

Sorrel Horse And The Thunder God

Come back with me tonight to a meeting of the Club over 120 years ago. I want to show you our quarters then and have you meet and hear one of our early members who made a name for himself in the art world. It's May 28th 1887. We'll assemble in our comfortable room at 24 West Fourth St. between Main and Walnut. We've occupied this space since October 1870 and will stay until 1896 when we move to Eighth Street. One of our members, Frank Hunter, with an early interest in photography, took a picture of our quarters back then. We have a print of it in the library and Rick Kesterman found an even better copy in the Cincinnati Historical Society archives. It shows the space in interesting detail.¹

It's a large, tall room decorated and furnished in a rather cluttered, mid-nineteenth century, masculine style. It's separated from a small ante-room, off to the left, by a heavy fringed curtain tied back at the door jamb. A wallpaper frieze with classic medallions circles the room under an ornate crown molding at the ceiling. The floor is covered by a beige carpet with a flamboyant floral design. A round iron coal stove, with a fancy acorn finial and its smoke-pipe rising to a chimney in the wall, stands in the far left corner. The room is lighted by chandeliers suspended from the ceiling, two wall fixtures and a lamp on the reader's desk. The walls are adorned with a number of pictures, white plaster busts of Shakespeare and Salmon P. Chase on brackets and the roster and bulletin boards most of which are still with us today. Faintly visible, on either side of the busts, is the legend, *Here Comes One With A Paper*.

The room is filled with several tables in a variety of shapes and sizes. Each is surrounded by a half-dozen or so, bow-backed, cane-

seated chairs. The tables are set with glasses and bottles of wine and beer. It's a century before the anti-tobacco fad began. So, each table is graced with a box of cigars and ash trays. For the tobacco chewers and snuff pinchers in the club, there are cuspidors on the carpet at each table. Everything is ready for the members to arrive.

Thirty-one members and two guests have shown up. President Stephen Ayres is presiding at the small, galleried desk at the wall under the roster, Benjamin McConkey's portrait and the two busts. Secretary Bill Cochran has clipped the regular notice that appears in the newspaper before each meeting, to attach to his minutes. It reads.

“Society Notes

Literary Club-----Informal

Charles Theodore Greve-----Editor

W.C. Cochran-----Sec'y”ⁱⁱ

Nine short papers are on the agenda. Two are by the editor of the Informal, or Budget as we call it today. Greve read –“A Rondeau” and “Our Congressman and Free Trade”. Charles Wilby has provided two papers to add to his eventual record total of three hundred and thirteen during his fifty-seven years in the club. One he calls “The Last of the Great Eastern”, The other has the cryptic title, “A Dab After Ouida”. Thornton Hinkle calls his contribution “The Dawn of Genius”. Our everlasting member on the roster, Lawrence Carr, also has come with two papers that he named “Hell on Earth” and “Breezy or Too Good to be True”. The eighth, a story, “Love's Lost Lesson”, by an anonymous author, was taken from the budget box. Before the final paper, let's digress for a closer look at the member who wrote it – Henry Farny.

He was born in France in 1847. As a child of six he came to America with his family in 1853. His father ran a marginally successful saw mill in the forests of western Pennsylvania. Farny met American Indians there for the first time. Remnants of an old Seneca tribe lived in the area. A few years later he drew his first known sketch of an Indian on the fly- leaf of his school song bookⁱⁱⁱ. The family left Pennsylvania in 1859 and moved by flatboat to settle permanently in Cincinnati. Farny's father died in 1863. He left Woodward College, as it was known then, after his second year there, to help support his family. He sought to pursue his native talent for art in Cincinnati. He told an Enquirer reporter in 1874, "It's the worst place for a large city that a young artist could choose to make his debut in. There is not much attention given to aesthetic culture by the public at large and unless an artist takes to designing tobacco labels, theatrical bills and such work as that he will generally find it hard to make a living. Many of us take refuge in portrait painting which is really about the best paying line of art in Cincinnati. ---For the first year or two I almost despaired of being able to succeed."^{iv} In addition to Farny and Frank Duveneck, forty-six other artists are listed in the 1875 Cincinnati Directory^v, so competition was tough. Farny did paint portraits, circus posters and Civil War lithographs for the Gibson Co. His cartoon of Jefferson Davis, dressed in women's clothes and trying to escape his enemies through a fence was published in the Enquirer.^{vi} It caught the eye of Harper's Weekly editors and led to considerable work for them. He also provided many beautiful, story-telling illustrations for the widely-used McGuffey's readers of the time. In 1868 he traveled to Rome for his first formal art training under Literary Club member, Thomas Buchanan Read. He

also studied in Dusseldorf, Strasbourg and Munich. In 1874, back in Cincinnati, he collaborated with Lafcadio Hearn in the illustration and publication of *Ye Giglampz*, a short-lived weekly devoted to art, literature and satire.^{vii}

In 1881 he made his first of several trips west to Ft. Yates, Dakota Territory and there began his trade-mark genre of paintings of Indians and the West. “Farny’s career unfolded at the same time that American Indians were literally being driven to the end of their endurance and reservation life had neared its lowest point. No one else painted what Farny painted. Most artists trained in Germany portrayed the Indian as a savage, picturesque figure, or as a foil to indicate the progress that white America had made.”^{viii} In addition to his historically accurate rendition of the Indians of the time, his portrayal of western landscape was excellent. His work was avidly sought by museums and collectors, and still is even more so today. Just last December, despite the deep economic recession, Farny’s 15 by 28 inch, gouache on paper painting of an Indian camp entitled, *In New Pastures*, sold at Christie’s for \$1,426,500.00.^{ix} Farny seemed to care little for fame. Eastern artist friends could not induce him to come to New York. He once said, “Cincinnati is my home. I would be lonesome anywhere else. I would feel like a cat in a strange garret.”^x

Of particular interest to us is Farny’s association with the Literary Club. He probably learned of the Club while studying under Buchanan Read who had been a member since 1852. Elected to membership on the ninth of November 1872, Farny proved to be an active, faithful member of the Club. During the 1886-87 club year, when attendance records were kept, only two other members were present

more often than he. I feel sure that the Literary Club was one of the delights of the area that kept him in Cincinnati. He wrote interesting papers on his experiences while training in Europe and, of course, about Indians and his travels in the West. He left us several examples of his work that are real treasures for us to enjoy.

On the mantel in the reception room and stair wall in the hall are seven rosters of club officers painted by Farny. On the south wall of the library is a portrait by Farny of Thomas T. Gaff. It's undated but no doubt done in the early struggling days of Farny's career. What Gaff's connection with the Literary Club might have been, I don't know. He was a principal in the distillery firm of T. & J.W. Gaff & Co., and lived at 280 W. Fourth Street near Farny's studio at Fourth and Race. Also in the library are three cartoons with Farny's monogram. The first is of two men, one old with a beard the other with a sharp nose, both pointing a finger at each other and in animated conversation. It's inscribed, 'A prospect showing a discussion on Architectonik'. Another is called "Hero of the Hour" and there is a caricature of Lawrence Carr entitled 'The Influence of Toys'.

Our most typical and best documented Farny hangs on the south wall of the reception room. It's a pen and black ink drawing of an Indian entitled *Unke Unkee-ah/ Siah Tappah/ Blackfoot*. The drawing was exhibited in the 1882 Cincinnati Industrial Exposition. Under the image of our Blackfoot Indian in the exhibition catalogue there appeared an excerpt from a Farny letter in which he wrote about his subject, "He sat and eyed me with all the legitimate suspicion which would naturally arise in the mind of a man to whom a paper bag of prunes had been offered for the mere pleasure of sketching him."^{xi}

Now, let's return to the meeting and the final paper of the Informal. I think you'll find that Farny was skillful with his pen as well as with his brush.



Sorrel Horse And The Thunder God

I think Sorrel Horse could have been a sore disappointment to the average enthusiast whose ideas of the Red Man are derived from Fenimore Cooper. He was garrulous and fat; his curiosity and vanity were irrepressible. Though in happy possession of his two squaws (the younger of whom had been punished for adultery by having her nose cut off), the festive Sorrel Horse was, in his rough, untutored Sioux way a dude and a Don Juan. No squaw in the camp was safe from his blandishments, and more scars on his body were due to amorous flirtations than to honorable wounds of war. In fact, several braves had left their mark on him with their war clubs and only his great and mysterious gifts as a medicine man had saved him from a journey to the

happy hunting ground amid the imprecations of the indignant husbands whose feelings he had lacerated and whose honor he had outraged,.

Sorrel Horse had once made a lucky guess as to the location of a herd of buffaloes when the tribe was starving, and he cured several cases of grievous sickness and wounds by secretly consulting the army surgeon at the fort and getting medicine from him. The young surgeon, fired by a desire to learn something of aboriginal pharmacopeia, had cultivated Sorrel Horse with gifts of cigarettes and primes and made him his friend to the great admiration and edification of the tribe. He was allowed to come and go through the fort like a “Soldier Chief” and it was immensely amusing to watch his pompous strut as he marched with trailing blanket behind his colleague the “Big White Medicine” and to see him duck and dive through when perchance their walk led them under a telegraph wire. For although before the gaping tribe, Sorrel Horse pretended to hear spirits whispering to him through the “talking wire”, he had a holy dread of that awful and mysterious contrivance of the wicked pale faces. He used to dance, howl and beat his drum for hours around a telegraph pole and applying his ear to it, deliver oracular commands and prophecies which created consternation among his dusky fellow citizens.

The doctor at the fort had shown him a flaming chromo depicting a locomotive and train at full speed and in pantomime explained to Sorrel Horse that one of these things would soon come and further explained that the men who peeped through a brass thing on three legs were the forerunners of this great fire horse and looking for its path. It is true that the tribe doubted the idea of a fire horse which dragged whole rows of tepees full of people, but still the fact remained that the

men with the three-legged brass things kept on peeping through them in an incomprehensible way and disappeared over the hills to the west with them. Scouts who watched them reported that they were going on through the Badlands and still peeping and driving stakes, but the fiery horse with the one great glaring eye which Sorrel Horse said the spirits had told him was coming did not make its appearance. Even the squaws began to laugh at his prophecies. Matters were in this state when Jumping Dog reported a careless emigrant outfit one day's journey to the north. The tribe broke camp – followed the emigrant trail, and a favorable occasion appearing, had stampeded their horses and cattle and then moved into the buffalo ranges of the far north with the utmost celerity, for there was no telling when the brass-buttoned men, the wicked white soldiers would be after them. The Piegrins and River Crow and Rees were there and might make it hot for them, but our Sioux friends had laid in a full supply of cartridges and Winchester rifles and had great hopes of paralyzing the hostile aborigines with their superior armament.

Sorrel Horse never was a great hand at fighting though he could beat the drum and sing at a war dance in a way that would have made Rome howl. He did not distinguish himself particularly during that summer's campaign. He ran away during an engagement they had with the Rees and had to hear many gibes and innuendoes in consequence. Daily his prestige seemed to fade more and more and when the Autumn came, Sorrel Horse seemed to have lost all of his former greatness. Indeed, once when the older braves were telling naughty stories round the camp fire after a great feast of buffalo tongues, Sorrel Horse tried to chip in with an antique chestnut, was crudely told to keep his peace and

go and tell his stories to the squaws where he belonged. Had it been any but Iron Bull, the war chief, Sorrel Horse might have plucked up courage enough to retort, but he slunk away, a saddened instance of failed greatness.

Sorrel Horse had had a long and solemn conference with himself. Mounting his pony he rode aimlessly southward through the sage brush chewing the cud of sweet and bitter reflections and wishing the “Fiery Horse” would come and confound his enemies---if only it came. Sorrel Horse gloated over the thought of the discomfiture and terror of the insolent Iron Bull when that great beast of Brass, Iron and Fire should make him cringe and crawl.

They were one day’s journey from the Fort now, their escapade of the previous Spring had apparently been forgotten and they were coming back with promises of future good behavior and new resolutions. As he rode on ruminating on other things, he suddenly slipped like a snake from his pony and crouched breathless in the sage brush. Great Heavens! Could it be? There before him was the Fiery Horse with the row of tepees as in the surgeon’s room ! The blood rose in Sorrel Horse’s breast. He stood erect in the sage brush like a prophet of old waving his war club over his head and giving a series of war whoops and yells which were even heard beyond the hills in the camp. Like a rush of waters, came the horsemen over the hills, the squaws and children trailing breathless behind; for from mouth to mouth went the awful news that Thunder Horse had come to vindicate its profaned protégé, the misunderstood, the insulted Sorrel Horse.

Silent and awe-stricken the tribe watched it from afar. Great was their consternation when they heard an awful shriek and saw the fiery

eye of another Thunder Horse which came from the west and was answered by the other which waited on the switch for it to pass. They were brave warriors, heroes of many fights with Crows and Piegans, but when they heard the demoniac roars of the Thunder Horses, they fled and again traveled northward as far as their ponies could carry them. It is needless to say that Sorrel Horse was again a big Injun and he celebrated the fact by a song and a dance the first time they stopped long enough on their flight to light a camp fire. In his wild chanting improvisation, he told how his father, the Thunder God. had wept for his child, Sorrel Horse and had sent his Fire Dogs to avenge him and how he, Sorrel Horse had been overcome with pity for the tribe and by a potent charm had prevented them from devouring it. There were many “How Hows” grunted in thankful concert by assembled braves and ever thereafter Sorrel Horse was ceremoniously called the young man who frightened the Thunder Horses away.

And with that the Literary Club meeting of May 28th 1887 is adjourned.

John Diehl

Literary Club

26 October 2009

ⁱ Photo by Literary Club member Frank A. Hunter, July 1886. Copies in Club Library and Cincinnati Historical Society library.

ⁱⁱ Clipping attached to minutes of 28 May 1887

ⁱⁱⁱ “Henry Farny Paints the West” , Susan Meyn, Kristen Spangenberg, Cin’ti Art Museum 2007 pg 39 {Henry Farny S.M. and K.S.}

^{iv} From article in Mar. 22, 1874 Cin’ti Enquirer Pg 7 “Our Artists” quoted in “The Queen & The Arts”, Robert Vitz, Kent State U. Press, 1989 pg 168

^v Williams’ Cincinnati Directory pp 1015-6

^{vi} {Henry Farny S.M. and K. S} pg.16

^{vii} Ibid pg 17

^{viii} Ibid pp 31-32

^{ix} Maine Antique Digest March 2009

^x Quoted by Carl Vitz in his Literary Club paper and HPSO Bulletin article Vol XII No. 2 pg 100

^{xi} {Henry Farny S.M. and K.S.} pg. 41