

## Cincinnati in 1849: The Dark Side

Several former Literary Club members have written about the founding of our club in 1849, now one hundred and seventy years ago tomorrow. Most recently, John Diehl, my predecessor as club historian, provided in 2003 an entertaining and illuminating account of the club's first year. As befitted John's sunny personality, his paper acknowledged Cincinnati's extraordinary growth and the club's "solid, splendid start." Much of that same spirit graces James Albert Green's paper, read in 1941. Green, another one of my predecessors, and Diehl both spoke highly of the city's rapid population growth, its booming economy, its developing infrastructure, and its many exciting social, cultural and intellectual organizations.

There was much about which to be excited. Railroads had already captured the imagination of forward-looking citizens. The early promise of the Little Miami Railroad, now contracted to connect to Springfield and Columbus, initiated feverish talk for building rail connections to St. Louis, Indianapolis, the East Coast, to Charleston, South Carolina, and even San Francisco. Construction on the Cincinnati, Hamilton & Dayton Railroad continued, generating much excitement, although Spring Grove Cemetery lot owners vigorously protested the railroad's plans for running its track through the cemetery. Buildings in the community rose up at an unprecedented pace as the city limits pushed outward toward the hills, and brick began replacing wood as the major construction material. Cincinnati had recently established a public waterworks, second in the nation only to Philadelphia, and people marveled at the 45 miles of pipe and 5,700 hydrants. A new gas works already supported over five hundred street lights.

High above Mt. Adams stood the three year old observatory, which boasted the largest telescope in the nation, and the soon-to-be world renowned-Burnet House rose rapidly on the corner of Vine and Third. The new College Building on Walnut housed the Mercantile Library, the Cincinnati Law Library, and the Chamber of Commerce. The Western Art Union occupied the northwest corner of Fourth and Sycamore and provided a home for numerous aspiring artists. The National Theatre hosted the best American actors of the era. Plans for the first German Saengerfest, to be held in the spring, set the path to future May Festivals, the construction of Music Hall, and the founding of the College of Music.

Iron works, furniture manufacturers, saw mills and boat builders affirmed the city's position as the leading western center of manufacturing and commerce. Nicholas Longworth's Catawba wine had earned a national reputation, and the hillsides along the river seemed to sprout new grape cuttings daily. The public landing greeted over a hundred steamboat arrivals each month, connecting the city to Pittsburg in the east, Saint Louis in the west, and New Orleans in the south, while the Miami & Erie Canal and the Whitewater Canal connected the

city to its hinterland. Cincinnati was indeed the Queen City, the Athens of the West, the must-see city of America.

Of course, boosters and promoters of that time helped create that image. Not that the accolades which came the city's way were erroneous, just a bit one-sided. Since I do not share John Diehl's sunny disposition, this evening I want to take you to the dark side of 1849.

With a population approaching 115,000, Cincinnati had become increasingly congested. In the age of horse-drawn vehicles, the hills confined most people to the basin, with the Mill Creek Valley providing the major exception. But, with most people working 10-12 hours a day, it was necessary to live within a comfortable walking distance of your employment. Factories required access to a water source, either for transportation or waste disposal, and so within that approximately three square mile basin you could find over ninety percent of the city's population, along with virtually all of its commercial and manufacturing life. Streets were often poorly paved or not paved at all. The many horses deposited large quantities of piss and shit, which created a filthy muck when it rained or snowed, or swirled into the atmosphere when it dried. During the late summer and autumn, large droves of pigs could still be found coursing through the city on their way to friendly stockyards, where what wasn't turned into a saleable commodity ended being dumped into either the Mill Creek or Deer Creek. As the city slowly replaced wood with coal as a source of energy, the air became increasingly dirty.

Despite the new public waterworks, filtering of water was done by the simple expedient of settling in a reservoir. Thus, the water that moved through the new iron pipes often arrived with the look of uninviting lemonade. Since many residents were not connected to the city's water system, they took their household water directly from wells or from the Ohio River or from Mill Creek, a disconcerting thought at the best of times. It was probably to their benefit that they knew nothing about bacteria.

It was a restless population that had made Cincinnati the sixth largest city in the country. German and Irish immigrants were changing the city's character. Growing concerns about slavery and possible emancipation had become part of the presidential election of 1848, and those anxieties continued to ripple through the city. Racial, ethnic and religious tensions which had led to major riots earlier in the decade remained unabated, simmering just below the surface. Indeed, just the previous year—in 1848—an angry mob threatened to destroy the courthouse while trying to lynch two German-American former soldiers whom they erroneously believed had raped a young woman.

There were also the usual problems of a compact urban population. Mixed in with listings of hotel guests, steamboat arrivals, market prices of local produce, numerous advertisements and announcements of various events, the daily newspapers listed a growing

number of criminal occurrences. Notices of burglary, robbery, knifings, counterfeiting, horse theft, speeding drivers, and drunken brawls appeared in their columns on a daily basis. Even murder, although less common than in today's more civilized era, showed up from time to time, and the poisoning of the Simmons family in May of 1849 received extensive coverage. As a point of interest, providing counsel for the defendant was a young attorney named Rutherford B. Hayes. This apparently did not damage his election to membership in our club the next year.

However, nothing quite eroded Cincinnati's confidence as much as the outbreak of cholera that year. Not that cholera was new. Cases had turned up in most years and in the early 1830s the disease had reached epidemic proportions. On New Year's Day, 1849, newspapers reported that two steamboats from New Orleans had brought passengers sick with cholera. Indeed, the captain of one steamboat notified local authorities that fifteen people had died on the trip upriver. Three days later the editor of *The Gazette* recommended unadulterated brandy as both a preventive and a cure for cholera. By mid-January, dropping temperatures and the onset of winter--or perhaps an increase in brandy sales--ended the city's concern.

In April, however, the dreaded cholera reappeared. Although a *Gazette* editorial noted that only sporadic cases had been found here and emphasized the slowness of the disease's approach as it made its way from New Orleans and Memphis to Saint Louis and Louisville, the newspaper cautioned its readers to depend on the Board of Health's announcements rather than the alarmist rumors already swirling around the city. For the next several weeks the Board of Health did release modest figures on the number of cholera cases in the city, and newspapers noted that most of them were in the unsanitary German or Irish neighborhoods, implying that more respectable citizens had little to fear. This changed the next month.

On May 10 Judge Charles Brough, a well-known jurist on the Court of Common Pleas, died from cholera. Soon after that, the figures released by the Board of Health began to turn upward, and the board announced that boat captains, hotel proprietors, boarding house owners, and physicians should report daily the number of new cases and any deaths from the disease. However, it soon became clear that not everyone was submitting cholera statistics to the Board of Health. Those supposedly required to do this feared the loss of their establishment's reputation and a subsequent decline in business. Even doctors feared the loss of reputation. This was compounded by the rivalry among the various "schools" of medical practice. Homeopaths, Allopaths, Eclectics, "Botanics," and "Old School" physicians each believed their practices were the most successful against the scourge. And who wanted to admit that their patients died more frequently than those of other doctors?

In the meantime, the columns of the local papers provided various explanations for cholera, along with numerous remedies which included: keeping the body horizontal; imbibing

cordial stimulants; and applying extreme heat to induce sweating. One particularly interesting remedy, contributed by “a physician in an extensive practice,” called for mixing ¼ ounce of pulverized gum, ¼ ounce of ground clove; ¼ ounce of ground cinnamon; and one pint of best brandy—this to be taken each half hour. It was not clear whether an entire pint of “best brandy” should be consumed every half hour, or the concoction taken in smaller doses. Dr. Daniel Drake, the city’s most eminent physician, warned citizens not to leave the city. Traveling by stage or steamboat, he cautioned, was bound to irritate the bowels causing constipation and leaving one vulnerable to the disease.

In June, the *Gazette*--in an essay titled “What Can Be Done?”--used the dreaded word, “epidemic,” and, indeed, as temperatures rose there had been a fearful increase in the number of deaths. Drake estimated about one hundred per day. Concerned clergy called for a day of fasting and prayer, and the mayor recommended that on the coming Thursday, July 3, all citizens should observe such a day. Its impact remains unclear. However, on that same day, an anonymous note pointed out that the local supply of coffins was virtually exhausted and that general wagons had been called on to serve as hearses.

Up to this point, nothing had proven effective in combatting the disease. Sarsaparilla, calomel, camphor, doses of sulfur, and smudge pots on street corners were all tried. A number of people pointed to the “filth” in the streets and one or two suggested the public water as a source of the disease. Nothing seems to have been done to abate these conditions. Near the end of August, an unidentified physician announced his own remedy for diarrhea: Burn a cork and mix the ashes with some loaf sugar, add a small quantity of brandy and form the mixture into a black paste. Take a teaspoon several times a day, he assured newspaper readers, and this will check diarrhea and prevent cholera. Several days later the *Gazette* pronounced the epidemic over, and it is true that the number of announced cholera cases declined rapidly. Who knew the medicinal powers of burnt cork?

If Cincinnati’s anxieties over cholera gradually disappeared, the city confronted new troubles. In mid-summer the court house burned down, destroying numerous legal records. By late September, the river level had fallen so low as to virtually stop commercial traffic, and activity on the public landing came to a virtual standstill. Then, a series of letters in the *Gazette* blasted city leaders for their reluctance to push for a rail connection to Saint Louis and eventually on to San Francisco, noting that Pittsburgh, Indianapolis and Columbus had accelerated their plans for just such a connection. The optimism of January was now in full retreat.

On October 3, Nicholas Longworth wrote a public letter describing the “rot” that was damaging vineyards along the city’s hillsides, possibly the first mention of the destruction that would soon kill the local wine industry. Later that month, state elections were held, and the

Gazette's Whigish editor became apoplectic over the behavior of Democrats, calling it, "a reckless, violent and disorderly spirit abroad which threatens the peace of society." Particularly irksome were the "Locofocos." Now, time does not permit an explanation of Locofocoism, or the origin of the name, let it suffice to say that they were considered a radical element in the Democratic Party that often worked closely with Southern secessionists, and that the *Cincinnati Enquirer* supported their views.

The last weeks of the year brought quieter days. November rains solved the river problem; health issues all but disappeared; complaints of election fraud dissipated . . . and a notice of a new Literary Society appeared in the pages of the *Gazette*. Described as an organization of young men who would meet on Saturday evenings to listen to a presentation by a member and then debate an issue of present concern. But wait! The society's first meeting was held on December 8 . . . and the public was invited. Its president, one C. S. Pomeroy, would give a lecture. These were not our founders. I quickly scrambled through back issues of the local newspapers, searching for some mention of THE LITERARY CLUB. I found nothing. The papers covered activities of the Horticultural Society, the History and Philosophical Society of Ohio, Young Men's Mercantile Library Association matters, lectures sponsored by The New England Society, a variety of musical performances, and even described paintings exhibited at William Wiswell's Art Gallery. But of our first meeting . . . not a word. Perhaps that was the darkest part of 1849.

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