A SEARCH FOR A TITLE

BY

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After I agreed to read this paper I thought I might write of the exciting world of real estate management and its importance to the survival of civilization as we know it. I'm sure stories of tenants: housing dogs for months on the second floor of a beautiful little farm house; leaving in the dead of night to join the Italian navy; or, having checks in the mail for months could be expanded into a paper of great social value. But the thought of reliving the painful past for a few moments of fun redirected my search to nonprofessional subjects.

Then, one Sunday afternoon while working my way through a somewhat

boring antiquarian book fair, I came across Frederick William Gookin's "The Chicago Literary Club -- A History of Its First Fifty Years". Even though the out of town dealer had outrageously over priced the book, I quickly paid the ransom for what I hoped would help me create a paper in the spirit of our sainted founders.

That evening I began my study of the book printed for the Club in 1927 by Lakeside Press in a limited edition of 250 copies. Composition of the book was done in their training department by pre-apprentice boys under the age of sixteen years. The children who set the type did a excellent job. And I am sure the Donnelley's gave the Club a very good deal. I briefly considered a paper on child labor and the ethics of our predecessors but a healthy fear of their ghosts lead me to continue my search by reading their story.

The story begins at three o'clock in the afternoon on Friday the 13th of March 1874. On that faithful Friday seven prominent Chicagoans attended the first of several meetings to discuss the establishment of what was to become the Chicago Literary Club. The men who met in the club room of the

Sherman House included three reverend doctors (Collyer, Burroughs and Powers), a judge (Booth) and three others (Binckley, Mason and Leonard). They were friends of "The Lakeside Monthly" and had come together to form a Lakeside Contributors Club. Instead they decided to form a club similar to New York's Century Club.

At a meeting on Tuesday April 7, 1874, the drafting committee of Burroughs, Booth and Binckley presented a "stately" preamble and constitution to the astonished ears of practical Chicagoans.

"To promote the sovereignty of letters and culture; to sustain by moral and social virtues; to form and maintain a literary organization fairly representative of the intellectual rank and progress of Chicago; and to cultivate fraternal relations with other exponents of literature and art. We, the undersigned citizens of Chicago, convened for this purpose do ordain and establish this constitution."

To insure that all members would have titles, the proposed constitution was heavy with many offices and committees such as Art in Western State, Art

in Eastern States, Art in Europe, and Science and Literature. At each meeting an appropriately attired marshall would lead the members as major domo of grand exercises. This would have been a sight to remember and report.

The audience sat quietly with visions of waving flags, magnificent regalia, and finally being laughed out of town dancing through their heads. The silence was broken as a motion was made to delete the poetic preamble. With the drafting committee abstaining it was unanimously passed. Next, the editor of the Chicago Tribune, Horace White, moved that everything, but the preamble, be stricken. This was carried unanimously. As the committee of cleric, judge and lawyer sat in horror, new members were added to their ranks to help them write a constitution less in keeping with Imperial Rome.

The new men's literary club was finally established on April 21, 1874, when a more republican constitution was adopted and the Reverend Doctor Robert Collyer was elected first president. The first seven meetings were devoted to detailed and careful consideration of the Club's structure. Our sainted founders were busy men yet they spent meeting after meeting planning

how to hold meetings.

At the first regular meeting held at the Sherman House on Monday May 4, 1874, a formal Order of Exercises was approved; a few new members were elected; a constitutional amendment was proposed and they all went home. Over the next several years members spent quite a bit of time proposing to amend and amending the constitution. Revised drafts were approved on March 6, 1876, on November 28, 1881, on January 28, 1884 and finally, on March 28, 1887. With all this work they forgot to clearly bar female members--a "mistake" we discussed at length last year.

The first paper "Physical Pain; Its Nature and the Law of Its Distribution" was read by the Reverend Doctor L. T. Chamberlain on May 14, 1874. Gookin does not record the reaction to this paper but does note that the author moved to Brooklyn two year later. With this first paper the standard was set that the subject could be anything the member choose. The Club was to be literary in name only.

Early meetings were open to reporters who noted that more than ample

food and drink were made available to the assembled "literary scholars". The social nature of the Club quickly became part of its character and was often criticized by those who questioned the seriousness of the organization. Because of this lack of understanding, working reporters were barred from meetings.

During the first season a very structured "informal" discussion period followed the papers. The social nature of the Club helped lubricate the wits of members and made it a somewhat unpleasant experience for the authors. To insure a supply of speakers it was decided to institute a requirement that "no paper at the time it is read shall be open to adverse criticism in the club." This continues to assure availability of speakers.

George Mason, first Recording Secretary of the Club, felt strongly that the club's name should be changed to The Marquette Club to honor Chicago's first educated visitor. At a meeting on March 6, 1876, the question came to a head. The members were in an extremely creative mode and came up with the following additional suggestions: The Open Ballot Club, The What's in a Name Club, The Club Which Is Too Modest To Say What It Is, The

Amateur Club, The Club for the Aggregation and Fostering of Old Citizens Regardless of Qualifications and The Marquette Eye and Ear Infirmary. With such a fine list to pick from the membership decided to keep a name that had already become part of their tradition if not of their practice.

During the fourth season three new traditions were established: at business meetings a collation or light meal was severed to insure attendance; meetings were moved from Saturday to Monday; and, meeting were held weekly rather than fortnightly.

The Club soon rented permanent rooms at the American Express Building on Monroe between State and Dearborn. This created a problem since the membership wanted to pay as little dues as possible. The officers had a solution--rent the rooms to a like minded organization. Unfortunately this like minded club was called the Fortnightly Club and had only women members. The horror of having their sacred precincts desecrate by females was resisted but the need for cash won out as it has in recent changes in many clubs.

In October 1877, it was discovered that the Committee on Arrangements lead by Dr. Charles Gilman Smith was planning to make October 29th a Ladies Night. Edward Mason, who had lead the resistance to the Fortnightly Club deal, argued that this was a violation of the constitution which did not permit any guests who resided in Chicago or vicinity. He was quite right but his resolution to enforce this provision and "that the members of the club here present are not in favor of inviting ladies to attend the meetings" failed to pass. The fact that invitations had already gone out to many of their wives and could not be easily rescinded may have had something to do with this failure.

The "brilliant assembly of ladies, including a delegation of The Fortnightly Club, making in all a meeting of some hundred and fifty" inaugurated the Club's Ladies Nights. Although this tradition continued to be resisted by some members it soon became a much looked forward to event and the beginning of the end of male exclusivity.

The ladies of The Fortnightly Club began to do a little minor decorating of the Club's large room by adding a plaster cast of a statue of Dante, a bust

of Homer and sundry other embellishments. Shortly after these additions a lady's veil was dropped and put over the head of Homer by a playful janitor. As the members entered that Monday to vote on Alfred Mason's constitutional amendment to bar women from attending meetings, they were shocked to see the veiled head. After voting down the amendment, a committee lead by Charles Gregory was appointed to formally unveil the head and thus mark a club milestone.

At first new members were elected after formal nominating speeches and a vote of the membership during business meetings. This lead to the rejection of several prominent Chicagoans after inspiring nominating speeches by their friends and black balling by their enemies. In one incident it is even reported that the ballot box contained only black balls with the nominator voting against his own candidate. Our traditional committee structure soon developed to protect the Club from such incidents and put the vote in the hands of the few responsible members.

The Club rooms were located directly below the drill hall of the St. Bernard Commandery which may have allowed the Club to negotiate a low rent.

And, since the St. Bernard's didn't use their drill hall during Club meetings, the tenants were both happy with the arrangement. Then a little problem developed in 1880 when the St. Bernard's decide to become the best drill team in town and began practicing on mondays. This tended to make the meetings noisy as the St. Bernard's marched their little hearts out on the floor above. Although the drill team might have fit into the original concept of the Club, the meetings were switched to Tuesdays. Attendance fell and Club members began looking for a new permanent home.

After long planning by the Rooms and Finance Committees the Club moved into its new home at the Portland Block in the Spring of 1881. Although the Club signed only a five year lease they had custom carpets, draperies, wall coverings, and furniture installed in their new permanent home. They neglected to get an option to renew their lease. This fact would come back to haunt them.

During the Portland Block years the membership took great pride in having prominent guests attend their meetings. In the Spring of 1885 Cambridge's MP was that prominent guest. He grandly told Chicago's assembled

intellectual elite:

"When I return to my native country ...I shall tell them of...two cities which closely resemble each other. One maybe called the frontier outpost of the civilization of Europe toward the East, the other, so to speak, the frontier outpost of civilization of America toward the West, each stretching out as it were, its hands to the other. I remark a most singular resemblance between them in their inner life, and as it were, in their spiritual, mental, and moral characteristics. The other city I speak of Nishni Novgorod. Nishni Novgorod and Chicago!"

When this English politician visited Chicago he found a dirty city with its stockyards as the primary point of interest. The "wonderful process" of slaughtering animals together with "what you call parks and boulevards" were amusing to the eye of this British traveler. His hosts were the aspiring elite of a "literary club without a single literary man" and were proud of their new private club even though smoke continually invaded its rooms from nearby chimneys.

Nizhny Novgorod, the city referred to by the MP, was founded in 1221. It was and is about 250 miles east of Moscow on the banks of the Oka and Volga Rivers. It developed independently as a trading center until 1392 when it was annexed by Moscow. In the 19th century it was the site of Russia's largest annual trade fair and was connected by rail to Moscow. To compare one of Russia's oldest cities to one of America's youngest seems strange but, they were both dirty provincial cities developing into industrial giants.

Over a glass of port, the MP probably told many a strange story of the half civilized provincials he had met and of their quaint ways. Their industrial development would be spoken of as a threat but, of course, a minor one since they would never be as good as the English. By the time Gookin's history was published in 1927, the British Empire was beginning its decline and was awaiting the era of the super powers.

The only scandal reported in the first fifty years took place during the 1885-86 season. Members began complaining that reading room periodicals had begun to disappear in whole or in part. A rather unsuccessful lawyer who

had begun to use the club rooms as his office was discovered to be the thief. A motion was made to expel him on April 26, 1886. He was allowed to resign before the vote to protect his reputation and limited professional career. I find this interesting since I know of similar problems in club libraries and doubt that similar actions would be taken against a thief/member today.

Real estate rather than scandals were to cause the greatest difficulties for the Club. The Portland Block was sold and its new owner had plans for expansion and remodeling. The Club's lease expired on April 30, 1886, and their new landlord told them he wanted them out as soon as possible. A new home for the Club had to found before the construction crews began to invade its second permanent home.

A final meeting was held on April 26th and by eight-thirty the next morning the Club's secretary was barely able to save the Club records from the construction crew. They lost some minor records and a large round table that their landlord turned over to a used furniture dealer. It was later recovered from the dealer shortly before we moved into our third permanent

home.

The landlord's name has not been record but he must have done quite well in Chicago's expanding office market. To be a landlord in times when you could throw out paying tenants and sell their furniture. Those were the days when landlords were landlords.

Other landlords needed tenants and considered the Club a prime prospect. The eight year old Union League Club offered to rent space in its new building on Jackson and the Art Institute suggested that the Club locate in their proposed new building on Michigan and VanBuren. After due deliberation it was decided to move to the non-existent Art Institute building being designed by club member John Wellborn Root. Since the Club needed a place to meet while the building was under construction Kinsley's Restaurant was selected. The "unsuitable" Union League Club was thanked and used when Kinsley's was unavailable.

To properly outfit their new Art Institute Building home the Club issued $10,000.00 worth of 10 year 6% bonds. The bondholders soon had a

chance to see how their money had been spent when one hundred and fifty members attended the first annual reunion dinner to be held there on October 10, 1887.

Photos of the reading and assembly rooms show it to be a pleasant Victorian place with many plaster casts, a few prints and simple furniture. The architect had given them grand columns, high ceilings, fireplaces and an elevator for their third floor home overlooking Michigan and VanBuren.

In that home on January 16, 1888, in conjunction with the reading of a paper titled "The Old Masters of Japan", the first American exhibition of Japanese old masters is said to have taken place. The "paintings" of artists from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century were loaned to the club by Tadamasa Hayashi. A catalog was issued but unhappily no description of the works were included since the Paris based "connoisseur" had arrived in Chicago only two days earlier. One would love to know what works were exhibited, why the collection was in Chicago, and whether any of the works stayed.

A major event of the Art Institute years was the death of long time member John Crerar. He left $10,000.00 that helped to fill the Club's treasury after some years of litigation. But most importantly, his death left an empty spot in the hearts of his fellow members and the city. Crerar had been a loyal early member who never read a paper of his own but read four "informals" or collections of short papers by other members that he edited. Were are such men today who would edit and read our work and mention us in their wills?

Attendance at meetings began to declined in the new location. This was attributed to the fact that members living on the north side found it hard get to the Club. At that time taxis were non existent, the North State Street streetcar line ended at Lake Street, and it snowed in the winter. But their landlord had an ironclad lease that ended in April 1897 and the Club could not move.

In 1891 that lease became an asset when the Art Institute wanted to sell their building to the Chicago Club. Our Club had men who knew how to take advantage of that fact. Although some guilt was expressed for taking

advantage of their landlord, more practical minds ruled and the lease was traded for $10,000.00 of Institute funds.

The Club then temporarily moved their meetings to the University Club and began more wheeling and dealing. The University Club needed cash and a tenant while the Chicago Literary Club had cash and a need for a new permanent home. A deal was made: the Literary Club would buy $14,000.00, later raised to $20,000.00, worth of 10 year 6% University Club mortgage bonds payable if the building was sold and would have a ten year lease of the second floor.

For thirteen years the building on Dearborn between Washington and Madison was to be the most permanent home that the Club had yet known. During those years many of the early members died and our first president would make his final visit. We founded a library of members' books and a collection of their portraits. We became a club with a proud past and a membership that knew that past only as history.

The University Club years were eventful despite low attendance in the new

more central location. The month of June was dropped from the schedule, a comical members' show of expressionist art was mounted, special professional discussed nights were held, and even a fish stories night was tried. All of these ideas helped but did not solve the problem of poor attendance.

During the decades around the turn of the century fear of "dishonest" foreigners controlling their city caused many established groups to promote "honesty" and "Americanism". When in the 1904-1905 season some of the more politically active members proposed that the Club advocate political change the idea was strongly rejected. The membership felt, in the words of Sigmund Zeisler, that "the greatest charm and value of the club is that it does not stand for any idea or propaganda whatever." This remains a charm and a value.

The University Club began to neglect maintenance and many members refused to attend meetings because they found the place dirty. The reason for this negligence soon became obvious when the University Club announced that they were planning to move into a new home. This required

quick action by the Club's Rooms and Finance Committees to find a new home for their cheap and picky membership.

The committees had not yet finished their work when the last meeting in our University Club permanent home took place on April 30, 1906. They had obtained a lease for the sixth floor space at Orchestra Hall that had been occupied by the McCormick estate for only $2,900 a year. But they were still in the process of trying to trade that four year lease for space on the eighth floor to be shared with a group of bibliophiles called the Caxton Club.

The Caxton Club had been founded on January 26, 1895, at the University Club by eleven men lead by Charles L. Hutchinson, a grain merchant and banker. Hutchinson and four other founders were Chicago Literary Club members as well as being lovers and collectors of fine books. They felt Chicago needed a new club whose objectives were "the study and promotion of the arts pertaining to the production of books".

On May 14, 1906, thirty-five Literary Club members met in the disorderly former McCormick estate space and were told of the nearly completed deal.

Two weeks later, at the invitation of President Holt, the last meeting of the year took place in his Lake Forest club without a finalized agreement.

The sixth floor rooms were considered entirely unsuitable for the Club's needs but the rent fit its budget and its members were sure they could work a deal with the building's management. They were wrong! The building manager could not be moved and the negotiating committee finally accepted this fact in August. Tenant improvements were begun at once and the rooms were ready for the 1906-07 season.

There must have been some heat discussions over this development since they had moved out of their former home long before needing to.

The four years spent at the Orchestra Hall permanent location were pleasant but the approximately 2,200 square feet was too small to hold larger meetings. This required dealing with former and future landlords when meetings were held at the University Club, the Art Institute, and the Cliff Dwellers Club.

Early in the 1909-1910 season the committees on Rooms and Finance were instructed to find yet another new permanent home for the Club. An offer by the Cliff Dwellers Club was reject and together with the Caxton Club new quarters were rented at the Fine Arts Building.

The Chicago Literary Club held its first meeting in its new Fine Arts Building home on April 25, 1910. The photos show pleasant rooms with portraits, books, leather bound chairs and a plaster cast of Homer that may have once been covered by a lady's veil in our first permanent home. The assembly room looked quite small compared to the large assembly room at the old Art Institute building and one wonders how it compared to the old University Club location.

After the first lease expired in 1913 it was continued on a year to year basis at the same rental. Then in 1915 the demand for space and increased operating expenses allowed and required their landlord to demand a higher rent. The membership refused to raise their dues to pay the new rent and instructed the Rooms and Finance Committees to "fix" the problem. A rather odd deal was struck with the building's management that allowed the

building manager to "sublease" the space to other organizations whose meetings did not conflict with the meetings of our Club or the Caxton Club. The Literary Club found this strange arrangement ideal but the collectors of the Caxton Club did not. Many common members kept the partnership going for a few years but it finally broke up in 1918 when the Caxton Club moved to the Art Institute.

The history of the first fifty year ends at the Fine Arts Building and how we got from there to here and lost our bust of Homer is a story I have yet to discover. But, like the story of the first fifty years, it must be a story of real estate and a need to keep the dues down.

Others may write with pride of our many great names but to me it is the few loyal members who attend meetings who make this Club what it was and is today. Women are members, our bust of Homer is gone and we may have lost this home but the men of an earlier time would recognize this exercise.

The stories I have just told you were learned from Gookin's history and the

stories maybe untrue. Like all club histories, it is written to make the membership feel good and feel important. It reflects the values and interests of the living membership. Authors of club histories are honest men but they work from poor records and even poorer memories. The recently published history of the Caxton Club remembers the past quite differently. I do not know were the truth lies but perhaps all club histories should start out with the words "once upon a time". And perhaps that is the true title of this paper--"Once Upon a Time".