

Simeon Johnson

Last February, our much-loved member Robert Smith died. Robert had been a member for just over 40 years—an impressive length of time, especially considering the type of people he had to put up with at our Monday evening meetings. However, his club tenure comes nowhere close to a club record. Currently we have five active members whose longevity exceeds Dr. Smith's: Bill Burleigh and John Tew have already crossed the 42-year threshold; while Ducky Wadsworth comes in with an impressive 49 years. Lew Gatch joined in 1965, and I will let you do the math. That still leaves us with Tuck Asbury who has now completed 59 years as a Literarian, an extraordinary tenure indeed.

But, has anyone ever held a longer membership? Well, that set me off in a search of our somewhat disorganized and incomplete records. My first thought was of our very young founders, those "immortals" in the words of John Diehl. Unfortunately, they proved not to be so immortal. Ainsworth Spofford dropped his membership sometime after leaving for Washington, D.C., in 1861, while Hazen White, Reuben Stevenson, Stanley Matthews and Isaac Collins all died in the nineteenth century and now peacefully reside in Spring Grove Cemetery. Several others also left the city and at least two seem to have just disappeared.

Then, my thoughts turned to Charles Wilby, who, as many of you know, gave over three hundred papers during his years in this club. Surely that enormous contribution to our bound volumes must have covered multiple decades, if not an entire century. But Wilby, who died in 1929, joined the club in 1871, thus granting him only 58 years as a Literarian. Then I turned to

John W. Herron, a prominent local attorney and father-in-law of William Howard Taft. He joined just weeks after the club's first meeting and died in 1912, a membership lasting 62 years. Sorry Tuck, you still have work to do. But, as it turns out, Herron's 62 years is not the record either . . . not even close. Now, it is not possible to check every member's longevity, but I do believe I have found our longest serving member in Simeon Moses Johnson who graced the club with his presence for 72 years. He joined in 1885 and died in 1957, three years following his last paper. I believe there is no one who can challenge him.

But, who was Simeon Johnson? His paternal grandfather, David Israel Johnson, emigrated from England in 1818, and, after spending some months living with a brother in southeastern Indiana, arrived in the Queen City in 1820. He was among the first Jews to settle in the rapidly growing community, and was among the founders of Congregation Bene Israel. According to Charles Greve's *Centennial History of Cincinnati*, in 1821 David Johnson fathered Frederick A. Johnson, the first Jewish child born here. Although David Johnson died in 1842 at the age of 47 and is buried in the old Chestnut Street Jewish Cemetery, Frederick Johnson had a distinguished career as an attorney and at some point picked up the title of Honorary, probably in recognition of his years in the Ohio General Assembly. And now that brings us to his son, Simeon Moses Johnson.

Simeon, a name introduced in the Book of Genesis as the second son of Jacob and Leah, was born on March 18, 1859 and was reared in the Reform Jewish tradition. After attending Hughes High School, at that time located on West Fifth Street, he attended the Cincinnati College, followed by a degree from the Cincinnati Law College, graduating in 1880. Among his

law professors were Manning Force and George Hoadley, both prominent Literarians. Five years later, on a chilly Saturday evening in December, 1885, Charles Wilby, William Coppock, and Judge Hiram Peck proposed the 26-year old Johnson for membership in the Literary Club. The vote was unanimous. He instantly became a regular attendee, and in March, 1886, he delivered his first paper, titled "The Young Lawyer," a budget contribution.

Johnson's self-deprecating humor was on full display in this maiden effort. His paper began, "The young lawyer, we all know him. We have all met him. He is generally in a hurry. Has a quick, nervous walk and a highly important air. Wears nose glasses, but they are to make him look intellectual, am sorry to say the desired result is not often effected." A year and a half later he was elected trustee, no doubt with solid support from the club's already numerous attorneys.

Johnson also became active in local politics, serving many leadership roles in the Democratic Party and voicing strong opposition to the Republican machine directed by Boss Cox. In 1912-13 he served as vice-mayor during the short-lived reform administration of Henry T. Hunt. Later he supported the new city charter that established the city council/city manager system of government, although he remained in the Democratic Party. In 1915 he declined the Democratic nomination for mayor and five years later he declined an appointment to the Ohio Supreme Court. He also survived 77 years as a member of the Ohio Bar Association and was elected president in 1912.

His obituary in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* referred to his "energy, skill and integrity." It also described him as a "gracious, impeccably dressed, well-spoken gentlemen." "His courtly

manners, his flowing Spencerian handwriting, his polished speech, his urbane humor, all set him apart as an American Victorian who . . . lived into the atomic age.” Now, obituaries traditionally are full of praise and good thoughts . . . a tradition we all hope continues for many years. However, there seems to be another side to this “well-spoken gentleman,” at least early in his career.

Apparently our Simeon, like his Biblical namesake, had a temper. In October, 1890, Johnson and a certain Judge Robertson, serving as opposing counsels in a probate proceeding, abandoned their heated legal arguments and went after each other with fists. Newspapers remarked that Johnson received a bruised face but that Robertson appeared untouched. Both attorneys later apologized to Judge Goebel. And then during the same year, in a more serious altercation, Johnson and his law partner, Wallace Burch, attacked a local editor with whips.

This situation grew out of a medical case. A Dr. Palmer, in operating on a patient with “womb trouble,” had left behind part of a needle. After several weeks of increasing discomfort, the patient had the needle removed at a local hospital. She then obtained the services of Burch and Johnson to bring a malpractice suit against Palmer. The attorneys, “not disposed to create any ‘noise’ about this matter,” wrote to Dr. Palmer asking him to call at their offices to amicably discuss the situation. Palmer then insisted that they come to his office instead. Subsequently, no meeting was held and a suit was filed in court.

Dr. J. C. Culbertson, editor of the *Lancet-Clinic*, took great umbrage at this “attack” on a fellow physician. In an editorial, he called the case “a contemptible, villainous attempt at blackmail.” “The lawyers, or creatures who call themselves by that appellation,” he continued, “should at once be prosecuted with

such a superlative degree of vim and vigor for their infamous attempt to obtain money under false pretenses . . . and [should] be made a wholesome lesson to all of their ilk and tribe.” The reference to “tribe” was no doubt intended to alert readers that Johnson was Jewish.

According to Dr. Culbertson’s account in *The Enquirer*, Burch and Johnson had appeared at his office the next day and assaulted him with three-foot whips, and it was only with the assistance of his printing office foreman that the two attorneys were pushed out of the office. The result of all this was that, since no serious injury was done, Burch and Johnson were fined \$2 each for “cowhiding Dr. Culbertson.” I do not know the outcome of the malpractice suit.

Of greater interest to us is his role in the club. Johnson’s contributions were many. Along with his term as trustee, the club elected him vice-president in 1930, and then, following that well-established pattern, he served as president in 1931-32. He also presented some 45 papers covering a wide range of topics, but he frequently returned to the theme of Cincinnati history. He often wrote about the city’s various visitors and residents, including Charles Dickens, Lafcadio Hearn, the Trollopes, both mother and son, and William Henry Harrison. During the 1930s and 40s, he entertained the membership with humorous accounts of the city exactly one hundred years ago on the evenings he delivered, and in 1947, in the last of these papers, he even spoofed his own penchant for doing so.

His presidential year was unremarkable, highlighted only by the club’s acceptance of the Appleton Memorial Window, now in our library, and the continuation of the Monday evening meeting experiment as it moved toward permanence. At the anniversary dinner that year, he

contributed to the evening's budget with a paper titled, "The 150th Anniversary of the Literary Club," a repeat of his 1888 paper. In this pun-filled spoof, the club president by means of electrical wires attached to the chairs could now shock slumbering listeners into some level of alertness. In addition, honorary memberships were now automatically conferred upon deceased members so that dues could be claimed against their estates. Furthermore, because the club secretary had read an order for 100 membership lists as 100,000 and so gave it to the printer, fiscal responsibility required all new members to take the name of a former member. There was much more in this humorous vein.

After his death in 1957, John Gatch, Rabbi Victor Reichert, and Walter Draper presented a memorial in which they praised his character. Of course, what else does one say in a memorial. But, in this case, the words ring very true. Johnson is described as a man of erect bearing, aristocratic dignity, and fastidious dress—genteel characteristics that one can easily picture in a person who spent almost half of his life in the 19th century, and the only member who attended both the 50th and 100th anniversaries of this club.

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