

**100 YEARS OF THE ATHENAEUM SOCIETY  
OF HOPKINSVILLE, KENTUCKY  
AS SEEN THROUGH ITS MINUTES**

presented at the Open Meeting  
Thursday, May 2, 2002  
Holiday Inn

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Originally, this paper was to have been the second part of my previous paper on Theodore Roosevelt Augustus Major Poston, but after finding that I would be speaking at the open meeting of the 100th year of the Society, I determined to postpone that paper and attempt a paper on 100 years of the Athenaeum Society as seen through its minutes. This paper will be something in the nature of a complement to William Turner's paper last month in which he reported on the founding of the Athenaeum Society and gave brief biographical sketches of the founding members. I found out Sunday afternoon that Jim Adams gave such a paper on the occasion of the Society's 90th anniversary, but by that time I was too far along with the project to pick another topic, so the 23 current members in the Society who were members at that time will have to endure another round of self-examination.

The minutes state that: "At the invitation of Mr. William H. Harrison the following gentlemen met at Hotel Latham in the city of Hopkinsville, on Friday night, April 18th, 1902, for the purpose of organizing a literary society, Messrs William H Harrison, Edmund Harrison, Clifton Long, T.C. Underwood, E.B. Bassett, Ira L. Smith, and John Stites, and Drs. Manning Brown and F.M. Stites. . . .Dr. F.M. Stites moved that the society proceed to adopt a name, said name to be selected, provided it met with the unanimous consent of the society - Mr. Clifton Long seconded the motion, and it unanimously carried.

On the motion of Mr. Bassett seconded by Mr. Smith the members proceeded to suggest names and vote on same. THE REVIEWERS; THE QUERY CLUB, and THE LITERARY AND SCIENTIFIC CLUB were suggested, but as unanimous consent could not be obtained, after much discussion, upon the motion of Mr. Bassett, seconded by Mr. Underwood the selection of a name was postponed until Monday afternoon, April 21st, 1902 at 4 o'clock, at which time a

committee composed of all gentlemen present should meet at the office of Dr. F.M. Stites' for the purpose of selecting a name and adopting suitable by-laws."

The members then proceeded to set the offices and elect officers, Mr. William H. Harrison being elected the first president. The following men not present were also elected as charter members: W.T. Tandy, C.M. Meacham, L. McCartney, F.P. Thomas, E.H. Barker, A.W. Wood, A.P. Crockett, John Feland, and J.T. Hanberry.

In the very first year, the members began setting patterns that we follow today. They set a limit on the length of a paper of 30 minutes per paper and limited discussion to two speeches per member, no one speech to exceed 5 minutes. There have been further discussions of the appropriate amount of time to allow for discussion and rebuttal. At one point, the membership limited discussion to 30 minutes total for each paper, and today we limit ourselves to about 3 minutes of comments per member. Perhaps we have taken the old saw to heart: "Brevity is the soul of wit". The members also voted in May of 1903 to adjourn during the summer. In 1951, we increased the summer vacation by adding June. In a rare departure from tradition, this bit of Society business was transacted at the May open meeting of that year.

In the early days, the Society usually called for three papers per meeting. However, only rarely did the members hear three papers. Usually someone was ill or absent or forgot, so, at least by custom, the Society usually has heard two papers at any given meeting. It seems from the minutes that, prior to a meeting, the Secretary would canvas the men and find some willing to give papers. Then at the close of the meeting, he would announce the papers for the next meeting. In 1905, the Society made its first effort to list the presenters a year at a time. Even so, the Society for years had trouble with men forgetting they had to give a paper or just not being prepared, so it was not unusual for the Society to hear only one paper until into the 1920's. In

1906, the Society declared that failure to present on the day appointed constituted resignation from the society. Later, the Society relented in so far as to allow a member to make a prearranged substitution or to send in his written paper to be read by someone else.

Both William Turner and Jim Adams reported that the society sometimes heard as many as six papers in a session. According to the minutes, this ordeal of oratory only occurred at open meetings. Until the Second World War, the custom prevailed of hearing four to six papers on pre-assigned topics, usually intended to be humorous, or at least light. Some time during the span 1938-1948, the membership shortened the program of the open meeting. The first open meeting occurred in May of 1905, with the following six papers: W.T. Fowler on "The Queen of Hearts", W.L. Nourse on "Things Worthwhile", Ira L. Smith on "Such Stuff as Dreams", J.T. Hanberry on "Young America", J.W. Downer on "The Reading Habit", and C.M. Meacham on "Adam and Eve". You may notice a paper that could be religious in nature; indeed, papers with religious themes or at least allusions, appeared for many years on Society programs.

The open meeting in May of 1907 received coverage in the Kentucky New Era, as indeed, most open meetings until the Second World War did. The program was typical for that period, beginning with a reception in the parlors of the Hotel Latham from 8:30 until 9:00, followed by a dinner in the dining hall consisting of salted peanuts, sliced tomatoes, boullion en tasse, mixed pickles, radishes, fillets of bluefish ala bordelaise, pomme parisienne, gingembre sorbet, smothered chicken ala persillade, new potatoes, delmonte tips, plum pudding with hard sauce, fruit salad, neapolitaine ice cream, strawberries, assorted cakes, and coffee. All for not more than \$1.25/plate. Most open dinners were not that elaborate, usually consisting of simple hors d'oeuvres, maybe a soup, spring chicken, ham, biscuits, ice cream and coffee. The neapolitain ice cream seems to have been quite a favorite, as it showed up on several menus. After dinner,

the president, Mayor Meacham, welcomed the assembled throng and served as master of ceremonies. Again, the program was light, H.D. Smith leading off with a speech entitled "Family Affairs" in which he discussed the Smith family, its origins, and its achievements. Then Judge J.T. Hanberry gave a speech entitled "In Our Town", setting forth the virtues of Hopkinsville. His peroration seems to have been mainly a glowing tribute to the Hopkinsville girl. T.C. Underwood followed him with "When a Man Marries". He developed his theme in a decidedly sentimental vein, enlarging on the idea that when a man marries, his troubles fade away. "Poles and Persimmons" came next, given by Ira L. Smith. The write-up in the paper suggests that this speech was a whole lot of nothing, or an excuse to exercise the presenter's wit: "Mr. Smith is an adept at the skillful use of words and his puns and paradoxes were exceedingly clever". Obviously, many of our traditions have long standing. J.W. Downer followed this flight of fancy with a "veritable pastel of prose" on the topic "In Fancy's Realm". The concluding speech came from Prof. H. Clay Smith: "Before Adam" in which the newspaper indicates that he displayed such vim and electric brilliancy that the company would gladly have had him talk on indefinitely despite the "wee sma' hour". The meeting finally adjourned at 1:20 am, after which the members and guests walked home or rode home in their buggies.

Occasionally, the open meeting has provided its guests with natural excitement to complement the scintillating papers, such as the occasion in 1915 when the roof came off the Hotel. The minutes note that a storm outside was the probable cause. Then, twenty years later, at the open meeting in 1935, the power went out as Judge Ira D. Smith spoke on "Orchids and Onions" in which he explored the conflict between communism (the onion) and western capitalism (the orchid).

In 1918, when America was actively engaged in fighting the War to End All Wars, the members voted to have a dinnerless Open Meeting. The Society assessed the members the usual charge and donated the proceeds to the Red Cross. Menu cards appeared, tantalizing the attendees with what they might have in future, war-less years. However, the members and guests enjoyed their usual five speeches and received the customary write-up in the paper.

Various technological innovations have been made at Society meetings. At the open meeting in 1929, the Society made the first recorded use of a microphone. The record is unclear, but the program may have been broadcast on Hopkinsville's radio station WFIW: "Whitest Flour in the World". In January of 1932, the minutes record the first resignation by telephone. The members refused to accept a resignation given over this novel instrument, insisting open the age-old custom of a written resignation before they would consider it. The first use of a tape recorder was noted in January of 1973 at the suggestion of Tom Westerfield to record to the proceedings. In February of 1986, Jim Love made the first recorded use of tape recordings as a part of his paper on "Garrison Keillor and A Prairie Home Companion". Wendell Rorie made the first use of a video player while giving his paper on "Patagonia to Galapagos" in December of 1993, and Hollis White brought us into the computer era with the first power point presentation in October, 2000 on "Hydraulic Motors: The Hidden Giants". This potentially dry topic brought forth much ribaldry from the members. Perhaps they were mindful of the paper given by a now senior member on "The Joy of Sex Revisited". The example set by this otherwise upstanding member may have led one of the junior members to stray, as the Society heard a paper from him on "Nude Dancing" two years later. Or, perhaps the junior member was merely following along in our tradition of shop-talk papers, wherein we discuss our own businesses. This gentleman

expressed some hope that the controversial dance halls would keep going, as they provided him with a certain amount of legal work.

Occasionally, the Society has enjoyed music at the open meeting. In one instance, in 1910, the Society debated the advisability of hiring Lebketcher's Orchestra of seven brasses for \$15 or Blakemore's Orchestra, a colored four piece string ensemble who provided a very good grade of music for \$8.00. Later on, in 1932, the Society enjoyed the music of the Hopkinsville High School orchestra, which helped the members and guests to conclude the program by singing "My Old Kentucky Home". After the Second World War, various musicians from Bethel College entertained the Society until the demise of Bethel.

Elections in the Society have usually occurred in April. The prevailing custom for many years has been that a man serves his turn as president in chronological order according to the date of his acceptance into the Society after serving one term as Vice-president. Early on, the Society limited a man to one term as President during his years as a member. Only the office of Secretary/Treasurer carries no such limit. In the early years, many of the members had the same initiation date, and so elections could be contested, as in the election of 1907:

"This being the time of the annual election of officers, nominations for president was called for and Mr. C.M. Meacham being the only one placed in nomination on motion the clerk was instructed to cast the vote of the society for Mr. Meacham, which was done and he was declared the duly elected president of the society for the ensuing year.

Clay, Smith, John Stites and I.L. Smith having been placed in nomination for vice-president a ballot was taken and I.L. Smith having received a majority of the ballots cast was declared elected vice-president of the society for the ensuing year. As the result of a well organized conspiracy, Frank Rives was the only name put in nomination for secretary and the

president was instructed to cast the vote of the society for him for secretary, which was done and he was declared to be the duly elected secretary and treasurer for the ensuing year and was allowed to qualify without bond. He felt and believed that he had good and sufficient grounds for a contest, but decided to waive them provided the members would get the fifty cent habit." In the last sentence, the secretary refers to the members paying their dues in a timely fashion.

By 1912, the custom on uncontested elections had taken hold, with the only excitement being an allegation of fraud which was successfully refuted. At the June meeting, the members voted to strike the reference to this allegation from the official record. Reading between the lines, the allegation probably came from the secretary in a humorous protest of his election to that duty.

Occasionally the minutes make record of particularly good or bad meals. When landlord Noe appeared at the Latham in 1909, the meals improved a great deal. In November of 1908, the club appointed a Quail Committee, which took responsibility for shooting enough birds to feed the members. They accomplished their object and the members enjoyed a quail dinner that December. The Society has favored fowl as an entree for years, even going so far as to appoint the infamous Tilley Chicken Committee in November, 2000 to investigate the disappearance of the delectable bird from the buffet. The minutes state that his "well researched report, although littered with fowl language, elicited a few cackles from members." Doing without chicken was preferable to what happened in October of that year, when the Holiday Inn forgot that we were coming. Their error resulted in a modification of the usual program when the Society heard one paper while they scrambled to prepare us a dinner and the second afterwards. The innovation was not favored, as it has not been repeated.



Paper topics before the Great War covered a gamut of subjects, as they do now, ranging from a paper on Japan in 1908, the discussion of which was “quite animated, and the agitation of the Japo-American war question grew rather exciting at times, but President Meacham in his usual diplomatic way finally routed all the Oriental invaders and order was once more restored”. The first travelogue appeared in February of 1908, a description of Yellowstone Park. This noble tradition is ably carried on by the members today: we have recently heard papers on travels in Africa and Germany. In June of 1911, when no speakers appeared, Col. Jouett Henry gave an impromptu paper on his travels in Mexico. The first paper on clairvoyance came in 1911, beginning a tradition of sporadic papers on topics relating to one of our most famous sons. Social ills were clearly on the Society’s mind in 1912 when the group heard two papers on divorce.

With the coming of the Great War, martial topics became increasingly popular, to wit: starting in September of 1914 with “The Battlefield of Europe - Belgium”, followed by “Bismarck”, “Extracts From the Hague Peace Conference”, “Women in War”, “Mars and the Muse”, “Aircraft and its Modern Uses”, “The Psychology of War”, “War and Education”, “Gassed” - given at the open meeting and apparently humorous, “Our Food Supply”, “After the War - What?”, “Herr Wilhelm Hohenzollern”, “Bolshevism”, “Use of Gas in Modern Warfare”, “Italy in the Recent War”, and finally in December of 1930, a report by Herschel Long on his experience in 1919 as an inspector of German prisons. Since we do not have the minutes from the years covering the Second World War, we do not know how many papers during that period covered martial topics. However, we have heard papers in recent years on topics pertaining to the war years, including some firsthand reminiscences of experiences in the armed forces.

In 1921 and 1922, the Society engaged in negotiations with the Rotary Club and the Hotel Latham for the creation of a large dining room. Midway through the negotiations, the Room Committee reported that the Hotel was no longer willing to allow the Society to use the new room. Later, the committee reported that the new room could be had for a rental fee of \$2.00 per meeting. Finally, the Hotel agreed that the Society could use the new room for free if they would increase their plate fee to \$1.00 per plate per meeting.

In January 1922, the Society raised the initiation fee to \$5.00, which rate has remained in effect ever since. A tremendous value today in relative terms.

The Society has had official guests over the years, receiving visits from Clarksville's Philomathean Society in 1928, 1933, and 1934. The Forum Society from Princeton visited the Athenaeum twice, once in 1933 and again in 1936. The Athenaeum Society returned the favor by visiting the Clarksville club in 1934 and the Princeton club in 1935 and 1937. There is a gap in the minute from 1938 until 1949, but from 1949 on, there have been no further exchanges or visits.

Occasionally, the Society has indulged in flights of rhetorical speculation and fancy, such as the occasion in October, 1933 when the Society discussed the use of the term "unanimously": "W.L. Linton initiated an interesting discussion, which raised the question of the propriety in the secretary's use of the adverb "unanimously" when recording the election of members. The subject, including all its various ramified and related branches, was worked up into a fine mist, which blended effectively with the blue haze of tobacco smoke that already beclouded the atmosphere."

In January, 1934, the members again indulged themselves: "A great deal of talk followed the roll call, with a variety of suggestions, motions and counter motions as to the advisability of

authorizing the secretary to read the minutes of the two previous meetings or the expediency of ordering the readings omitted. Several points of order failed to be registered strictly in order. Finally, upon instructions from the Chair, the secretary read the minutes of the November meeting and heard the Society's expression of approval." In January, 1935, the members approved the minutes, then attempted to revoke their approval and entered into discussion of the language the Secretary had used to describe various clerical members who had been the occasion of the postponement of the November meeting because of a revival conflicting with the original date. The secretary was finally instructed to rewrite the minutes using more suitable words, which he apparently did because the November minutes seem quite tame.

In more recent years, the Society indulged in a discussion of what "Out of Town" meant and whether or not being so constituted a valid excuse for missing a meeting. The members did not reach a conclusion. If memory serves, this may have been the meeting when all excuses offered by the members for previous absences were found to be unsatisfactory and no excuses were accepted.

At the December 1933 meeting, the members and their guests from Clarksville heard two notable papers. The first, from Herman Southall, was on Hitler. Mr. Southall put forth the theme that Hitler was primarily an agitator using the Jews as scapegoats. Discussion on his paper centered on whether Hitler was a true leader or an egoist trying to imitate Mussolini. J.W. Downer gave the second paper on Robert Louis Stevenson. The minutes note that the paper lasted 1:10 and that the speaker gave it from memory.

Membership in the Society has always been by invitation and, in the early years, the Society appears to have achieved a kind of consensus with regards to new members before putting them to a vote, because the first record of an unfavorable vote came in June, 1935. After

the gap in the minutes, there is a record of a movement beginning in January, 1949 to increase the number of adverse votes required to block a candidate from three to ten. The members defeated this proposed change to the By-laws, as well as proposals to change the number of adverse votes required to five. Later, in September of 1953, a member again tried to raise the number of adverse votes to four, but again the members did not favor the change, so we still require three adverse votes to defeat a candidate. Throughout the years, the Society discussed whether or not to include the names of men proposed for membership in the minutes, frequently instructing the Secretary to omit the names of candidates receiving unfavorable votes. Usually the Secretary ignored such instructions, until December, 1984 when the Society again emphatically prohibited the Secretary from recording the names of anyone proposed for membership or refusing an offer. Since that time, the Secretaries have obeyed the wishes of the members.

In 1974 and 1975, the Society engaged in what seems to have been a pitched battle over proposed members. Some of our more senior members may recall this episode. According to the minutes, in November, 1974, two men were proposed for membership and both received unfavorable votes. Someone then called for the motion to be reconsidered, then a motion was made to table the motion to reconsider. The motion to table passed. At the December meeting, a motion was made and seconded to revote on the men considered at the November meeting. This motion was immediately followed by a motion and second to table the revote. The membership split evenly on the question, so the Chair cast the deciding vote to table the reconsideration. In January, the membership committee put forward two different names, both of whom received unfavorable votes. Then, again in February, the membership committee put forth three names. Both of the first two candidates received unfavorable votes. Before the voting began on the third

candidate, Frank Yost “moved, and it was seconded, that the vote on” the third man “be postponed indefinitely - and when a candidate should be presented to the society - the first one would be” this man. This motion passed, allowing the Society to continue on with its business of hearing papers. The ban remained in effect until September, 1975, when the Society voted to lift the ban, and at the October meeting, the Society elected the man held over since February. Oddly enough, several of the men receiving unfavorable votes during the time of the controversy have since received favorable consideration and joined.

This same problem occurred again in November, 1978, when four men were proposed for membership. In the course of balloting, each of the first three received unfavorable votes, after which it was moved that balloting cease and the remaining candidate be held over, which he was until April, 1979, when he received a favorable vote.

For many years, the Society limited itself to 30 members. The first attempt to raise the limit came during World War I, when it was proposed that the limit be raised to 36 in order to accommodate members going off to war, with the membership to drift back to 30 by attrition with the return of peace. The next recorded attempt to raise the membership, this time to 40, came in June, 1949, but was rejected. Further attempts in 1951, 1953, and 1955 were all rejected. Finally, in September, 1956, someone proposed that the issue of increasing the membership be put to a vote by mail, to which procedure the Society agreed. Upon counting the mail ballots at the October meeting, the amendment passed and the Society has remained at a limit of 40 since that time.

In January of 1954, the minutes record the first instance of the institution of the refreshment break between the reading of the papers and the discussion. All of the members have not always returned; in one notable case, in March, 1980, only 10 of the 28 members in

attendance returned, leading the Secretary to comment on the Diaspora after the intermission.

Only three members commented on papers, giving the presenters an unwontedly easy time of it.

The papers given since the Second World War have, not surprisingly, reflected both the times in which they were given and the personal interests of the members. In 1954, the members heard a paper on "The Federal Employees' Loyalty Program", or McCarthyism. A few years later, there were two papers on integration and desegregation. In April, 1961, W.W. Henderson gave a paper on "The Battle of Donelson", which the minutes note was a repeat of a paper given in 1913 by W.T. Tandy. This was not the first repeated paper, as J.W. Downer gave several of his papers twice. Later on in 1961, Wallace Henderson gave the first paper on the Night Riders, which he repeated in 1978. In 1962, George Boone presented an innovation by giving joint papers with Thomas Mabry, which may have been titled: "The Boom-Boomers and Beyond". Wendell Rorie covered "Mercy Killings" in 1963 and Brooks Major gave our only paper to date on the Bell Witch in 1965. In November, 1972 the Society heard a paper by Neil Ward on "Literary Censorship: An American Dilemma", which was followed by a panel discussion moderated by Brooks Major, finally resulting in a general discussion by the members. In March, 1986, Peter McDonald discussed the Middle Ages and critiqued the usual theories for their demise. "In a surprise conclusion he advanced the idea that the wide spread habitual and excessive use of alcoholic beverages causing universal lethargy and morning headache having been alleviated by the importation and use of coffee, the era might have transpired into the Renaissance or the Great Awakening". In November, 1988, a member made his maiden voyage by giving two papers at once - a double length paper on Nepal. Needless to say, he was reminded in the comments period by the members of the generally accepted length for an Athenaeum paper. In 1989, Mike Herndon gave as his paper the first work of new fiction ever heard by the

Society, or at least so identified by the author. 1991 was a memorable year for the Society, for in that year we heard a paper on "Caller ID" by Kenneth Powers, about which I have heard members comment, and heard Jim Love announce his candidacy for President of the United States of America in the No Change Party. Inquiring Minds wonder if he should have run a little harder in the last election. Perhaps he could have been the king-maker in that closely contested contest.

Throughout my paper, I have quoted from the minutes where appropriate. I will end this evening by reading the minutes of February, 1983 in their entirety in order to give you some idea of their flavor:

MINUTES OF THE ATHENAEUM SOCIETY, FEBRUARY 3, 1983

\* see below

The Society was called to order by the President at 7:30 P.M.

Subsequent to the pre-prandial oration and refulgent repast, the Roll Call resounded with 27 raucous responses. Several erratic excuses were enunciated relative to previous absences and they were received with the same understated enthusiasm with which they were proffered.

The President then called for old business. The Society proceeded to exercise its right of suffrage anent three proposed new members, one of whom, Carmichael Fels, survived the rigors of the refractory respondents. In the interim between the elective elicitation and the enunciation of the end result, Robert Sivley swiftly secured a copy of the Constitution to corroborate a questioned codicil, while the remainder of the recrudescant rank and file retired to the rest rooms for refreshing relief.

Having disposed of the democratic diversion, the President then elicited the elocutionary effusions of the evening.

Tom Westerfield presently pontificated on a prolix proliferation of puzzling paradigms of prognostication, magnificently based on "Megatrends." Picking parallelisms from particular prophets, he elaborated tendentiously on ten tendencies with terse truth traced with an occasional tinge of tergiversation, fairly framing the future.

Robert Baker then delivered a delicate diatribe dealing with the dialectic deficiency of the monolinguistic mania that marks major manufacturing moguls and the American populace in general. In essence, he elaborated on the economic impact of this erroneous educational elision with elegance and eclat.

President Riley then, omitting the ordinary post-oratorical out-  
ing, called for comments. (It should be noted that this departure from designated decorum was due to the delay instigated by earlier deliberations.) At least 45 members indulged in the privilege of adding their insightful encomiums and occasionally egregious individual evaluations, some apropos and others ambiguously allegorical.

The President adjourned the melee as the orange orb of the sun reluctantly pierced the cover of the frigid and stygian gloom, to the great relief of all concerned.

Respectfully submitted,

Secretary, Acting - W.P. Turner

\* Pseudo-minutes - composer anonymous