

The “Soirée”

Approaching The Literary Club from either direction, a member may sense a pervading atmosphere, one of tradition and fellowship. The surroundings of General Lytle’s Park suggest a cultural foundation in Cincinnati.

That comfort may have been present in September of 1855 when Abraham Lincoln first visited Cincinnati. One morning the lawyer from Springfield, Illinois walked alone down 4th Street, and passed the McLean Family Residence, the future quarters of our literary exercises. Lincoln had been prompted to observe the palatial home of Nicholas Longworth, an ultimate showplace, The Taft Museum.

Mr. Lincoln politely approached a gardener, “excuse me, I have heard about the beauty of these grounds. Does your Master allow visitors to his premises?” The gardener rose and replied, “my Master is queer, he doesn’t allow strangers, but makes an exception every time a stranger comes.” “Excuse me, Mr. Longworth,” Lincoln quickly replied, “mine was a foolish mistake.” . It proved a generous and collegial tour. The two became friends.

Lincoln’s next visit to Cincinnati, in September, 1859, occurred in final weeks of the Presidential Campaign. It had been a long day for Mr. Lincoln with four whistle-stop speeches between Columbus and Cincinnati. A re-visit at the Burnet House had been arranged. Longworth and Lincoln allowed their time to be well nourished with the best of Longworth’s famous Catawba wine.

Worthy of note, Mr. Longworth and Judge Jacob Burnet were the two initial owner-investors in The Burnet House, that handsome hotel, which stood on the northwest corner of Third and Vine Streets. Mr. Lincoln had just delivered his last speech of the day from the hotel’s balcony. The Literary Club’s informal drill unit, “The Burnet Rifles,” spontaneously organized after the firing on Fort Sumter, had been named in honor of Judge Burnet’s son, Robert Burnet, a West Pointer.

Nicholas's great grandson, Nicholas Longworth, IV, served as Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives between 1925 and 1931. Speaker Longworth's nimble political skill was much from his great grandfather's brand of Fourth Street cordiality. Speaker Longworth routinely reached across the aisle to Democrats, fostering a productive relationship with the House Minority Leader, John Nance Gardner. Daily, they hosted a secluded gathering of Democrat and Republican Congressmen, known as the "Bureau of Education." This unofficial club provided a cove to relax with a drink to learn of one another. Quick of wit and endlessly cordial, the Speaker always extended a respectful smile to the losing side when rendering a hard decision.

One day while lounging in a chair, a Democrat ran his hand over Longworth's bald pate, commenting, "nice and smooth...feels just like my wife's bottom." Longworth, feeling his own head for a moment, cheerfully retorted, "yes, so it does." For those well-mannered years, his colleagues honored him by naming the Longworth House Office Building on Capitol Hill.

From the invisible tap root, perhaps somewhere in our friendly Park across the street, sprang the re-location of The Literary Club in June, 1930. At one time, The Literary Club had its own Bureau of Education, of sorts, affectionately called the "Soirée" by its Captain, the late Dr. John Vester. John's inspiration engaged the supper group in 1995 with a monthly gathering at the La Normandy. Included in John's assembly of eight original members were Messers Doug Mansfield, Stanley Block, Nick Clooney, Frank Mayfield, Milo Beran and Joe Tomain. It proved a venue for sharing political views about current events and contested issues, especially those in need of balanced dialogue and constructive solutions. Those Mondays were always made happier with libation, and the privilege to witness the waitresses un-ending infatuation with Nick Clooney. After Stan Block,

the table's psychiatrist, clinically analyzed the ladies' obsession with that old Kentucky fart, the rest of us were greatly relieved.

John Vester was likely the most conservative among the group. His love for the banter clearly evidenced an addiction for his fix once a month from the more liberally bent. The primary subject of discussion was usually pre-selected, affording a month's reflection to assemble one's thoughts.

Captain Vester often reminded the group of spirited debates in The Literary Club's earlier years. Of course, there was the famous one, that almost came to blows. The member, who first took off his coat, was convicted of high treason by fellow members, and sentenced to repair at the St. Nicholas Saloon across the street. At another meeting in 1860, the Club President introduced the Reader and Paper's title... "A Bird's Eye View of Politics..." Rutherford Hayes jumped up, quickly pleaded, and moved the lager and sandwiches be distributed first. The motion unanimously carried.

To memory, there was only one incident when the games and debates of the Soirée ever broke from gentlemanly discourse. John Vester seemingly held the privilege of inviting guests, sometimes accommodating a mere one-timer, or more often recruiting a potential regular. Inasmuch as self-righteousness is an unbecoming characteristic, the incident occurred when a particular guest arrogantly expressed a fascist-sounding insult. In rightful indignation, Nick Clooney's fist came down in the mashed potatoes, squirting gravy cross table into Dr. Vester's eyes. The Captain calmly reached for his napkin, observing, "nothing has been explained quite so unclearly before." Law Professor, Joe Tomain, fortunately drew on his grasp of parliamentary procedure, and moved to skip dessert and adjourn.

On another memorable evening, each attendee was to amplify upon a political figure, most persuasive in their life. Bobby Kennedy was meaningfully memorialized. Another connected himself to Senator Patrick Moynihan. John

Vester, a former field surgeon in the Korean War, had been inspired by Dwight Eisenhower and more currently Senator Robert Dole. The only member of the group to have served in public office chose to personalize his offering with a story.

It was an early summer evening in 1967. The Cincinnati City Council race had emerged as a leading news story. Both Republicans and Democrats were going all out, putting up their big dogs. On the Democrat side, such names as John Gilligan and Tom Luken, and the Republicans were running the likes of Willis Gradison, Gene Ruelhman, and Bill Keating. The youngest Republican candidate, who had no chance to win, was driving all night to Washington for lunch with Senator Everett Dirksen, the country's highest ranking Republican, the Senate Minority Leader. The Senator had received a letter from the young Cincinnati and responded with a personal telephone call and an invitation for lunch. As the City Council candidate sat outside the Senator's office, awaiting the appointed time, a flurry of activity suddenly occurred... paramedics were rushing about and a stretcher rolled by. The Senator had just suffered a heart attack. The anxious administrative assistant graciously took time to apologize for the grave circumstances, and the City Council candidate sadly departed Washington for the long drive home.

The opportunity-lost lingered through the dog days of summer. The respective Parties were battling intensely for control of local government. Major issues were at stake, a riverfront stadium, re-development of Downtown. Astonishingly, in late September, Senator Dirksen called again; he was just back from an extended recovery. First words in that voice, always sounding like "tonsils marinated in honey"... "please forgive me young man for missing our lunch." Several days later, a round-trip airline ticket arrived from the Senator's office, and a mid-October lunch date was scheduled.

At lunch, the Senator shared affection for the late Republican, Robert A. Taft, for President Eisenhower, and President Johnson. The man from Illinois was known for the quip “a million here, a million there, pretty soon, you’re talking real money.” Also, known for his love of gardening and marigolds, whenever political discussions became too heated, he would lighten the moment by taking up his perennial campaign to have the marigold named the national flower. Dirksen was theatrical, and composed over a hundred writings of plays, short-stories, and novels.

Most persuasive to the young Council Candidate was Dirksen’s intimate sharing of the steerage, along with Hubert Humphrey, of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. It was Dirksen’s introduction of a substitute bill that broke the 57 day filibuster, attracting sufficient Republican swing votes for cloture, a pivotal moment in the course of the nation. At the signing, President Johnson presented the first pen to Everett Dirksen and the second to Martin Luther King. In citing Victor Hugo, Senator Dirksen declared, “stronger than all the armies is an idea whose time has come” and “the time has come for equality of opportunity in sharing of government, in education and in employment. It must not be stayed or denied.”

The following day, back in Cincinnati, the Council Candidate feeling enlightened by the experience, pondered what to do with it. A phone call from the Candidate’s wife interrupted the moment. “Have you seen the front page of the Post Time Star?” “No... why?” “It reads, Dirksen endorses Mayfield for City Council.” The next call was from Republican Headquarters. Chairman Gordon Scherer asked, “What the heck is going on?” It was like the most powerful Republican in the country was endorsing a pipsqueak in Cincinnati. No one had known of it or could imagine why. Something didn’t seem right, at least to the *party authorities*.

So that was the story, and my contribution of a political figure most influencing in life.

I fondly remember John Vester and his enabling an intellectual table for digesting opposing views. An inherent and collective sensitivity for the human condition and the nation's character seemed a common denominator, political agendas notwithstanding.

Doris Kearns Goodwin characterizes our old friend Abraham Lincoln's marshaling of disparate personalities, in her best seller, Team of Rivals, which included our own Samuel P. Chase. I anticipate enjoying the revelations portrayed in the screen version, while appreciating the benefit of John Vester's Soirée. They, very well, may go hand in hand.

Frank H. Mayfield, Jr.

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The Literary Club of Cincinnati