

The Chicago Literary Club Enters the Internet Age

by Francis A. Lackner, Jr.

THE past twenty years have witnessed transformations in our society and our economy as the electronic revolution has altered one field after another: communications, music, commerce, travel, finance, manufacturing, and publishing—to name but a few. Those institutions that have adopted and championed new ways have prospered, even while continuing to pursue their original goals. Note the success of *The Gray Lady* (the *New York Times*), and of the *Atlantic Monthly* in the publishing field, both of which are well into their second century while innovating ferociously toward the future. It is an upheaval of the sort not seen since the Industrial Revolution, or more aptly, since the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg nearly six hundred years ago, and it is only accelerating.

The Chicago Literary Club began using the Internet early in its development—thanks to the foresight of Manly W. Mumford, who was a member of the Club from 1961 until his death in 2003. Manly was a president of the Club, among other offices, and delivered twenty-three papers. A nationally respected municipal bond lawyer, he was also a technophile who had an understanding of the opportunities that the Internet presented and wanted to use those opportunities for the benefit of the clubs of which he was a member. As we shall see, the Internet has transformed our communications with one another and between the Club and its members and has opened our trove of documents and history to the members and to the outside world, and in so doing, has opened our minds to new opportunities for the Club.

The World Wide Web emerged at the University of Illinois in 1995 as a variant of the computer networks that had been serving the military and academic establishments since the mid-1960s. Combined with the personal computer and the cellular telephone,

The Chicago Literary Club Enters the Internet Age

this new structure allowed more programming freedom, making possible the growth of electronic mail, e-commerce, visually interactive websites, and all the other conveniences, resources and annoyances we now take for granted. When Manly first became intrigued by this newly popular phenomenon, in 1997, the World Wide Web was still in its infancy as a public medium. Unsure of its capabilities, he started slowly, with the adoption of the domain name chilit.org for the Chicago Literary Club (and cliff-chicago.org for the Cliff Dwellers, of which he was also a member) and the posting of papers from a few members who were enthusiastic about doing so.

Other opportunities to use this new medium soon presented themselves. As recording secretary of the Club from 1985 to 1995, I was responsible for taking the weekly minutes of meetings, noting the essayist and the topic, the members attending, and any other matters of interest. These minutes were filed in a minutes book kept in our podium at the Cliff Dwellers, but were largely ignored by the membership. In 1992, in response to a suggestion from John T. Gerlits, Jr, a past-president of the Club, I started writing a short newsletter which was published three or four times a year for members who could not attend our meetings and had no resource to stay in touch with their Club and its activities. It contained news of members, notes from the president, a list of the officers, and a brief summary of the recent papers. Sometime in 1997, Manly added the newsletter that I was publishing in a paper format to the Club's website for use by members.

I continued to write the newsletter during my term as president of the Club and until my term as chair of the Committee on Officers and Members ended, in 1997. It was thereafter discontinued, chiefly because electronic developments made it seem superfluous. After a brief hiatus, however, at the suggestion of Yolanda M. Deen and other members of the Board, I resumed writing the newsletter in 2001, and it later became the "Club Notes" that accompanied the weekly email meeting reminder then being sent to members. As time progressed, it made sense to have the Club Notes stand on their own, and so in 2009 a blog was created to share, and save, the

The Chicago Literary Club Enters the Internet Age

weekly Notes summaries and then other materials of interest to the members. When the Club changed Internet hosts in 2014, the blog changed form once again, and it was renamed “Club News.”¹

In 1997 a signal event shook one of the assumptions that Manly and I had about the nature of the Club’s website. The website was started as a service to the members of the Club. Although its intent was strictly local, and although the architecture was open to the public, the assumption was that only members, friends and family members would have any interest in the contents. The error of that assumption was made clear one Monday evening in 1997 when Manly brought to the weekly meeting an email he had received from Donald Factor.

A member of the Max Factor cosmetics dynasty, Donald Factor, who was then living in London, was researching and seeking information about his black sheep uncle, John “Jake the Barber” Factor. This ne’er-do-well had been convicted of fraud and disappeared from view in the early 1940s. The prosecutor in the case, Thomas Chalfont McConnell, who was a member of this Club, had written a paper about the incident.² The paper was read before the Club on March 1, 1943, and published by the Club in July 1943. I had also read it as a Classics Night paper on January 29, 1997, and included a reference to the paper in the newsletter, which was also then being published on our nascent website by Manly. Donald Factor, in researching his uncle, had found the reference to McConnell’s paper in the newsletter online and thereupon emailed Manly to request a copy of the paper for his research and for his family’s archives.

Manly and I were, to say the least, surprised by this long-distance interest in our Club’s archives and website, but were also excited by the curiosity it had aroused. Given the state of scanning and file conversion software in 1997, furnishing an electronic copy was a

1. A blog is a discussion or informational site published on the World Wide Web and consisting of discrete entries (“posts”) typically displayed in reverse chronological order (the most recent post appears first). For further information see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>.

2. “Luck and Witless Virtue vs. Guile: In Which an English Clergyman Proves the Nemesis of John (“Jake the Barber”) Factor, *Alias* J. Wise, *Alias* H. Guest.”

The Chicago Literary Club Enters the Internet Age

challenge, but we finally were able to send the document to Donald Factor. This was the first indication of an interest in the work of our members by an outside audience, but it was only the first. Club papers that have since attracted outside interest include Francis H. Straus's "Tulbend," Charles Ebeling's "French Fried," John K. Notz, Jr.'s "William Le Baron Jenney," and Earle Astor Shilton's "God's Country."

Our website and the Internet have also had a direct, personal effect on my own family. This story starts with Clarence Burley, my grandfather, a fifty-year member and former president of the Club, who passed away in 1928. His progeny included a son, Clarence Burley II, who moved from Chicago to Menlo Park, California, in the early 1950s. There were also two daughters, my mother, who eventually moved from Chicago to Cedar Rapids, and her sister, who moved to Milwaukee. The Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin branches of the family (my own family constituted the Illinois branch) stayed in fairly close touch, but we lost contact with the California branch in the late 1960s. Letters and Christmas cards were returned by the post office, and further attempts at contact were thought to be fruitless. Then, one day, I received an email addressed to the webmaster at chilit.org from one of my California cousins, enquiring if anyone with my surname was still living. You may imagine my surprise at finding this long-lost branch of the family!

The Club's 125th anniversary year (1999) further fueled Manly's vision for the website, and he added to it the entire roll of members (from the inception of the Club), along with appendices listing officers of the Club and papers published by the Club (also, in each case, from the date of inception). This was a huge task, quietly undertaken entirely by Manly, which formed the cornerstone of our present online database. The posting of these materials made them available to anyone with Internet access, a huge benefit to the members and, potentially, also a service to others.

By the season of 2000-01, members of the Club began to realize that the website was of growing importance to the Club. At the same time, it was becoming apparent that greater continuity in board

The Chicago Literary Club Enters the Internet Age

membership from year to year was needed and that the preservation of the history of the Club required more attention. As a result, early in that season, I was asked to present a proposal to change the officer structure of the board by amending the By-laws to add the posts of webmaster and historian and, also, to eliminate the largely ceremonial post of corresponding secretary. These changes were approved by the Club's members on January 17, 2000, and Manly was chosen as the first webmaster. My thanks were to be selected as the first historian.

Sadly, in the fall of 2003 Manly was stricken with a terminal illness and asked if I would complete his term as webmaster for that year. We owe a great debt to Manly as the founding genius of our website. It was his idea to provide a site for the members to use to gain access to the materials of the Club; it was his guidance that provided the focus on the written word that is still our primary thrust. It was also Manly who wrote the capsule description of the Club and its goals which may be found on a front page of the yearbook and on the website homepage.

One of the traditions of our authors has been to obscure the subject of their essays, to the greatest degree possible, in the title, revealing the subject only at the time of the reading of the essay. This is not a bibliographer's delight, and the ordeal of compiling a useful index of the papers found online is a continuing one. The first effort in this regard was the "Index of Papers Online," an attempt to categorize papers by subject matter, followed by a brief bibliographic description of the paper.

Roughly contemporaneous with the effort to so categorize our papers was the realization that I was in possession of a full set of the histories of the Club, which had generally been unavailable to others: *The Chicago Literary Club: A History of Its First Fifty Years*, by Frederick W. Gookin; *The Chicago Literary Club: Its History from the Season of 1924-1925 to the Season of 1945-1946*, by Payson Sibley Wild; *The Chicago Literary Club: The First Hundred Years, 1874-1974*; and *The Chicago Literary Club: One Hundred Twenty-Five Years, 1874-1999*. "A Twenty-Minute History of the Chicago Literary Club" by Earle Astor

The Chicago Literary Club Enters the Internet Age

Shilton and Clark L. Wagner's paper "The Club's Victorian Roots" also provide historical information about the Club. Over the course of the summer of 2005, I endeavored to copy and post on our website each of these documents,³ so that they would be available both to the members of the Club who wished to access them and to others who have found their way to our doorstep in search of information about our Club and its members.

In this connection, in January 2009 I received two surprising emails within two weeks of each other. Marc M. Cruciger of the Chit Chat Club in San Francisco wrote to inquire about literary clubs for an essay he was preparing for his club. Stephen J. Jay of the Indianapolis Literary Club, intrigued by the copy of a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds,⁴ *A Literary Party*, which was displayed at their meetings, was also trying to track down similar information. The three of us agreed to share resources and to form an affiliation not only of our own clubs, but of other clubs with a similar purpose.

Since then, we have hosted the electronic papers of the Chit Chat Club on our website (inasmuch as they are a smaller club with more limited resources) and have also enjoyed the company of visitors from the Cincinnati Literary Club.⁵ A highlight of this association was the discovery that a non-resident member of our Club, John A. Schram, was also a member of the Chit Chat Club. Not only that, the fiftieth anniversary of his membership in our Club coincided with our 140th anniversary year. John was willing and able to present an essay⁶ and did so on November 4, 2013, in celebration of that event, at which he was introduced by his original proposer and fellow fifty-year member Leonard Reiffel.

3. We have since added William E. Barnhart's paper "Clubbing," read for the 140th anniversary of the Club and subsequently selected for publication by the Committee on Publications.

4. Together with Dr. Samuel Johnson, Sir Joshua Reynolds, the English portrait painter, was the founder, in 1764, of the most famous literary club in the English-speaking world, first known simply as "The Club" but later referred to as "The Literary Club."

5. See John K. Notz, Jr's essay, "Brain Drain: Cincinnati to Chicago: From Queen City to Garden City," February 1, 2010.

6. "Sometimes Good Guys Wear Gray Hats."

The Chicago Literary Club Enters the Internet Age

Other developments have also been made possible by our use of the Internet. The election of new members using paper forms to collect their applications and other vitae had always been fraught with the dangers of any paper document: loss in the transfer from one coat pocket to another, dry-cleaning, and other forms of mischief. As a result, in 2011 the Club adopted a procedure for processing applications using email to distribute information and to cast ballots. The requirements for membership were not changed, but the process was shortened from weeks to a matter of days, and the information, being electronic, is now being transferred more securely.

Just as we have converted the process for electing new members to an electronic format, so, too, we have converted the weekly written reminder notice of meetings to an email. For many decades, the secretary had to arrange to have a short run of specially printed postcards, address labels, and postage stamps on hand to mail out the reminder. This task was largely taken over in the 1980s by Association Services, Inc., the Club's outside administrator, but it remained burdensome. Later, in the early years of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the board agreed to sending the weekly reminder by email, reserving the postal card, then being sent monthly, for those without a computer. The postal reminder was finally eliminated in 2013, when all but a handful of members had access to a computer.

The website had started as a personal project for Manly Mumford, its materials created and housed on his personal computer. When responsibility for the website was transferred to me, the project undertaken by Manly continued to grow and flourish. By the spring of 2014, it became evident that the hosting firm used by the Club for over a decade could no longer meet our growing needs, and a new host was selected with greater capabilities. As we transferred our material to a new host, it was an opportunity to prepare for the future of the website and, in time, to transfer the responsibility for the website to a new generation of members. It was also a chance to provide security and safeguards for the Club's electronic resources in ways not available previously, and to take advantage of new professional services.

The Chicago Literary Club Enters the Internet Age

It is perhaps appropriate to note that the open architecture that Manly advocated is a service to the community: our website is not locked away as a members-only website, or an academics-only university site, but is open to view for research and reading on a worldwide basis. Manly believed, and the Club has agreed, that our online papers can contribute to intellectual discussion in many fields, and that the broadest possible dissemination of our essays and history is an essential part of the Club's purpose.

For purposes of completing the record, it is important to note that the Club's interest in preserving and sharing the Club's papers predates the Internet. The Club preserved essays and books in the Club's library during the years that it leased its own rooms. While these materials were largely lost during the Depression years, the interest in preserving such materials continued. Stanley Pargellis, then the head of the Newberry Library, who became a member of the Club in 1947, initiated the practice of archiving our essays in the Special Collections Section of the Newberry, where they were available not only to our members but also to the wider community. The problem, of course, is that these papers were located in Chicago, beyond the reach of anyone not having access to the Newberry. The posting of our essays on the Club website effectively solved that problem.

In the years ahead, the challenge to the members will continue to be to "express themselves competently in English."⁷ That dictum, however, has nothing to do with the medium in which that expression is delivered; it is the process of a creative mind, and of clear thought, competently presented, that is essential. The Club will need to continue the traditions that make it a place where like-minded men and women can meet to present and discuss their ideas. It will also need to continue to appeal to its members and to a wider outside audience by judiciously adopting new technology and adapting that technology to the Club's purposes.

7. We were concerned with the use of our English tongue even before William Newnham Chattin Carlton addressed the Club in an After-Dinner Address on October 2, 1911, entitled "The Decline and Fall of Literary Ambition in The Chicago Literary Club."

The Chicago Literary Club Enters the Internet Age

* * *

This essay was initially titled “Looking Forward from 4533 Meetings,” that having been the number of meetings at the end of the 2013-2014 season. With that in mind, it is my fervent hope that the Club will be active after another 4533 meetings, in the same lively fashion, in the year 2155.