

A Galaxy of Guests

Our twelve founders were a group of unusually bright, innovative young men. They had the characteristics and talent to plant the seed of an organization that would not only last but thrive bountifully for over 150 years with no end in sight. They had a lively interest in current affairs, in contentious debate, in writing and good literature all wrapped in a mantle of delightful good fellowship. They were proud of their club and seemed to enjoy sharing its pleasures with invited guests.

Before the Club's first birthday, they embarked on an ambitious project. They decided to invite Ralph Waldo Emerson, in the heyday of his literary career, to come to Cincinnati from Concord to visit the Club. In addition to inviting him to visit, they offered to sponsor a series of his lectures. We have in the Club archives, a copy of the address our founding father, Ainsworth Spofford, gave when he was here for the Club's Fiftieth anniversary in 1899. He included an interesting account of Emerson's visit, so let's hear it from him in his own words.

“During the first year of the Club we had a visit from Ralph Waldo Emerson. It came about in this way: His fame as an original thinker and lecturer was well established in the East, but he had never yet visited the West. Many of us had read with delight his early essays (and) books which I am fond of recommending as one of the finest intellectual tonics in all literature. So I took around a subscription paper among our Club members and some of the solid men of Cincinnati-----and soon had \$150 pledged for a course of lectures from Mr. Emerson. I wrote him asking him to accept our invitation, with a guarantee of this sum for traveling expenses, and as much more as the receipts of the lectures might bring, less the expense of the hall. He replied that he had just settled down to his spring gardening (it was the

month of May, 1850) but that my letter had awakened a long-cherished desire to see the Ohio River and all that lay between it and his home.”

“So Emerson came and gave us five lectures which were the foundation of his book *Conduct of Life* (published in 1860). So well attended were they that when I came to tender the net proceeds to him there were some \$560. Mr. Emerson said, with that quaint, wise and radiant smile of his. “What shall I do, Mr. Spofford, with these gifts of the good Providence which you bring me?” “Well, Mr. Emerson”, said I, “I think, perhaps, that you had better invest them.” “An excellent idea,” he replied; I will write to my brother William, a lawyer in Brooklyn, who knows about such things, and get him to find me an investment. So, will you get me some kind of draft for \$500 and give me the rest in money?” He continues.

“Our Literary Club took Mr. Emerson on an excursion to Fort Ancient, that old Indian earthwork, and we sat long under the trees on the grassy mounds, on one of those delicious June days when the earth puts on her choicest array to stir the senses to gladness. We chatted over our modest repast, moistened by sundry bottles of Ohio’s choicest vintage.”ⁱ

Fort Ancient was a favorite destination for Literary Club outings. They enjoyed the pleasant journey on the brand new Little Miami Railroad that skirted Fort Ancient and could whisk them there, at the then amazing speed of twenty miles an hour, in less than two hours. The 1850s railroad guide for the Little Miami touted excursion business with a whole chapter devoted to the charms of Fort Ancient.ⁱⁱ

The Club invited Emerson again in 1854 to the fifth anniversary celebration. He was busy with a full schedule of lectures and writing at the time. He was also considered the center of the American transcendental movement.ⁱⁱⁱ He came, but he didn’t come. Another treasure in the archives

is his rather cryptic reply to the invitation. Thornton Hinkle in his paper of June 26, 1915 wrote: “Prowling among some of the old Club papers I found this letter. It was read at the Thirtieth Anniversary, 1879, and will very well bear reading again tonight. Here it is.”^{iv}

It may be a trifle tedious listening on a full stomach, after our sumptuous feast, but it’s a unique short essay, on one of his favorite subjects, by a prominent nineteenth century author written specially for the Literary Club. The Club seemed to like it on their thirtieth in 1879 and when Thornton Hinkle read it in 1915. Since we’re talking about Emerson, it may be appropriate to read it on our 157th anniversary. So here it is again:

It’s dated: “Concord, October 20, 1854

Gentlemen,

By this day’s mail comes to me your invitation to celebrate the Anniversary of your Society and to that end eat a supper with you. I accept your kind invitation.

I do not mean to say that I shall leave Concord on such a day and opposing space with the material appliances of steam and iron roads (I trust we have sucked that orange dry), present myself on such another day and take my seat at your feast. That (would be) a performance gross, sensuous and mercenary, as indeed for the most part all mere performance is. We are the fools of our senses. Our eyes and hands set snares in our path.

Still I shall eat of your feast. For to the open soul, the nutritious oyster is ever open, and to the loving heart its deep-sea secret is ever told. And, as of old, in that travail of the desert, at the bidding of the heroic soul, the roast quail cometh horsed upon the sightless couriers of the air.

How are we baffled and defeated of our aims, by words and names which are but the shadows of things! Here and there, if we will but consider

it, are neither here nor there. You are not there---neither am I here, and Cincinnati isn't and Concord aint. Why should we also not enjoy an original relation to quail and oyster? What theory have we to explain these phenomena? To the ferocious predatory soul they are simply things to be hunted, shot down or fished up. The sensual age sees in them at best only bone, and sinew and muscle, and they suggest nothing better than good digestion waiting on appetite.

Only the fairest soul perceives that oysters and quail are also moral. He not only is made aware of motion and taste, and fiber, and palatable juices, but behind this he perceives that which symmetrically relates not only him with oyster and quail, but all three with star and sun, ocean. Plato, grass, lobster salad, gas, and not only with these material and so phenomenal entities, but through these as through transparent crystals he sees the shining laws that govern all, and perceives that beauty of motion is identical with the beauty of holiness, and that oyster sauce and perfection of heart are one. An oyster must be made man before it is fully an oyster. All things, bi-valves and else, speak to and reason with us. You sing to us in choral harmonies with the spheres, and help us to solve the infinite Sphinx's riddle, if we have ears to hear.

Very beautiful is that back-wood myth, telling how whole neighborhoods of frivolous cocoons, sharp necessity compelling them, got at length into such perfect symmetrical relation with downright inexorable David Crockett and made a covenant with him, suspending gross powder and shot. At bottom coon and Crockett are one.

Hence, gentlemen, you perceive that when I say I accept your invitation, and will eat your supper, I mean it to be taken in a certain fine and transcendental sense, which, after all, is the only practical or possible

sense, for the ideal alone is and the actual is not. I and not you shall eat the supper, and although you shall seem to pay for it, yet not you. I shall pay for it.

Rely upon it, gentlemen, until all can see these things in their large relations, we truly eat no supper---the supper will eat us. Still this pecuniary consideration would be a matter of no moment with you, as I am well aware, having, myself, on a former occasion furnished suppers fit for the gods, which the Cincinnati public kindly accepted nearly gratis.

- - - - For yourself and the Club, accept sentiments which make the sea and sun sublime, and fill with melody the song of the silent stars.

R. W. Emerson

P.S. Man is an endogenous microcosm. R.W.E.”^v

So, Ralph Waldo Emerson came to our Fifth only in transcendental spirit, but the anniversary was nevertheless a joyous success. In Hinkle’s paper, we read, “Judge James, who was the editor for the evening, (of what we now call the Budget) read as one contribution a ‘delicate and delicious burlesque of Emerson by one who studied and admired him and had the honor of his personal friendship’. The contributor was Benjamin M. McConkey, an artist of great promise. His self portrait (hanging there in the southeast corner of the reading room) and the unfinished landscape (over the mantel) were presented by his widow to the Club. He became a member of the Club in 1852 and died a very few years after.”^{vi}

On May 12th 1866 John Roebling, foremost civil engineer and bridge builder of his time and his son, Washington, were guests of the Club. There is little more than a bare mention of their presence in the minutes. It is pure conjecture, but they were possibly invited by member General John Pope. Washington Roebling served on General Pope’s staff during the Civil War in

the Second Bull Run, Antietam and Stone Mountain campaigns. “Through four years of war young Roebling had risen in rank from private to Colonel. He had ridden captive balloons over Chancellorsville, had built military suspension bridges in record time at Fredericksburg and Harpers Ferry. He had personally dragged the first cannon up Little Round Top to halt Hood’s famous charge at Gettysburg. He had received three brevets for courageous conduct and had been pronounced ‘ablest and bravest’ by his commanding general.^{vii} He was a very able partner with his father.

The Roeblings were in Cincinnati supervising the building of our suspension bridge, of course. It was a prodigious engineering project with, the then, world’s longest span of 1057 feet. Construction, delayed by the Civil War, had been resumed with vigor. By the time of their visit in May 1866, the towers had been completed and the last of the thousands of wires making up the main cables had been spun into place, with much still to be done. The bridge was opened to traffic on New Year’s Day 1867. I wish I could tell you just what went on during the Roeblings’ visit to the Club, but the records are silent on the subject.

Booker T. Washington visited the Club on November 14th 1896 and “made a short speech on the condition of (African Americans) and what he was doing at Tuskegee to make them independent industrially”.^{viii}

Moncure Conway graced our rooms on October 2nd, 1880. He was an ardent disciple of Emerson. Little is heard of him today, but at the time of his visit he was enjoying a notable literary career. The long list of his published works includes, *Emerson at Home and Abroad*, *Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne* and his highly acclaimed two-volume *Life of Thomas Paine*.^{ix}

Walter Damrosch, who reached great heights in music, visited the Club February 14th 1885, while he was in Cincinnati with his opera company.^x

For a new twist in guests, the Amherst Glee, Banjo and Mandolin Clubs were invited by member, William Sampson, to the meeting of March 30th 1895. According to the minutes, “they came in after their concert at the Odeon and entertained those present with half a dozen college songs.”^{xi}

Oscar Wilde was a guest at the meeting of June 10th 1882 after having given a lecture at one of the theaters in town. The Club minutes read, “Mr. Wilde was called upon and addressed the Club in easy style, recounting some of his experiences during his lecture tour of the West.”^{xii} A reporter gave a rather biting but more colorful description of Wilde in the Gazette two days later. Since Wilde probably came to the Club directly from one of his lectures, it may describe his appearance quite accurately. The reporter wrote: “He (Wilde) appeared in aesthetic costume—Knee breeches, ruffles and all. He looked very languished, but certainly not very graceful. One hand was encased in a yellow kid glove, its mate being artistically folded and held in the other hand, thus allowing the display of a ring, the merit of which seemed to be in its enormous size. While gazing with divine abstraction up at the center of the ceiling and grinding out his entranced rhapsodies, he kept time to the monotonous jingle of his emphasis by gently fumbling and beating the air with a massive watch charm which dangled on a black ribbon from his fob.—Some of his sentences appear to have neither beginning nor end. He’s all commas and no periods.”^{xiii}

Samuel Clemens was a guest at the meeting of January 3rd 1885 with his friend and associate, George W. Cable. The terse minutes for the meeting record simply that, “Remarks were made by Mark Twain and George

Cable”^{xiv} as if it might have been a regular occurrence. The two authors had been in town for two days of lectures and readings. They played to full houses and enthusiastic, appreciative audiences. An Enquirer reporter of the day described in more detail what they must have been like when they were guests at the Club. He wrote: “(Cable) is small, dapper and so slight that his dress suit clings rather than fits his frame. He has a colorless face encircled with an abundance of dark hair and a long, pointed beard suggestive of cheap stage makeup for the villain’s part, hardly in keeping with his talent and calling. He had the look of an overworked student who was cultivating brain at the expense of physique. But, when he read, his words were delivered with a dramatic effect so thrilling as to send cold chills through every listener.”

“Mark Twain is tall and gesture-less with a shock of iron-gray hair and a deeply furrowed tired face. His voice has a down-east, nasal tone, flowing with the steadiness of a brook in words that, though scarcely separated, are perfectly distinct and rich in their delicious drollery.”^{xv}

Our old permanent member, Lawrence Carr remembered the Mark Twain meeting. In his paper, *Reminiscing*, he wrote: “I remember the visit of Mark Twain and George Cable. They were seemingly at their best that night, and the Club took much pleasure in entertaining them. I can see Mark Twain standing up to make a speech. In his speech, he accused Cable of drinking all the liquid refreshment he had provided for their joint lecture. Which remark he gave as an apology for the amount of liquid refreshment he consumed at the Club. How Cable, white with wrath, got to his feet, denied the impeachment and stated he had never touched that kind of refreshment.”^{xvi}

Thanks to his keen research eye, our newest member, Rick Kesterman, who is on the staff at the Historical Society Library, found an unidentified clipping in the Hinkle scrapbook there. It was probably submitted to the paper by a member and gives further interesting details about the Mark Twain meeting. It goes on to say.

: “The evening at the Literary Club last night was unusually pleasant. Henry Farny made a highly interesting address on *Indians I Have Met*, detailing graphically some of his experiences in the Wild West. During the evening “Mark Twain” and G. W. Cable were introduced by Alex. Hill. -- -- When Mark Twain was presented somebody called out, Speech. Whereupon the humorist, with an injured look, remarked, ‘the gentleman who said ‘speech’ is certainly not a public speaker, or he wouldn’t expect a man who already preached twice in one day to convert the people of this great city—and I am convinced that I have converted thousands—to preach again.

‘Mr. Cable made a few pleasant remarks and intimated that his confrere’s gray hair was possibly due to too frequent speaking after bed time.

‘Something was the matter with the gas meter at the Club rooms and it was necessary to find other illumination towards the tail-end of the evening. This was furnished by frequent flashes of wit, and candles stuck into the necks of empty bottles.’^{xvii}

Famed poet, Robert Frost, visited the Club at the meeting of April 4th, 1960. He was the guest of his friend and Vermont summer neighbor and our fellow member of fond memory, Victor Reichert. Over his signature in the old guest book, Frost wrote, “I never dared be radical when young, for fear it would make me conservative when old.”

I'm sure some of you remember when Eslie Asbury brought Alex Haley to the meeting of September 17th 1974. Unfortunately, he arrived after the paper and some of the members had left. He signed the guest book and, with a plate of food and a glass of water sat at the round table back there under McConkey's portrait. He chatted with us amiably about his popular genealogy, *Roots*, also about his *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and a new book he was writing about his small hometown in Tennessee. He told us how his literary career began in the Coast Guard when he learned he could make money by writing love-letters for less articulate shipmates.

So, over the years we've entertained a number of interesting celebrities. I think they, even Oscar Wilde, enjoyed visiting us as much as we did having them.

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John Diehl Literary Club 30 October 2006

Note: My 1991 historian's paper, *Gleanings from the Guest Book*, was about, among other things, a few of the famous people who penned their signatures in the old book when they visited the Club. Since over 70% of our present roster is made up members who came aboard after 1991 and since it would be presumptuous to imagine that the rest of you would remember what I read fifteen years ago, I've taken the liberty to include the guest stars from my earlier paper who are too important to leave out.

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- i *The Literary Club of Cincinnati 1849-1903* Pg 15
 - ii *Ohio Railroad Guide*, Ohio State Journal Co. 1854 pp 29-34
 - iii Smithsonian Magazine May 2003 on Emerson-- *Still Ahead of His Time*.
 - iv *Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Club*—Thornton Hinkle June 26, 1915
 - v Ibid
 - vi Ibid
 - vii *The Builders of the Bridge* D. B. Steinman , Harcourt-Brace, 1945 Pg. 255
 - viii Club minutes 14 Nov. 1896
 - ix Club minutes 2 Oct.. 1880
 - x Club minutes 14 Feb. 1885
 - xi Club minutes 30 Mar. 1895
 - xii Club minutes 10 Jun. 1882
 - xiii Cincinnati Daily Gazette 12 Jun. 1882
 - xiv Club minutes 3 Jan. 1885
 - xv Cincinnati Enquirer 4 Jan. 1885
 - xvi Lawrence Carr paper, *Reminiscing* 30 Oct. 1920
 - xvii Clipping from Hinkle scrapbook nd no name Probably Enquirer 4 Jan. 1885