In the Beginning

MARCH 13, 1874 is the earliest date for the genesis of the Chicago Literary Club. On that date seven men met at the Sherman House to consider forming "a Club composed of men congenial and acceptable to each other, and distinguished to some degree by a love of letters."

This simple Credo had surprising appeal in an era as pretentious as the Gilded Age. The Club prospered from the beginning. Among those early members were some who stand out after a century. While others also made contributions to the success of the Club, yet, without the effort and special talents of the few singled out, there certainly would be a lesser record here to re-create the early years—and possibly no history at all to record.

The meeting of March 13 was followed by a series of pre-organizational meetings which had a double-pronged objective. To attract a strong membership of kindred spirits while coping with the more difficult task of embodying their simple Credo into written documents—the Constitution and By-laws. These were intended to lay down fundamental rules and principles to guide them and future members.

Despite their simple Credo, the founders met with little success in avoiding the fustian writing then considered fashionable even for formal club documents. By the April 7th meeting, a constitution was presented which was characterized more by ornament than by content. Fortunately, William F. Poole, recently come to Chicago from Cincinnati, was present for his first meeting on April 7th, having been elected a member on March 31, 1874. His reaction to the proposed constitution was immediate and negative.

In Cincinnati he had been a member for twelve years of the prestigious Cincinnati Literary Club. He left Cincinnati to become the first Librarian of the new Chicago Public Library, the first tax-supported, truly "public library" in the City. The father of modern library indexing, he later became the head of the Newberry Library, built to his specifications and designed especially to serve the needs of scholars. For two years after his arrival, he edited *The Owl*, a monthly literary magazine published by W. B. Keen, Cook & Co. In its columns he occasionally betrayed his desire for Chicago's rivalling Boston as America's bastion of good taste in cultural achievement. "The circulation of the Chicago Public Library", he boasted in *The Owl's* second number, "is about double that of the Boston Library, and on a capital of 8,000 less volumes."

Because of Poole's impressive professional background and his extensive experiences in the Cincinnati Literary Club, his arguments and caustic comments were effective and the proposed April 7th Constitution was rejected. Later with humor as well as sarcasm he referred to the rejected constitution as "A most gorgeous piece of literary composition, tropes, figures, metaphors, and rhetorical fireworks chased each other with dazzling brilliance."

All these were ruthlessly eliminated at his urging, along with fanciful names for the Club's dignitaries such as "Orator," "Poet," and "Marshall". The document finally adopted was modelled after the constitution of the Cincinnati Literary Club. Changes over the years streamlined it even further. Almost all of the "business" of the Club was and is conducted by a few committees which confer at other times aside from the regular meetings.

Poole suggested, tongue in cheek, that because of the importance of the proceedings at that historic meeting, the records should show the April 7 session as having taken place prior to those held in March; thus it would follow that he was a founding member in the most literal sense! As a matter of fact, the records of the Club support Poole's status as a founding member, since he was elected, three weeks before the official adoption of the constitution on April 21, 1874.

William Poole served as president of the Club during the 1879–1880 "season". His inaugural was an unusual occasion in his own personal history as well as in the Club's. A man of great dignity and self-possession, he had decided opinions on many subjects and was known to be "impatient with triflers". One of his favorite beliefs was that an address given without notes was more interesting than one read from a text, and in order to demonstrate the point he memorized his own inaugural remarks, which, in the tradition of the Club, were more often lengthy than otherwise. It transpired, however, that after a few moments of talk he first lost the thread and then the whole substance of the paper, and was forced to resort to notes. Poole, however, never lost his aplomb for long. It became a rule that all papers must be read and the text deposited with the Secretary.

Poole delivered ten papers at the Club, the last, "Our Modern Education and the University Curriculum", presented on November 27, 1893.

Unfortunately, the policy to publish selected papers was not adopted until 1894, the year he died.

If the literary efforts of the Chicago Literary Club's first twenty years have perished, however, the minutes remain to us, a record of every session to the present day. At the beginning, contrary to vogue, the minutes were written briefly and simply, albeit at times so concise that they failed to reveal all action taken. Volume I of the minute book commenced with the minutes of the first pre-organizational meeting held on March 13, 1874, and ended with the minutes for the session held on June 23, 1879. We know that Volume I was bound in leather after the last meeting it records, because a charming cartoon was executed and dated 1879 by member Lawrence C. Earle, a professional artist, and was inserted as a frontispiece in which it can be seen that Earle humorously depicted the four primary activities of the members.

The original constitution stated the object of the Club to be "literary and aesthetic culture", but the social activities reflected by Earle in the caricatures "Collations" and "Conversations", clearly reflected an activity that nevertheless was carried on for several years without constitutional mention. At a meeting held March 6, 1876, this discrepancy was remedied by an amendment which added the word "social". This tripartite object remains unchanged.

The advent of Frederick W. Gookin as Secretary added depth to the minutes, formerly dry and brief. In his long tenure, 1880 to 1920, he tried to capture the flavor as well as the substance of each meeting. A banker by profession, Gookin was a genial man of broad interests. Elected in 1877, he took advantage of his early associations with the original members to record their memories of the Club's activities. Their recollections and his own impressions of the half-century of his membership, charmingly told, make up the Club's first History, *History of the Chicago Literary Club* 1874–1924, published in 1926.

Secretary Gookin possessed considerable artistic talent and took an interest in Japanese art almost from the time that nation was opened to the western world. He was profoundly influenced by Japanese style, as were the others who created the refreshing "art nouveau", a relief from the dreary, overdone rococo that characterized the "Gilded Age".

At the beginning, professional copyists adorned the top of each entry in the Club minutes by engrossing and the text was executed in copper plate. As secretary, Gookin himself wrote the minutes in round cursive style but embellished them with illuminations as well as by his own engrossing. At times he incorporated designs in the illuminations attuned to seasonal changes and, on rare occasions, social events of the Club. His graceful floral designs heralded the "art nouveau" change in artistic taste which had its first expression at the Philadelphia World's Fair in 1876.

After transforming the format and design of the minutes, Gookin undertook a gradual development of an enlarged and handsome Year Book. Year Books were published from the beginning and contained, as they still do in a more expanded form, current data relating to Officers, By-Laws, papers, membership, and other matters of importance not only to the current membership but for historical purposes as well. Until 1878, they consisted of slim leaflets. Thereafter for ten years the publication developed from an eight-page book to fifteen pages, keeping pace with the increasing membership list and reflecting an editorial desire to provide more information.

Although the Year Books of the first decade were useful, they were not distinguished until 1884, when Gookin's extraordinary talents went to work. Under his brilliant execution, the Year Books became works of art. A simple Gookin design in one color adorns the covers of all Year Books issued since his death in 1934. Rising costs and the loss of Gookin have forced a return to the "practical" issues of the current Year Books, which are now concise and well-printed pamphlets.

Another historian of the Club, Edward Osgood Brown, was a young lawyer when he attended the very first meeting on March 13, 1874. He was active in civic matters and championed causes not always conservative nor popular. After 37 years devoted to private practice and the espousal of such theories as Henry George's Single Tax, he was nevertheless elected Judge of the Circuit Court of Cook County and later Judge of the Appelate Court. He served in these capacities with honor.

Judge Brown maintained his membership for almost a half century and presented 17 papers, a number not often equalled. His last, "Vignettes", was read by him on February 12, 1923, less than a year before he died. In 1917, he wrote an article about the Club for the Bibliographic Society of America which, while not a full-fledged "history", evoked the essence and spirit of the Chicago Literary Club's activities since 1874. In it, he recorded that he and the other founders present at the March 13 meeting had compiled a list of 24 prominent men who were to be invited to the next week's session.

"There were in this list statesmen, like Senators Trumbull and Doolittle; distinguished clergymen, like Bishop Whitehouse and David Swing; eminent lawyers, like Melville Fuller, Thomas Hoyne, and Wirt Dexter; judges, like Jameson and Booth, and authors, like Horace White, M. J. Savage, Joseph Kirkland, Francis Browne, and William Mathews. Almost all of the persons named in the list—all that I have mentioned among them—eventually became members of the Club. But the time was too short for very effective recruiting between March 13 and 17, and upon the latter day there were but thirteen present at the adjourned meeting, the present writer being the least important and the youngest." The roles subsequently played by those cited by Judge Brown and other early members brought fame to themselves and distinction to the Club. The attorney, Melville Fuller, became Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Joseph Kirkland became the author of "vigorously realistic novels of western life," and helped establish a new trend in the American novel. The other authors named also helped fulfill the prophesy made by another member, Alexander McClurg, who wrote in 1892: "I do not look to see an impromptu and lusty growth of literary geniuses springing up suddenly around us, we have been too busy so far to devote much time in the development of what literary possibilities may be within us. . . .So as a community, it seems to me we need not worry about our immediate literary product. Let it come, as in due time it will come, without forcing, and as a wholly natural fruit, mellow, ripe, wholesome. . . ."

Another on Judge Brown's list—General George Dana Webster, after serving in the Civil War, became the government engineer who raised Chicago twelve feet out of the mud and installed our first comprehensive sewage system—a civic advance of the first magnitude.

The original list of prospects also included the name of David Swing, a clergyman. At the time he was elected to the Club, Swing was a pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church. He was tried in 1874 for heresy and acquitted, but resigned, pending an appeal, to head the non-denominational Central Church, created to provide him with a pulpit. His leadership there brought him national fame. He emphasized a love for his fellow man rather than strict adherence to doctrine and his sermons were famous among people who entertained "advanced" religious views.

At the Club he delivered twelve papers and was active until he died on October 3, 1894, having declined the presidency on several occasions because of ill-health. That year, the Club chose his paper, "A True Love Story", to be its first publication. It was a thoroughly delightful spoof of the popular romantic fiction of the age, beautifully illustrated by Gookin and printed on heavy rough-edge rag paper. The copy, donated to Newberry Library by Mrs. Gookin, is in mint condition. Some of the charm and humor of the contents may be gleaned from the Author's Preface: "While I sympathize with the Chicago Literary Club in its desire to find, if possible, in its ranks some man who as a novelist might rank with Mason as a historian and with Thompson as a poet [both fellow members], and while I confess the right of the Club to experiment with its members for the purpose of discovering that one may conceal some signal ability for finding the most of invention and the least of fact, yet I cannot but feel that it was almost an insult to a clergyman to ask him to give a specimen of 'Sheer fabrication' to a society composed almost wholly of members of the legal fraternity."

While David Swing's "A True Love Story" was the first to be published under the rules adopted in the eighties, the very first "Essay" was published in a morning newspaper under date of October 20, 1874. It had been delivered at the Club on October 19 by Reverend Kaufman Kohler, also a founding member. Entitled "Myths and Miracles", it was a daring composition for that time and evidenced a deep understanding of the significance of religious belief to the spirit of man. Rev. Kohler's words have ecumenical impact even today. He took as his text, the quotation, "I am a man, and nothing that is human I hold to be strange to me." He traced beliefs held sacred from the time of the Egyptians on down through the ages.

The Chicago Literary Club, by providing uninhibited platforms for Rev. Kohler's ecumenical viewpoint and David Swing's departure from Presbyterian doctrine, demonstrated tolerance and courage from inception. At other times the Club proved equally tolerant of extremely conservative views.

The guarantee of freedom of speech, and its corollary, the protection of speakers from objections from the floor, originated on another theological occasion: May 17, 1875, the date on which Judge Henry Booth read a composition entitled "Evidences of the Resurrection Examined". His conclusion (as Earle Shilton put it in his paper of November 28, 1960, "A 20-Minute History of the Chicago Literary Club"), was that the evidence in favor of the resurrection was "somewhat inadequate". In those days, half the members were clergymen and Booth had barely finished reading when several of them leaped to their feet and, as rapidly as they could be heard, roundly denounced his conclusions. The discussion became acrid and bitter and "threatened to end the existence of the organization at that moment." The next week, in the interests of harmony, the membership adopted Section 3 of the by-laws which states, "no paper at the time it is read shall be open to adverse criticism in the Club."

However, opportunity is afforded for a forum for opposing views at the next open date. Controversy is regulated through rigid adherence to the early rule. Personal confrontation is avoided, and the Club atmosphere remains relaxed; for the meetings are not marred by acrimonious debate. Compare the original 1874 "Order of Business" with the current rules. Note the remarkable lack of change.

The rigidity in format has been followed for a hundred years, not because of a fetish for the past, but because the format is successful. Therefore, homage is due the man who was a pioneer and authority in Library Science and yet by his positive, imaginative and knowing leadership, helped mould this successful format a century ago.

Thanks, too, to a quiet rebel who became a distinguished Jurist and an excellent Club historian and recreated a past which we are privileged to reproduce. And last, a successful banker who became the author of a magnificent history of the first 50 years of the Club, and whose extraordinary artistic talents enliven the documents and booklets which otherwise might well appear to be prosaic.

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