

1960-1967

WHEN the Chicago Literary Club gathered for its first fall meeting in 1960, Douglass Pillinger was the new President and Walker Davis was—as he had been since 1954 and would be until he became President in 1963—Recording Secretary and Treasurer. The Club had 149 resident and 47 non-resident members.

The paper read that night, October 3, was Mr. Pillinger's "One of the Missing", and 86 members and guests were in College Hall of the University Club to listen. Mr. Pillinger's work was outstanding. The Club had begun a very strong year. It was also, though nobody knew it, settling into a decade that was to bring torment to our land.

The 1960's turned the United States upside down. Some welcomed as long overdue the fundamental and violent changes that wracked the country. Others, who had seen merit in the values that society now heaved out the window, were, at worst, outraged and, at best, saddened and confused. In 1960 there were approximately 685 United States military personnel in a little southeast Asian Country, if "country" is not too ludicrous a term, called Vietnam. By 1967 our participation in what had grown to be the Vietnamese War had become shatteringly divisive. In 1960 American college campuses were almost uniformly calm and non-political. By 1969 students had taken over major institutions by tactics reminiscent of the French Revolution. In 1960, our black citizens had not yet rebelled in any massive organized manner against their subordinate status. Over the next several years the civil-rights movement had them holding elective public office in Mississippi. It was in this decade that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, which had not existed when the Soviet Union launched "Sputnik" in 1957, put men on the moon and brought them safely back. It was also during these years that the

word "marijuana" ceased to be a cute term from an old song about Pancho Villa and became the most innocuous element in a drug sub-culture, and that race riots turned substantial portions of Los Angeles, Newark and Detroit to smoking ruins.

But the 1960's did not turn The Chicago Literary Club upside down. The Club met in the 1960's as it had met before, changing only its pre-meeting dining place from the Bowl and Bottle to the Cliff Dweller's Club, and altering neither the quality, nor the broad nature of the subject-matter of its members' papers. As Carl Dragstedt later reminisced in a letter to Theodore Remer concerning the doctor's 1961-1962 presidency, "John Glenn made the first American orbit around the earth at that time, but the C.L.C. kept its feet on the ground." And perhaps this is all just as well. The Club's purpose always has been and still is scholarly, and one can certainly argue that scholarship should not be blown hither and yon by what seems most relevant—even explosively relevant—during a particular period. Few papers addressed themselves specifically to the obviously dramatic developments of the times. Roger Shugg's beautiful 1962 piece, "Slavery", (published) was historical and philosophical rather than prophetic or concerned with the seething restlessness that was about to erupt in defiant activism. In 1966, however, Paul Bucy wrote with great earnestness, in "When the Candles Go Out", that we must make the effort necessary to save Vietnam because our failure to do so would mean the loss of Thailand, India, Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines. In 1969, a paper dealt in detail with civil disobedience, then at its height. But perhaps the most perceptive of the small group of papers that treated specific topical subjects was Earl Schermerhorn's February 1964 "Do Unto Others". The civil-rights movement had gained some real momentum by then, but the depth and the foresight shown in this piece of writing were far ahead of their time as far as the demonstrated attitudes of employers and of the man on the average street were concerned. "It has been said," wrote Mr. Schermerhorn, "that in dealing with people there never is the perfect time to institute change . . . Americans prefer to have their morality separated from everyday life and served up in harmless generalities on weekends, so I have avoided the moral issues that are involved in this problem. But it really doesn't matter, for

history is changing our behaviour, and our moral sense will have to catch up with it sooner or later."

Such offerings are easy to single out because they were exceptional in their emphasis. On the whole the Club did not seek to predict change or to chronicle that which was bursting all around it. Like Aristotle, it took all knowledge for its province, and was not to be hurried in the process. The many indications of what our speech and our attitudes were during this period were incidental to larger themes. Thus when Ellsworth Hoffstadt, in his gentle and delightful 1963 paper, "Eddy", wrote, "About ninety years ago, in the tobacco country of old Kentucky, a girl child was born to one of the young Negro women on a large plantation," he was not making a provocative point in using the then-dignified term *Negro*; but shortly thereafter the word was scornfully rejected by many to whom it applied, in favor of the ostensibly synonymous but perhaps less precise *black*. In his "Eulogiam Magistrorum Meorum", Percival Bailey commented on ". . . the fact, obvious in every examination at the medical school, that very few doctors can spell or cipher or write a grammatically correct letter. Since the secretaries are no better it is painful to read their correspondence." Passages like these form historical background material that will grow in interest. They are imbedded in biography, history, philosophy, and excellent book reviews.

Posterity will profit by the perspective resulting from such restraint. There is simply no room for doubt that in the fullness of time such terms—such verbal historical landmarks—as Selma, Watts, Woodstock, Haight-Asbury, "Nam", "pig" and "porno" will be appropriately—and, above all, interestingly—committed to paper by members of The Chicago Literary Club.

When the 1960's began, the Club had a loyal core of members that almost never missed a meeting. Among them, as Carl Dragstedt said in his letter to Ted Remer, was ". . . Byers Wilcox, who sat always in the chair in closest proximity to the speaker—and glared at him with a challenging stare." From this position Byers could occasionally sail small paper airplanes—almost, but not quite, as disconcerting as stepping up to the podium when the lectern light cast a beam right in his eye, and wrenching the light so that it broke and dropped on the speaker's manuscript. There were other regulars—Ellsworth Hoffstadt, who for a time had a bit

of rivalry with Byers Wilcox over a seat that appealed to both of them; Walker Davis, Herman Lackner, Tom Boal, George Gale, Alexander Isaacs, David Maher, Willard King, Manly S. and Manly W. Mumford, and Howard Carter among them—but perhaps none who inspired the same sense of uncertainty and expectancy as Byers.

Much of the flavor of those years is subtly available to us in the minutes of Walker Davis, written with perception tempered by the most amiable wit. The urbanity and elegant prose of his notices and letters were only the gleaming tip of the iceberg of Club business handled so deftly all the year 'round as to make our conviviality ever more agreeable and stimulating. Having succeeded Wilfred Puttkammer as Recording Secretary and Treasurer in 1954, his retirement and removal to North Carolina in 1966 forced him to turn over these offices to Herman Lackner and Thomas Boal. These minutes may at first glance appear like practically all other minutes—coldly reportorial, written after the fact to make the fact conform to propriety, and sterilely devoid of emotion. But not so! At the meeting of March 18, 1963, we learn, President Bing in opening remarks informed forty-one members and guests that on the preceding Tuesday Earle Shilton and Archie Jones had “participated prominently in ceremonies that commemorated a restoration of the Chicago Water Tower.” Franklin Bing then expressed in these words (but in Pennsylvania-ese that even the best of Walker Davis’s minutes cannot revive for us) just what the landmark meant to him:

No carved chess piece, this
no sculpture of some stake pushed
by a Paul Bunyan myth of man
into wet sand under the concrete,
no toy, but a working tower—
cut stone, brick and iron—
Chicago’s monument, quiet in the hub-bub
now, holding no water
in the stand-pipe it was built to cover
but erect, proud, resolute
as an old man, neat in his coveralls,
who looks down at his product and silently prays
that men will dream and work to make
their dreams take shape for a nation.

He then placed copies of Mr. Jones's address and of Mr. Shilton's remarks in the Club's archives. The Club will show good judgment by preserving Dr. Bing's poetic comments as well.

The minutes of May 10, 1965 (Paul Bucy presiding, Herman Lackner, acting secretary), introduce the first paper of Theodore Silverstein, "The Art of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"—as "an intellectual effusion laced with good humor, gracefully and tidily constructed and exceedingly well delivered." These words will reawaken, in the minds of those who have seen and heard Ted Silverstein read and act out a piece of his writing, memories of an enthusiasm that is as much a trade mark of the man as is his literary skill or, on occasion, his utter indifference to time.

With pointed gentleness, the minutes of one 1966 meeting describe the author's title as one in which the author "suggested that papers should not be written but ad-libbed and proved his point by writing this one. His search for a subject was conducted in beautiful prose clearly enunciated."

On January 30, 1967, only twenty-three members were present. Why, when the evening's author wrote with such felicity? The minutes tell us that ". . . Nathaniel Apter rewarded the hardy souls who had braved wind and weather (aftermath of the worst storm in Chicago's history) by reading a truly distinguished paper on Robert Frost, entitled 'Barding It Up' ". The storm to which the secretary referred had worked a havoc usually associated with wars—it had killed only a few and had destroyed no major buildings, but had otherwise caused greater Chicago to grind to a beautiful, paralyzing halt. After a monumental snowfall rescue teams had sought out the stranded, and strangers had spoken to each other on nearly empty trains or as they munched down the middle of State Street like misplaced "forty-niners". It is doubtful that many other voluntary groups brought twenty-three members together on the first night after the snow stopped.

A sampling of the quality of the best papers the Club produced during this period has been well preserved through those selected for publication. They were, in chronological order, Walker B. Davis's "The Reluctant Conservative", Earle Astor Shilton's "Once In A Lifetime", "Slavery" by Roger W. Shugg, Martin D. Stevers's "Retrospect and Prospect", Douglass Pillinger's "A Golden Vessel of Great Song", Joseph A. Matter's "Henry Blake

Fuller", Theodore Silverstein's "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", Percival Bailey's "Harun Al-Rashid", and David Willard Maher's "The Don". This comes to nine in eight years. Anyone interested in what the Club has contributed to the world of letters should read them. Their quality is high. So, in fact, is the quality of a good many others that have not been published. If there is any question, it is not about the wisdom that the Committee on Publications exercised in choosing the papers it did. The question is whether the committee should have selected more. As Alexander Isaacs has observed of the Club ". . . its contributions to literature have not been widespread. Science, medicine, law, and education have been represented more than literature (in its specialized definition). 'Club' is the more important word." Still, during this period some of the Club's writers not only chose interesting topics—not a particularly demanding task when one considers the educational level of the group—but also managed to achieve something else, something beyond erudition—an element of style, an artfulness, a subtlety, and sometimes an appropriate jolt. At times a clean economy of words can convey more than a dissertation. Thus Manly S. Mumford casually in "An Able Young Man":

Diaz was no scholar, but he knew what went on, because he was there, he was observant, and he had a memory like the day of judgment.

Or Douglass Pillinger in capturing the essence of Ambrose Bierce—what Clifton Fadiman has called "the purity of his misanthropy":

As a man he was at his best as a soldier. But one may question whether this was from any compelling belief in the justness of the cause—a cause which he said 'might be right or might be wrong.' Once years later, when the body of a confederate soldier was found in the woods outside Washington, he wrote to one of his friends: "They found a Confederate soldier the other day with his rifle alongside. I'm going over to beg his pardon."

Percival Bailey, telling of "Ol' Doc Artin" writes of an eccentric country physician with such deceptively simple craftsmanship that the reader is swept along in what seems to be just another nostalgic reminiscence—until he realizes that he has heard an unforgettably sharp delineation of character.

The problem that a historian has with such papers is selection. Many deserve a fate kinder than oblivion. The styles, like the lives and the minds of the authors, differ widely and refreshingly. Douglas Flood, in "Respectfully Yours", wrote in an unorthodox, at times almost stream-of-consciousness manner that brought the inner workings (and failures to work) of the U.S. Foreign Service into clear and often hilarious perspective. In an era when heavy drinking was almost as widely accepted by society as the brushing of teeth, John Nuveen wrote a paper both brave and moving, "John Barleycorn, Jr." He made his point not with a meat cleaver but with a smile:

In the beginning God created man and He created fungi. We don't know how long it was before the first man discovered what fermentation fungi could do to a neglected jar of fruit juice, but there is no doubt that when he tasted it he found it good and that sooner or later he drank too much of it. From that time on it has been a problem.

Geza de Takats, whose life has ranged from a childhood in Budapest through service in the Hungarian Army in World War One to his present eminence in surgery, has provided credibility and a sense of magic to occurrences and situations that in clumsier hands would have seemed improbable or outrageous.

One thing is certain (he told us in "Miracle at Bochnia"). Events of the past stand out clearly, whereas those more recent are hazy or forgotten. This has no doubt to do with the narrowing or closure of a little artery serving the hippocampal gyrus of the temporal lobe of the brain where memory is stored. The anecdotes described here are true stories and only partly concerned with me. For the rest, my bachelor uncle, George, is responsible, a fabulous character who kept a diary found in a trunk—my heritage.

There were other papers—in fact, a surprisingly high number—that handsomely rewarded those who heard them during the 1960-1967 years. Among them were Willard King's "Amateur Historian", Archie Jones's "Cops, Robbers, and Other Heroes", "The Red Nun" by William Wartman, "Reflections of a Kept Lawyer" by Walker Davis, Leo Seren's "Once Around and Eight Feet Forward", "The Poets Lie Too Much" by Maurice English, "Sounding Brass or Tinkling Cymbal" by Herman Lackner, George Quilici's "The Beautiful or the Damned", Ho-

bart Young's "The Torch Passed", and John Nuveen's "Timbuktu to Table Mountain."

The Chicago Literary Club has kept its essential nature. As Frederic Jung has said, "One sees no painful striving to impress, no studied efforts to discover trends, no labored efforts to find significance in the abstruse." The statement is true. No-one *uses* The Chicago Literary Club. If a member has a community of interests with his fellows, if he is congenial, that is enough. If the time comes when a potential member seeks to join the Club for the sake of social or other prestige, or when the Club urges membership on an outsider for the same type of reason, the Club will in a very real sense have died. This devotion to the Club for its own sake has been striking—and, as one would expect, unheralded. A number of members who, for reasons never questioned, seldom delivered papers, were nevertheless nearly perfect attendants at the Club's meetings. Frederic Jung has said, "During the 17 years that Howard Carter belonged to the Club, he continued to drive home from the meetings in his automobile, carrying with him as many passengers as the car would hold. Since he had had an artificial aorta implanted in 1961 . . . those who knew about his precarious hold on life often marveled at his thoughtfulness, optimism, and apparent unconcern."

Howard Carter maintained a photographic roster of the Club's membership. He did this so quietly and efficiently that no new member could long escape his relentless camera. At ninety-three Roscoe Pound wrote apologetically from Cambridge that he could not get in to Boston in the bad weather to get a 2" × 2½" photograph.

The 1966-1967 season closed, under the leadership of Arthur Baer, with this spirit intact. The Chicago Literary Club was in sound condition. It was solvent (it had never attempted to be rich), and now comprised 172 resident and 47 non-resident members. There were those who felt,—probably with reason,—that the addition of some youth would add strength to the group. But this feeling, which had no doubt been voiced before and which will no doubt be voiced again, represented a constructive challenge rather than a real problem. The Club could confidently look forward to a fulfilling future.

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