance on the

table.

While puckish hilarity was the norm at **Informals** on the last Monday, meetings during the rest of the month were spent in serious business and hard-fought debates. After each debate, the president pronounced his judgment on which side prevailed. The members were then polled for their opinion, which at times disagreed with the president. **Spofford** said in his 1899 address. "We were great sticklers for the Club rules in those callow days, and had among us a few of those litigious fellows, such as have wrecked many a literary society, who fancied that our temporal and eternal welfare depended on the constitution and by-laws." The constitution and bylaws were changed and amended at least a dozen times during the Club's first year. Spofford went on to say. "But we soon outgrew that folly, and became absorbed, with growing interest, in the questions that always divide opinion, questions of government, society, history, literature and manners."^{vi}

On November 5, 1849 the Club conducted its first debate on the question, 'Ought a system of universal and liberal education be conducted at public expense in this country?' Writing very fully on this question the day after the debate, one of the Club members discussed it from every point of view. He gave as one reason in its favor, that 'It would in time abolish the miserable system of humbugs known as private schools, and would greatly modify our academies and colleges which are now too little under the public eye and too exclusively under the management of corporations.'^{vii}

The question chosen for the debate on July 20, 1850 was "Are our free institutions in danger from Catholicism?" **Herron, Peirce, Guilford, Glass** and **Stephenson** argued the affirmative and **Collins, Cross** and **Gundry** took the negative. After the debate, President Edwin **Dodd** announced that in his judgment the negative prevailed. The vote by the members present also favored the negative 5 to 3. Then, the minutes go on to read. "The President desired to vote upon the merits of the question. But it being clear that he could not do so constitutionally, he decided that the vote of the Club was not a vote but an expression of opinion and directed his decision to be (so) recorded in the minutes of the meeting. From this novel decision an appeal was taken and an animated discussion followed as to what votes really were votes. The Ayes and Nays were taken on the appeal and the chair was sustained by a vote of 5 to 3 Collins, Cross, Baker, Peirce and Guilford voting Aye and Herron, Glass and Stephenson voting Nay. The point thus determined was that this vote of the Club upon the merits of the question was not a vote but an expression of opinion."^{viii}

Then all hell broke loose. The Club came perilously close to a violent death after

only nine months of its infant existence. On July 27th the minutes of the stormy meeting of the 20th were finally approved after a "warm discussion of two hours and adoption of a resolution by Mr. Collins to have his vote to sustain the chair stricken from the record."^{ix} At the meeting of August 3rd the fracas continued with a resolution to expunge the minutes of the meeting of July 20th, which was done. On August 10th the secretary read letters of resignation from John Herron and Reuben Stephenson. Acceptance of their resignations was postponed for weeks and, luckily for the Club, they were persuaded to return.^x As noted above, Herron graced the roster as a beloved member for the rest of his life and Stephenson was the trusted caretaker of the Club during its Civil War hiatus.

According to Eslie Asbury, this is when the almost obsessive weekly handshake began. It was to show that there were no lingering hard feelings from the argumentative battle of the week before.^{xi} The custom has persisted and now we're probably the handshakingest organization east and west of the Mississippi.

It was decided, after a very few years of often-stormy debates, that they should be abandoned and replaced by the less inflammatory, more peaceful, literary exercises we know today.

There were two changes in meeting nights. For the first eight years the Club met on Mondays. From 1857 and for seventy-one years thereafter meetings were held on Saturdays and in 1928 changed back to Monday as it is today.^{xii}

Our financial situation has changed dramatically over the years, thanks to generous members and very able treasurers. Judge Patrick Mallon, one of the 1849ers, said at an anniversary meeting, "We were poorer then, had lunch once a month and it was meager - — (at) one informal we had nothing on hand, and we were without money or credit."^{xiii} In his treasurer's report last month, Bill Friedlander shows the Club's net worth including our clubhouse at well over a million dollars. You'll agree, that's quite a change.

There was a time in the recent past when we sponsored an essay contest and awarded prizes to student contestants. It might be a good idea to change back to that custom. It would not only encourage skill in writing but would also put a little flesh on our bare-bones 501-C-3 tax status.

There have been remarkable changes in the food served at our after-paper lunches, now every week instead of only on Informal or Budget nights. On January 31 1852, secretary, Dan Thew Wright recorded in his delightful minutes, "The executive committee made a descent on the secretary of the treasury and violently, with force and arms, took from his vest pocket the sum of nine dollars. The committee came back but the nine dollars didn't and:

The board was spread
With butter and bread,
And all that the heart could wish,
The ale was new,
The oysters few,
Say two to every dish"^{xiv}

The lunches were rather basic for a long time. Many here remember the bread, cheese and cold cut lunches of the Mrs. Browning and Russell Cook days up to the early 1980s. When Lou Prince introduced the Ranieri brothers to the Club in 1985 there was a remarkable change to the lavish, gourmet buffet and the well-stocked bar we enjoy at every meeting today. Spring picnics and anniversary dinners are works of culinary art.

The use of tobacco at the Club has undergone changes over the years and drastic changes recently. There have always been smokers in the Club and in the nineteenth century and perhaps beyond we also had members who chewed tobacco. If you examine the photograph in the library of the Club reading room in 1887, you'll see four cuspidors placed strategically around the room. One of the duties of the trustees in the old days was to purchase an ample supply of cigars to be passed out free to the members who wanted them. The Club often spent more on cigars than on food.

Harlan Lloyd, in a reminiscent paper, tells of a tobacco incident. Shortly after the Civil War, the club had moved to the first floor of the Moselle Building on 7th St. He wrote: "We were very comfortable. More so than the tenants of the upper rooms. A lady distinguished for her career in educational work as well as for her many admirable traits of character, had her school rooms in the same building above the Club. We had no ventilating apparatus. The common practice, after the cigars were lighted, was to open the door into the hall and stairway, and the fragrant odors of the Havanas gently rose to the delicate nostrils of the ladies above. There came first, a mild remonstrance; then an indignant protest; and finally, a furious appeal. Alas, that it should be said, the appeal had no effect."^{xv}

In addition to cigar and cigarette smokers, I remember a half-dozen or more ardent pipe smokers. I remember Gene Mihaly particularly with his deep voice, bright eyes and pensive smile as he sat in the far corner under McConkey's portrait puffing contentedly on his favorite curved-stem Wellington pipe.

Smoking at the Club came to an almost dead end on April 15th 2002. President Bill Burleigh announced, out of the blue that, acting on complaints from a couple of the

members, the Board of Management decided that there will be no smoking in the reception and reading rooms in the future but only in the library. The announcement created a lively little hammer and tongs stir. Several of us, including Frank Davis and Jack McDonough, who are not smokers at the Club, objected to the arbitrary ruling without a vote of the members. Someone asked if they're going to have a similar ruling outlawing alcohol. A vote was finally taken. The smokers left in the Club were substantially out-numbered. We went along with the ruling and were ignominiously relegated to the library.^{xvi} Now, after Dale Flick, Herb Curry and I are gone, 500 East Fifth Street will be completely smoke free.

Since I'm apparently the last of the Literary Club pipe smokers, I can't resist adding an extraneous personal sidebar. I began smoking when I was a boy of seventeen. Serious smoking I mean, even when my mother was looking. Neither my mother nor father smoked. But that was back in the days when Colliers and the Saturday Evening Post ran full-page ads showing a handsome young physician savoring a cigarette with the caption, "The brand most doctors prefer - Chesterfield". It was November 24th 1934. I was a senior at St. X high school and left tackle on the football team. The game that day was with our arch-rival, Roger Bacon and ended in a scoreless tie. Before the game, I bought a Frank Medico pipe and a can of Half and Half tobacco and put them in my locker. After the game, I lit up and have been smoking a pipe ever since. For much of just a month shy of seventy years I've been in a fragrant cloud of first and second hand smoke and enjoying it thoroughly. If the anti-tobacco activists are right, I should have been dead long ago. Either I'm just an exception to prove their rule or they're a bit hyperbolic.

One aspect of the Literary Club has never changed. We've always, even at the time of the 1850 crisis, had a solid core of faithful members who really love and appreciate the Club. They attend regularly; they leave their titles and honors at the door. They greet their one-week-long-lost fellow members with a bright smile and a hearty handshake. They make a conscientious effort to turn out a decent paper when their turn comes to read. They thoroughly enjoy being a part of the Club and give it their best. As long as that situation prevails, the Literary Club will continue on happily for another one hundred and fifty five years and many more.

ⁱ The Life of the Literary Club, Jones, Robert R. 16 March 1921, pg4
Subsequently- Jones

ⁱⁱ Spofford in Jones Pg. 15

ⁱⁱⁱ Paper John Diehl 27 Oct. 1977

^{iv} Mallon in Jones Pg. 14

^v Mallon in Jones Pg. 14

^{vi} Spofford in Jones Pg5

^{vii} Jones Pg5

^{viii} Club minutes 20 July 1850

^{ix} Club minutes 27 July 1850

^x Club minutes August 1850

^{xi} Asbury, Eslie conversation

^{xii} Asbury, Eslie conversation

^{xiii} Mallon quoted in Jones Pg. 14

^{xiv} Minutes January 31, 1852

^{xv} Lloyd, Harlan 'Editorial' Oct. 29, 1892

^{xvi} John Diehl Journal 15 April 2002