

The Climate

AT FIRST GLANCE, Chicago in 1874 would seem an unlikely place for the formation of a club devoted to literary pursuits. A closer look, however, indicates that there were certain forces operating at that time which in combination provided a favorable climate for such an organization. Some were the result of local conditions but others were national trends.

The Civil War and the reconstruction period which followed it altered the power structure of the United States to such an extent that its organization in 1865 was almost entirely replaced in 1900. Besides the western expansion and facilitation of transport resulting from railroad construction, the explosive growth of science and technology contributed to the development of a society in which the dominant factors were huge corporations. Relations between employer and employe became distant and impersonal, with inevitable unrest and animosity. At the same time, the descendants of immigrants from many countries who had come to the Melting Pot became numerous, vocal and powerful.

Governmental and social organization had previously been controlled by men whose ancestors had been long in the United States and who were predominantly of British origin. Consciously or unconsciously, these men realized that their way to power and financial dominance lay in holding the reins of the burgeoning corporations and in establishing cultural and educational institutions with self-perpetuating governing bodies. The sheer numbers and diversity of such institutions founded in the period 1865-1900 were extraordinary, as was their distribution in all the major cities of the United States. In Boston, the Museum of Fine Arts was established in 1870, the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1878; the Boston Symphony in 1881; the Watch and Ward Society in 1890, to mention only a few. In New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, established in 1870, was

only one of the equally varied institutions dating from this period. The same was true for Philadelphia and other eastern capitals.

The people who found power and satisfaction in financial and institutional control as a substitute for dominance in government began to sense the need for places where they could meet socially, hold discussions and carry out those delicate business arrangements which were best managed in a social environment. This requirement was met by creating social clubs with restricted membership. The great Boston clubs all started in the 1880's—the Algonquin, St. Botolph, Tavern, Club of Odd Volumes, among others. A study of clubs in New York, Philadelphia and other cities shows that this trend was similar in all of them. Club life in the United States became a mixture of status symbol and an escape from the noisy trivialities which commanded the attention of the newspapers (and, regrettably, of many present-day social historians).

These same trends were present in Chicago but were modified by special local conditions. It was a brash new city emerging from a frontier settlement in less than half a century while the eastern cities had experienced two hundred years of history and tradition. In 1830, Chicago was a village of 50 inhabitants, yet by 1837 it had grown sufficiently to receive a city charter and have William B. Ogden as its first mayor. The next three decades saw prodigious, if disorderly, growth as Chicago became the center of nearly all transportation to the West.

By 1850, Chicago had less than 30,000 residents, yet the pattern of its future growth had been set. It already merited Carl Sandburg's later description:

“Hog Butcher for the World
Tool maker, Stacker of Wheat,
Player with Railroads and the
Nation's Freight Handler.”

By 1870, it had become a huge, rambling city of wooden buildings. The demand for laborers led to the settlement of immigrants from many European countries, especially Germany, Italy and Eastern Europe. But men of education and substantial capital also moved to Chicago, lured by the financial opportunities and novelty inherent in rapid expansion.

Some of them, such as Cyrus H. McCormick, had come from the South. There was, however, a substantial majority who were New Englanders, bringing with them its traditional values of frugality and hard work. They also brought the newer trends toward consolidation of power in corporations and institutions along with withdrawal from governmental organization. The Civil War was too recent for harmony to exist between these two groups and it took a generation for the wounds to heal. It was particularly the ex-New Englanders who began to feel the need for clubs as islands of quiet in a turbulent sea. The two first to be founded in the city were the Chicago Club and the Standard Club, both dating from 1869.

Then suddenly all was changed by one of the greatest city fires of recorded history. The entire central city of wooden buildings went up in flames on October 8-10, 1871, leaving 100,000 people homeless, over 250 dead and property damage of \$200 million (in 1871 dollars). In the midst of 1,688 acres of ashes and rubble, the Water Tower and the Ogden home stood alone in pitiful splendor.

Yet recovery gave dramatic testimony to Chicago's vitality. Within the first week after the fire, 5,497 temporary structures had been completed and 200 permanent buildings were under way. No attempt was made to produce a new city plan and rebuilding in steel and stone was the basic change. When The Chicago Literary Club was founded, only two buildings in central Chicago were more than three years old. Construction was centered on shelter and business facilities as best the carpenters and masons could provide them but architects from other cities soon moved in to take advantage of the opportunities that rebuilding offered. In 1873, the young Louis Sullivan arrived. By his work with his partner, Adler, Chicago was to become an international center for modern architecture.

Sullivan's appearance was only one evidence of the desire to rebuild the city physically, intellectually and financially along the lines that existed in older cities unaltered by a holocaust. The frenetic atmosphere, the mixture of races immigrating to the city, and the disorder of government served to enhance the need for a place of serious conversation, reflection and literary pursuit. The great cultural institutions of Chicago were yet a generation away, but a club could be formed to serve these ends.

The men who met in March, 1874, to discuss the matter had come to Chicago already familiar with similar clubs in the cities which they had left. They realized the advantages accruing from them by personal experience and frequent contacts with their cities of origin. Among these men, Francis Fisher Browne had known the Century Club in New York, William Frederick Poole had been a member of the Cincinnati Literary Club and our first president, the Reverend Robert C. Collyer, had come to Chicago from England by way of Philadelphia.

The soil was ready; the climate was favorable. The seed which was The Chicago Literary Club has strengthened and flourished now for a hundred years.

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