

Father and Sons (With apologies to Ivan Turgenev)

Some years ago, Frank Mayfield and I were talking just prior to the start of a meeting, and, as both of our fathers had been Club members, the subject of being a legacy came up. In looking around the room, we were somewhat surprised to note how many of those in attendance were also legatees. My recollection is that there were about fifteen that we recognized, and no doubt several others about whom we were unaware. Indeed, the number was such that I wondered how one could possibly become a member without a father to sponsor him. I suppose some here this evening actually earned their memberships.

Membership in our club has always reflected family connections, stretching from its mid-nineteenth century origins to the election of Peter Stern about two years ago, and the process has brought before us some of our most talented and distinguished members. Examples include the well-known artist James H. Beard and his son, James C. Beard, who eventually moved to New York City where he developed a national reputation as an illustrator. And then the two Bellamy Storers come to mind. The elder Storer served one term in Congress, taught for nineteen years at the Cincinnati Law School, and spent eighteen years as judge of the Superior Court of Cincinnati. His son, a graduate of the Cincinnati Law School, practiced law in the city, but, after marrying Maria Longworth, he spent much of his time in Washington and then in diplomatic posts in Belgium, Spain and Austria. Other impressive father and son connections are the Blacks, the Wilbys, the Hiltons, the Longworths, and the Dexters, I have intentionally left out those members still active in the club, both because the list would be far too long and because I would no doubt offend some by omitting them.

Ninety years ago, a former club member, Harry Mackoy, acknowledged this father and son relationship in a paper, and he concluded that “in a literary way, it seems that, judging from the experience of this club, two generations of members are all that we can expect from family.” He was much too pessimistic. In our own time, we need look no further than Lew Gatch and Chuck Carothers, who represent the third generations of their respective families.

But, if we seek our most prolific producer of legacy members, we must turn to Alphonso Taft, who foisted on the club four of his sons. Perhaps he felt a need to have a loud cheering section when he read his own papers. If that was the case, he was doomed to disappointment. Peter Rawson Taft, known as “Rossey” within the family, became a member in 1871, at age 25.

Although he graduated from Yale, first in his class, he struggled with poor health, a less than successful law career, and mental depression. He lived in Cincinnati for most of his adult life but produced only one paper for the club, titled “The Tichenor Case,” which chronicled a legal *cause célèbre* in Victorian England. However, before his marriage to Matilda Hulbert ended in divorce, he did manage to produce an heir, Hulbert Taft, who went on to become the long-time publisher of the *Cincinnati Times-Star*. “Rossey” died of tuberculosis in 1889 at age 43.

Rossey’s half-brother, William Howard Taft, joined the Club in 1878, shortly after graduating from Yale at the age of 21. As the only man to serve as both president and chief justice of the United States, he requires no elaboration from me. Furthermore, his long career as a public servant, particularly outside the city, did not permit him to be a very active Literarian. The 1903 record of the Club’s papers lists only four presentations, the titles of which do not recommend them for reading by current members.

William Howard's younger brother, Horace Dutton Taft, inherited all of the standard Taft DNA: Woodward High School, Yale College, Skull and Bones, legal training, an interest in politics . . . and a ferocious mustache. After returning to Cincinnati, following his graduation from Yale, he shared an apartment with brother William, located on Broadway between Fifth and Sixth Streets. In 1885, Horace graduated from the Cincinnati College of Law, but he found law unsatisfying. He joined the Literary Club in 1886. This most liberal of the Tafts, who even cast a heretical vote for Democrat Grover Cleveland in 1892, initially was to be the subject of this paper. That quickly proved to be a poor choice for this evening, for young Horace soon left Cincinnati, turned to teaching and founded the Taft School, now in Watertown, Connecticut. Once in the East, he retained no further association with the Club, and there is no record that he ever presented a paper during his short membership. Could he possibly have been an early advocate of a paperless society?

That leaves us with Charles Phelps Taft, Alphonso's eldest child. Another Yale graduate, of course, as well as a graduate of Columbia Law School, Charles joined the club in 1865 at the ripe age of 22. Following three years in Europe and an advanced degree from Heidelberg University, he returned to the Queen City and set up a law practice with Edward Noyes, fellow Literarian and future governor of Ohio. In 1873 he married Annie Sinton, daughter of David Sinton whom many considered to be Cincinnati's wealthiest citizen. Charles soon after gave up the practice of law to become part-owner and publisher of the *Cincinnati Times*, which later merged with *The Star* to become the *Cincinnati Times-Star*. About the same time he took over *Der Volksblatt*, a leading German newspaper. He also served one term in the U. S. House of Representatives and for over a decade was part owner of the Chicago Cubs, a period that, as every good Cubs fan knows, included the organization's last World Series triumph.

Charles became something of a business manager for his father-in-law, and even oversaw the operation of Sinton's large ranch, located near Corpus Christi in southern Texas. Later, it became the Taft Ranch, a 265,000 acre, scientifically managed cattle and cotton farm. Upon the death of David Sinton in 1900, Charles and Annie Taft inherited the ranch, numerous other properties, and the magnificent structure on Pike Street that is now the Taft Museum of Art, along with upwards of 15 million dollars. And that was when a million dollars meant something.

Of course, everyone here this evening is no doubt aware that we owe our present clubhouse to the efforts of the Tafts, and a few of our more venerable members may recall Ed Alexander's fine paper on the subject, presented in 1959. For the rest of us, it was re-printed in the 150th anniversary volume. Furthermore, all Cincinnatians benefit from the Tafts' magnanimous gift to the city of their home and art collection. However, Charles P. Taft contributed much more to this community, contributions which are seldom remembered today.

He used his highly influential newspapers, as well as his wife's inheritance, to support his brother William's political career, and he played an active role in state and local politics, even forcing himself to work at times with George B. Cox, the city's Republican political boss for almost twenty-five years. In 1879 he presented one of three public lectures in support of the drive to establish an art museum, a museum he envisioned as a teaching institution modeled after London's South Kensington Museum, now the Victoria and Albert Museum. Later, after the success of that drive, he served on the Cincinnati Art Museum's board of directors. He also served on the boards of the Cincinnati Zoo and the May Festival Association. As a longtime member of the Mercantile Library Association, after that organization received several gifts of property, he spent a number of years involved with the library's Real Estate board of managers. Although some of this may be written off as merely the expected community involvement of a

wealthy citizen, the extent of that involvement is a reflection of the civic expectations Alphonso Taft had preached to his children.

Now, I don't wish to exclude Annie Sinton Taft from this account, for she was very much involved in most of this activity. The Tafts took an understandably active interest in preserving the neighborhood around their home. Threatened by encroaching commercial interests, most notably the American Book Company to the south and the Pugh Printing Company building to the north, they worked to retain the area around Pike and East Fourth Street as a livable oasis. In part it was this concern that led them to purchase this building in 1929 and offer it at a very reasonable price to the Literary Club. Despite some hide-bound nay-sayers who did not wish to move, the club finally accepted the proposition the next year.

Almost twenty-five years earlier, the Tafts had supported the city's purchase of the old Lytle estate which then became the basis of Lytle Park. Just as that was happening, they became the principal financial supporters of the Anna Louise Inn, a Cincinnati Union Bethel institution developed as a safe and inexpensive lodging for working women "of modest means." This may have been more a reflection of Annie Taft's interests, as her father had long supported the Union Bethel. The facility, originally called The Working Girls Hotel, was soon re-named for the Tafts' second daughter. In 1926 they financially supported the construction of the Phelps apartments, our next door neighbor, as a way of attracting downtown business executives to the area. It is now, as you know, a residence hotel. The following year they saw to the establishment of the Cincinnati Institute of Fine Arts to promote art and music institutions in the city, and the Taft Museum of Art, which opened in 1932, evolved from that undertaking.

Thus, we owe not only our building to the Tafts but also much of the neighborhood which surrounds it, including its most permanent resident, the eleven foot bronze statue of a clean shaven Abraham Lincoln, sculpted by George Gray Barnard, which the Tafts had commissioned in 1912. Long before Charles P. Taft engaged in these various endeavors, however, he spent his Saturday evenings at the Literary Club, where he found both stimulation and relaxation. During his almost 65 year tenure in the club, he served only one year in any official capacity, as clerk in 1870-71, but he did present numerous papers and became an honorary member in 1922.

Like his brothers, his papers leaned towards serious topics. His first paper, delivered in 1871, titled "The German University and the American College," argued that American colleges must follow the German model if they wished to succeed academically. There is no record as to the number of club members who remained awake during the reading. He also produced papers titled "T. B. Macauley," "A Winter's Trip to Florida," "Some Suggestions on Art Matters," "The Associated Press," "On Modern Puritanism," and "The Fetich of Precedent," the latter an 1895 budget contribution that expressed his criticism of over-reliance on precedence in law and politics. His final paper, delivered in 1916, was a sketch of Nathan Hale. Five weeks following his death on the last day of 1929, the club's "Memorial" to him described his papers as "trenchant in intellectual quality."

So, this evening, as we sit here enjoying the fellowship of our anniversary meeting, savoring the fine food and wine in this wonderful facility, let us remember Charles Phelps Taft, an extraordinary citizen who loved his city, his neighborhood, and the Literary Club.

Robert C. Vitz

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