

AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING

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John Diehl

For my historian's paper this evening, I tried to paint a thumbnail sketch of the first year of our Literary Club with glimpses of Cincinnati in 1849, the young men who started it and what they did during that first formative year to found an organization, that has not only survived for over a century and a half, but still enjoys robust health and solid prospects for the future.

Cincinnati of the 1840s was a handsome town nestled beneath the surrounding hills. Charles Dickens, usually disdainful about what he saw in America during his visit in 1842, was quite pleased with Cincinnati. He wrote in his *American Notes*, "Cincinnati is a beautiful city; cheerful, thriving and animated. I have not often seen a place that commends itself so favorably and pleasantly to a stranger at the first glance as this does: with its clean houses of red and white, its well-paved roads and footways of bright tile. Nor does it become less prepossessing on a closer acquaintance. The streets are broad and airy, the shops extremely good, the private residences remarkable for their elegance and neatness I was quite charmed with the appearance of the town and its adjoining suburb of Mt. Auburn; from which the city, lying in an amphitheater of hills, forms a picture of remarkable beauty and is seen to great advantage."

Unlike Frances Trollop, ten years earlier, Dickens graciously omitted the minor seamy side of the Cincinnati of the 1840s. There were occasional droves of hogs in some of the streets. The town was well on its way to becoming Porkopolis as well as the Queen City of the West. As was common in most towns, in those days, there were no sewers. Privies and outhouses needing attention, were emptied by crews who worked at night. They drove wagons rigged with covered iron tanks derisively called honey-carts. Privy cleaning was an odoriferous but apparently a lucrative business. It was rumored that Mr. 'B', king of the honey-carts, wore a diamond stickpin even when dressed only in his pants, shoes and long-john underwear. Cincinnati boasted a state-of-the-art-1820s municipal water system. Charles Cist reports that by 1841 over twenty-four miles of water lines had been laid, more than half of it wooden pipe. Water was taken directly from the river and sent through the pipes with a pump powered by an engine rescued from the old steamboat, *Vesta*. Sometimes the water was quite muddy. Housewives would let it settle in a barrel before being able to use it on washday. Manning Force, one of our first-year members, while dining just after arriving in Cincinnati was served a tall glass of a yellowish concoction that looked like cloudy cider. He said to the waiter, "I'd rather just have water". The waiter replied, "That is water".

Despite the minor deficiencies that went with the times, Cincinnati of the 1840s was not only the Queen City of the West, it was the Wonder City of the West - the fastest growing city in the country. In just ten years, its population more than doubled from 46,000 in 1840 to 115,000 in 1850. Charles Cist, a sensible and highly respected journalist published in his *Cincinnati in 1841* an article which reads in part - "I venture

the prediction that within one hundred years from this time (1841), Cincinnati will be the greatest city in America; and by the year of our Lord two thousand, the greatest city in the world". It's now the year of our Lord 2003 and I'm afraid Cincinnati still has quite a way to go before reaching that miraculous goal of global supremacy. The spectacular growth did come, but in 1841 the local prophets based their predictions on the unprecedented immigration to the city and the booming river and canal commerce. They had no idea that the infant Little Miami Railroad, already chugging its way as far as Xenia and Columbus portended a massive network of rails that would spread the population and the economy all over the West and concentrate pockets of it in places other than Cincinnati.

Despite the shortfall, Cist's article gives a good inkling of the optimistic, nobody-can-catch-us atmosphere in Cincinnati in the 1840s. There was a dynamic exuberance about the city that attracted newcomers in droves. Doctors, lawyers, artists, scholars and skilled craftsmen of all kinds flocked to this city of promise. Two of every three people here were recent arrivals from someplace else.

Most of the twelve young men who started our Literary Club were relative newcomers. The list included Robert Buchanan, Isaac Collins, Nelson Cross, Stanley Matthews, Martin Sheldon, Ainsworth Spofford, Reuben Stephenson, Algernon Sullivan, H. G. Wade, Hazen White, Peyton Wyeth and John Zachos. All were just on the threshold of their careers. Buchanan was an agent for a cotton factory, Cross and Sullivan were attorneys, Matthews was a lawyer and an editor of one of the city's dozen or so newspapers, the *Cincinnati Herald*, an anti-slavery paper that riled the merchants who did business with the South. He subsequently became a justice of the Supreme Court. Spofford was a clerk in Truman's book store and eventually became Librarian of Congress. Wade was a clerk at the W. H. Harrison Co., Wyeth was a budding portrait painter, White taught at a young ladies seminary and Zachos was a principal at Miss Coxe's Cincinnati Female Academy. I haven't been able to find the occupations of Collins, Sheldon and Stephenson in 1849 but I know that all of them were bright young men in their twenties.

Literary clubs were relatively common in America in the 18th and early 19th centuries. There were at least two in Cincinnati before 1849. Doctor Daniel Drake had organized a literary club that met in his house on Third Street. When the group of personally-invited, prominent Cincinnatians assembled, Drake would ring a bell for order and he or one of the other members would read a paper on some literary subject. There was the Semi-Colon Club, which met alternately at the adjoining elegant residences of Charles Stetson and William Greene. Harriet Beecher Stowe and Judge James Hall were their stars. Its meetings were enlivened by suppers. Mrs. Stowe published a volume of papers read before the club entitled *The May Flower* and dedicated it to the club. This club was made up of men and women of considerable social stature and literary ability. As far back as 1727, Benjamin Franklin started his Leather Apron Club or Junto in Philadelphia. It was strikingly similar to our club at its beginning - made up of twelve young men in their twenties with the same goals in mind.

It's pure conjecture, but I imagine our twelve young founders, all book-lovers, became acquainted with each other by frequenting the bookstore at 111 Main Street where Ainsworth Spofford reigned as clerk and later part-owner. That's where the plan to

start a literary club was hatched. None had been invited to join Daniel Drake's august group. They didn't have the social stature for the elite Semi-Colon Club. They decided to organize their own club to suit themselves.

A preliminary meeting was held at Nelson Cross's office at Third and Hammond Streets to appoint a committee to draft a constitution for the new club. One of the cherished treasures in our library are the club minutes going back to the first official meeting of the club and including, in Ainsworth Spofford's own hand, the constitution, by laws and early proceedings. At that first official meeting of the club on October 29th 1849, the committee made its report with a detailed document consisting of a preamble, seventeen articles of the constitution and thirteen by laws. In the preamble the purpose and goal of the club was clearly stated and bears repeating; "We, the undersigned, with a view to promote the wider culture of our intellectual, moral and social powers and believing that a union of mind in the pursuit of these high aims will secure greater strength and success, do hereby form ourselves into an association with these objects, viz.- To discuss the leading questions of the age; to compare views on all the topics of politics, morals, science and literature, to acquire and communicate ideas, and to develop our habits of thought and our faculties of speech. And for the practical attainment of these objects, with a firm faith in intellectual progress, we hereby pledge to each other our hearts and hands, and to draw together this brotherhood of mind, we do hereby establish the following constitution."

A few highlights from the Articles and By Laws: This association shall be called The Literary Club.

The funds of the society shall be raised in the following manner, each member on his admission shall pay an initiation fee of one dollar - there shall be a monthly tax of twenty-five cents to each member to meet current expenses.

No person shall be admitted a member of the society except on the proposition of two or more members - The action of the society shall be by ballot. The secretary shall open and count the votes in the presence of the society and the whole number of votes cast shall be necessary to a choice.

The active members of this society shall never exceed twenty-five in number.

The regular meetings shall be held weekly on Monday evening starting at seven o'clock.

There shall be held on the last Monday of every month, an informal meeting of the society, the object of which shall be to cherish a freer social spirit among the members, and a less formal intercourse than the regular debates allow, to promote a closer union and a heartier interest in each other. To secure a definite aim to these meetings, some topic or topics of literary interest shall be selected by the society one week previous, as the subject of the evening, by which conversation shall be shaped; and this exercise with the reading of literary papers shall constitute the business of the evening.

At the regular meetings of the society the exercise shall consist of debates on some question selected by vote of the society.

Then follow four pages of details on how the debates were to be handled. Questions to be argued were selected two weeks in advance. To assign debaters, the secretary called the roll for volunteers to participate in the discussion. The first volunteer to choose the affirmative would lead as principal affirmative disputant with the same procedure for the principal negative disputant. In case of failure to find a volunteer for one or both sides of the argument, the president shall appoint a member to fill the vacancy. The principal disputants shall open the question, each being allowed twenty minutes to speak or read their arguments. The question shall then be open to the society for volunteer remarks, which in all cases shall be limited to ten minutes and no member shall be allowed to speak twice the same evening except the regular disputants who may each occupy ten minutes besides the time allotted for the opening argument. At the end of the debate the president shall sum up the arguments on both sides and shall weigh them against each other and render his decision of the question solely on the merits of the arguments advanced after which the secretary shall read the question to the society and it shall decide upon its merits, the secretary calling the roll for yeas and nays, and announce the result of the vote.

The constitution and by laws were amended and fine-tuned frequently throughout the year as a need arose.

Once started, the Club attracted a number of likely candidates for membership. An amendment was needed to raise the original limit. Thirty-two new members were elected during the first year. A few resigned, some moved out of town and some chose to become 'honorary' members, as provided by the by laws, who could still attend meetings but not vote. The rules were strict about attendance. A member absent for three consecutive meetings, without a legitimate excuse submitted by the sixth week, was stricken from the roster.

It's interesting to note that one of the new members elected February 2nd 1850, was Rutherford B. Hayes, later president of the United States. The minutes reveal that he was by no means a token member. He was a regular attendant, took an active part in the debates and discussions and served on committees and a term as president of the Club.

The first question argued by the Club was at the meeting of November 5th 1849: "Ought a system of universal and liberal education be conducted at the public expense in this country?" After summing up the arguments, the president decided they were about equal. When the vote of the members was taken, the question was decided in the negative 5 to 4.

The debates tackled some rather interesting and profound questions in the weekly sessions that give a clue to the thinking at the time. A few examples will illustrate.

"Ought capital punishment be abolished?" was decided in the affirmative 6 to 3.

"Is an aristocratic form of government more conducive to advancement of the arts and sciences than a democratic form?" was one of the few ending in a unanimous decision, 7 to 0 for the negative.

Another happened at the debate on December 12th 1849 when the question, "Would the peaceful annexation of Canada to the United States be for the best interests of both countries?" was decided 7 to 0 for the affirmative.

"Would a congress of nations tend to promote peace and happiness in the world?"
Yes 4 No 3.

"Is national wealth unfavorable to virtue?" Yeas 3 Nays 3. The president broke the tie by voting in the affirmative.

Eleven years before the Civil War, the question, "Are there causes existing at present (1850) from which we have reason to fear a dissolution of the Union?" leaned toward the negative 8 to 5.

The question, "Ought our naturalization laws be amended to retard admission of foreigners?" was answered with a resounding 14 to 1, 'No'.

When it came to the question, "Should females exercise the right of suffrage?", the ladies lost out by a vote of 6 to 3.

The debates became a bit sticky at times with heated discussions that went on into the night. There was finally a resolution passed to stop the harangue at 10 o'clock and adjourn to finish it at the next meeting.

The 'informal' meetings on the last Monday of the month provided lighter fare. A subject for discussion was assigned in advance to give members time to prepare for the conversation at the meeting. Topics such as 'American Orators', 'American Prose Writers' and 'Human greatness, in what it consists and in whom it has been best exemplified' were discussed with great animation. There were also poetry, stories, singing and refreshments. Secretary William McDowell recording the minutes of the 'informal' of May 25th 1850 wrote, "The exuberant feeling was not repressed but over egg nog and sweet confectionery the mirthful anecdotes and plenteous song elicited a warmth of sociability that made the big heart of the Club rejoice."

Short papers, read by a member, were often a part of 'informal' programs. The reading of papers began in a small way when a by law was amended on December 3rd 1849 providing that (in addition to the debate) "There shall be read at each regular meeting, an essay by a member, not to exceed 15 minutes, on a subject of his choice." Eventually, but long after the first year, debates apparently became too hot to handle, were abandoned and the reading of papers, as we know it today, became the dominant feature of all meetings.

There were a few interesting extra-curricular activities during the first year. In May of 1850, the Club invited Ralph Waldo Emerson to Cincinnati to deliver a series of lectures. As James Albert Green wrote in one of his papers, "Emerson was, at that time, regarded as a daring radical, a leader in the new thought that would break the shackles of the past. Our Club, in bringing him to town probably were flaunting the fact that they held very advanced views." After a special meeting to visit with the Club on the 27th of May, Emerson gave a series of five lectures at the Universalist church on Walnut Street on 'Natural Aristocracy', 'Eloquence', 'The Spirit of the Times', 'England' and 'Books'. Emerson was delighted with the patronage he received. The Club regaled him with a picnic at Fort Ancient before sending him back home with his purse full of money.

The Club celebrated the 4th of July 1850 with a gala affair at Latonia Springs, Kentucky. Ainsworth Spofford gave what the minutes record as a 'very excellent and eloquent oration', William Guilford read a 'patriotic and mirth-moving poem'. Even after

drinking to some thirty-one toasts, they were still on their feet and having a rollicking good time.

The first anniversary celebration was held on Tuesday, October 29th 1850, in the auditorium of John Gundry's commercial school in the Apollo Building at the northwest corner of Fifth and Walnut Streets. It was planned with typical Club precision. Since it was on the exact anniversary date but not on a regular meeting night, it was called an extra-informal meeting. Committees were appointed. "Ferguson and Blackwell to serve as poets, McDowell and Collins to constitute the committee on music, William Guilford to provide a budget of fun, Spofford, Mallon, Collins and Blackwell a committee on the all-important toasts, David Brown to give a few facts concerning British social clubs and the executive committee to have discretionary power in making provision for the occasion." They pulled out all of the stops. I'm sure it was a marvelous party.

I think you'll agree that our Literary Club got off to a solid, splendid beginning in 1849-50. Benjamin Franklin's Junto withered away after thirty years, when Franklin was sent to England on a long diplomatic mission. Daniel Drake's august club ceased to exist when Drake left the city to pursue his career elsewhere. The lights went out at the Semi-Colon Club when their stars moved away. Although our Club has been blessed with a succession of specially devoted members, over the years, such as Ainsworth Spofford, Charles Wilby, Lawrence Carr, Esie Asbury and Robert Hilton, it was never dominated by a single member with a tight grip on the reins. It has always had a solid core of dedicated members who truly love the Club and the goals our founders set forth in that preamble of 1849. It has continued on a steady course for the past 154 years and prospects for the future never looked brighter.
