

FROM THE OUTSIDE IN
158th Anniversary Dinner

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In the fall of 1979, Booth Shepard invited me to the Literary Club as his guest. After drinks we sat down. Visitors were introduced. President Lew Gatch announced the next week's paper and turned the podium over to the member of the evening, who read his essay, word by word to the end, unfazed by several snores. He stepped from the podium to applause, and a line formed to congratulate him on such a splendid paper!

Since our 150th anniversary and the beginning of the 21st century, at least thirty-nine new members have been elected to our club after first visits like mine. That's nearly forty percent of our present membership. If we go back to the year 1855, in a radical move the Club took in twenty-seven new members all in one year. These included Salmon Chase, Henry E. Foote, William Greene, Joseph Longworth, Charles Stetson, Bellamy Storer and Timothy Walker. They were leaders and patricians. Some had belonged to the old Semi-Colon Club, the Friday Night Club or the New England Club. They must have sorely tested the feisty spirits of our twelve founders of 1849--young men in a hurry who wanted to change how things were done in the clubs of the day. However fast or slowly new members are taken in, this stream never stops, and the quality of its inward flow is the reason our club thrives.

Tonight, at our 158th anniversary dinner, I am honored and humbled by your confidence in asking me to preside for a year and say a few remarks as my predecessors have on this occasion. The title of my paper is "From

the Outside In”. Its theme is to honor the continuous flow of our members, beginning with a first visit and a first paper.

Election to the Literary Club seems to be for life, subject to good behavior—like federal judges, but without pay. I’ve never witnessed anybody being kicked out for bad behavior, say insulting another member, dueling or non-attendance—well, maybe a warning for not paying dues. And when we read that first paper, it feels as if we are standing before fifty or sixty of these crusty and wizened federal judges ready to pass judgment before we even begin. An old friend, Judge Alfred Murrah from Oklahoma—late Chief Judge of the Tenth Circuit, knew how to tame this kind of a crowd. When he was Director of the Federal Judicial Center in Washington, Judge Murrah used to bring fifty or sixty experienced federal judges to the Center for seminars. He asked me to be on the faculty to help out; and here’s how he would begin:

“Your honors,” he would begin in his raspy old voice, blue eyes twinkling. He was tall and dressed impeccably. French cuff-links showed as he gripped the podium. He stooped forward slightly with a head bow to address them. “May it please your honors!” he began. “And you are all ‘your honors’. Now, we are not here to tell you what to do. Nobody can tell you what to do. And you are mean. Every one of you is mean and you don’t talk to anybody but God, and then only to give Him advice.” He paused, and they beamed and nodded and chuckled, then he said:

“We are here to learn from each other—and we expect no help at all from our natural enemy, the Court of Appeals!” With that he turned the podium over to us faculty and we were on our own, to summarize the small group discussions and practical suggestions for the benefit of new judges—all views from the inside.

In our club we, too, learn from the inside in small group discussions and pass on to new members our ideals and traditions—notwithstanding, some might add, well-intentioned efforts of reform by our own natural enemy, the Board of Management. As early as first visits, we explain to guests some of these traditions: Papers may be on any subject; they all must be original literary essays delivered as written—no off the cuff homilies; and all eyes and praise are on the reader. Convivial discussions follow around tables mellowed by light food and beer. Visitors may not realize that after hearing a paper read, a member might get a copy and discover its true genius only after reading the full text later. Sometimes, after reading it later, a member might wonder why at first it sounded so profound. An alert visitor will easily see that we have fused the oral and the written traditions.

The oral tradition consists of listening to a paper spoken aloud in the privacy of Club rooms. Though outsiders may think otherwise, we are not some ancient pre-literary cult, reciting the epics of Gilgamesh or Homer's Odyssey to each other from memory. We focus instead in seeing and hearing a member's expressive delivery of words read from his own original text. We listen for every nuance of voice and artful phrasing of sentences. After voicing his last words, a reader does not thank us for listening to him read. It is our pleasure to thank him and remember.

At first in Club history, we relied almost entirely on memory, in the oral tradition, for there was no easy way to get a full text of an original essay. Unless printed privately, leaked to a newspaper, or copied by hand, the paper's content passed into Club lore through the Hinkle or Wilby scrapbooks or collective memories. This tradition went on for nearly twenty years after the Civil War ended. No full texts of papers were collected in Club archives before then. So when did we fully embrace the written

tradition and begin to save texts? Exactly how did our custom of preserving all of our papers as written and read get started?

In researching that question last year, at the time we were discussing a Club website, I turned to the archives. To my surprise, I learned that on February 2, 1884, a committee on printing was appointed. Its purpose was to consider the feasibility and costs of printing and publishing all club essays. Three weeks later came its report:

Your committee are unanimously of the opinion that the essays of the Club should be preserved by being put into printed form. This for the following among other reasons.

1. Not only for the intrinsic value of many of the essays that one has read but as a memorial of what the Club is doing, which would in a short time make the series of volumes of great interest & value.

2. Because it would add to the literary reputation and increase the influence of the Club.

3. And perhaps most important of all, because of the effect it would have in raising the standard of excellence of the papers which are read before the Club. . . .

Your committee would further recommend that the essays as issued be copyrighted, with the understanding that the copyright belong to the author.

C. W. Merrill

Thornton M. Hinkle

F. M. Coppock

Printing costs were to be paid through voluntary subscriptions at a fixed price. Any deficiency would be subsidized out of the Club treasury, in

effect an increase in Club dues. The report never reached a vote. Before long, however, complete essays as read from a text began to appear in the minutes. They were not printed. They were copied by hand in full. The first to appear, in the minutes of April 5, 1884, was E. R. Donohue's paper, *Parliament and the Crown*. Within a year, full texts were being copied by script in a separate bound volume on blank pages, numbered and lined, reserved solely for essays read. The first paper to be recorded by hand in the new volume beginning at page one was Manning Force's *Black Point--San Francisco--Santa Barbara*. There are ten of these old volumes of papers in script in the library. The ink is fading on some pages; the lines hard to read. The Historical Society keeps micro-film copies.

There were exceptions. Henry Farny's paper "About Some Indians," read on Saturday evening, January 3, 1885, did not appear in the minutes. It was published in a local newspaper. That same evening, Mark Twain and George W. Cable were visiting the Club, as John Diehl told us last year. At the time, Mark Twain was copying manuscripts of his novels with the newly invented typewriter. He would type the printer's copy from his original hand-written text. His writing arm had been injured and no printer could read his scrawl. Maybe he bragged to us of his success with this new device. But our scribe kept copying essays by his own good hand, directly from members' manuscripts. After seven more years of this, an over-burdened secretary finally gave in and hired a typist. The first paper in Club history to be recorded by typewriter is C.B. Wilby's essay, *A Cincinnati Japhet*, dated April 30, 1892, in volume eleven. It's far easier to read than fading ink is, even with erasures and corrections. The essay tells about an abandoned fair-skinned baby boy found and raised in Cincinnati by mulattoes. Farny's essays about Indians all appear in later volumes.

Thus was born our custom of recording papers as memorials.

There may have been protests. The most persuasive might have invoked Plato's criticism of writing itself—that it induces forgetfulness, that recording texts leads to cultural amnesia! A modern critic may be appalled that society has externalized all memory into cyberspace and has outsourced the brain with Google, Wikipedia and the BlackBerry. Please, he prays, let us not outsource Club memory!

There is something to be said for these points of view. Consider the plight of Eurydice. As she enters the underworld dying from the snake-bite, Eurydice discovers that she's lost all memory. Without memory her grasp on any emotional response to Orpheus has abandoned her. She laments, "What happiness it would be to cry." Her loss is like ours, when we enter our own underworlds of lapsed memory, with such angry resistance. And we want to retrieve memory just one more time.

Our recorded memorials let us remember again. Consider also the value of the written tradition to a new member writing a first paper. He may listen to weeks of papers before begins one of his own. From impressions and inner experience, our new comrade perceives a spark of insight suggesting a first creation. He fans it into life with some research and reflection. He now shifts to writing it down. He may read some past essays by members. He may write only from imagination. He completes a draft and throws out much of it, reads, begins again and writes some more. He polishes and cuts and edits. Finally, a complete original written work is miraculously finished. He is pleased and reads it aloud, to himself. It takes an hour. Panic! What else can be cut? He's just hours away from taking the podium for the first time. Those favorite pontifications have to go; and

he sharpens a few lines of transition. Now, standing in front of fifty or sixty members ready to judge, he wonders how he will manage to pull this off.

But as the opening lines are read, his voice and his text fuse in projection. Sounds of his creation penetrate Club rooms for the first time. Every paper repeats the process of that first one. As heard, the most artful words seduce, they tempt, they intervene, and they inveigle their way into every listener's consciousness to reach and touch us. We listen to stories full of personal revelations and poetry, dramas from mountain-tops, inspiration from science or religion, spoofs and fiction, insights from music, art and history, heart-breaking tragedies, war stories. Now amplified, the sounds resonate: poor black talk; tone-poems of jazz or blue grass; New Jersey dialects; grunts from a chain gang; the hiccup of whiskey culture; and trumpet calls from enduring bad angels.

Imagine how Wilby's rich essay, *A Cincinnati Japhet*, the first paper recorded by typewriter in 1892, might sound if read now? Several of you in fact have proposed reading portions of some interesting old papers in a budget, maybe placing them in context of their times. This is nothing new. Henry Farny's amazing 1887 budget papers "Sorrel Horse" and "Thunder God" were re-read in 1913. These are his word-paintings. Another member thinks more about the present: Might he reserve ten minutes out of forty, he asks, for taking questions from the floor? Well, we used to have such discussions, I reply, but they became too heated and some turned ugly, so we stopped that practice long ago. But, living up to our reputation as reactionaries, we might consider restoring the original custom. We'd need no activism from the Board of Management to do that. As traditionalists, we might merely return to our roots in 19th century practice—to invite questions

after a paper is read, maybe adding a little civility, without the fist-fights or duels!

Immersed in these streams of literary expression from past and present voice and text, a new member moves inside. In time he becomes a “complete angler”—a complete insider. With the rest of us he joins past and future generations—literary comrades in every season of men’s adult lives. And when we come to the end of our travels, as five members so recently have, we honor those departed with “memorials” read to us, each one the first order of a Monday evening. By our response of silence, we affirm each life and then enter the written words permanently in Club memory.

And our gates stay open. Interesting guests become new members, to write and read first papers. We all keep coming with papers. No subject is barred. We preserve fading memory by keeping records. We may look back and hold on to memories one more time, if we must, but then we let them go and they, too, enter the archival chambers, as surely as new ones keep coming.

As this 158th anniversary dinner comes to a close, we celebrate all members and their papers--past, present and future. From a first visit to the first paper and on to the last, may the flow continue—from the outside in—for many, many, many years to come!