

My paper was originally going to be the first of a series on the lives of Kentuckians on the United States Supreme Court. I prepared a rough draft and feel good about that paper, but upon reflection realized that subjecting our open meeting guests to punishment more appropriate for a regular meeting of the Society, so I reconsidered.

I can see my legal colleagues fairly salivating at the thought of such a series of law related lectures. I sense their disappointment at my change of heart. I suspect the attorneys are already planning to lobby the Athenaeum powers that be to allow me to present my proposed series of papers in succession to quench the thirst for knowledge readily evident among our legal contingent. Alas, I am sure in denying such a preposterous suggestion the leadership would simply refer my stalwart supporters to the evidence. They would note the negative impact on meeting attendance fomented by the announcement of my first paper, arguing that a series of such events would likely deal a blow to the body Athenaeum it might not survive. After all, a lengthy series of papers on the lives of Justices of the United States Supreme Court would usurp presentations on much weightier topics like, for example, ketchup. I can't make this stuff up.

Furthermore, presenting a paper tonight about the United States Supreme Court would be contrary to the open meeting purpose which we all know is.....eh,.....actually I'm really not sure what the avowed purpose of the open meeting is. But one meeting a year to showcase our society to the community is probably enough. And frankly it's a pretty tough sell to have an open meeting at all. The old timers—look around you: Sort of brings the concept of old-timers into a completely new perspective, doesn't it?—the old timers don't like giving up our regular meeting rituals, stuff like dressing in druid robes, dancing around a cauldron, rhythmic chanting and the always popular tattooing. Yes, for one meeting a year we lay aside those signature qualities that distinguish us from say, Rotary, and allow the community to peek behind the Athenaeum curtain to gain a glimpse of the self-appointed keepers of the community intellectual flame at their best.

Lest you find fault with our organization for what may seem to be a lack of enlightened thinking, I offer the proposition that progressive steps at modernization are frequently considered, vigorously debated then rejected. Sort of like the apocryphal story of Judge Parker in Ft. Smith who once said to a criminal defendant “we intend to give you a fair trial and then hang you”. But the issue of gender discrimination is not the subject of this paper. I do not feel

comfortable taking that up tonight. But suffice it to say that the proposal to revamp our admissions policy appears to be going nowhere. But a clandestine, subversive element in Athenaeum has taken the reckless step of contacting various women's organizations to see if jointly harnessing our intellectual prowess drew any interest. The targets were somewhat limited though. We can't talk about politics so that red-lined the League of Women Voters. We can't talk about religion so the United Methodist Women are out. So we reached out to the local women's group that share our high minded devotion to the pursuit of intellectual advancement. The idea was doomed from the start. Not the Pierians. Not the Shakespeare Society. Not Petite Fleur. Nobody! The ladies asked to see a list of our members and their curt response is as follows:

Gentlemen: We have considered your merger suggestion and reject it. We see no advantage to lowering our standards to the point where we would allow men as members. Furthermore, we are already married to most of your members. We actually like our colleagues and exposing them to our husbands seems needlessly cruel. Finally, merging our groups would raise your collective IQ and lower ours. The matter, therefore, is closed. Hmmph.

Our attitudes regarding incursion into the digital age are more enlightened. We are on a course to digitize our papers and store them electronically in hope of avoiding the depredation that befell our collected efforts at preservation in an earlier, less technological time. I refer to the regrettable destruction of decades of Athenaeum material stored at the public library. The library, I am told, deeply regretted the incident, blaming the situation on miscommunication with a custodial staff member. I actually believe the destruction of our accumulated wisdom to be a terroristic act of an assistant librarian—probably a Pierian—who thought the space reserved for our papers would be put to better use as the final resting place of back issues of *Southern Living*.

The proposal to digitally store our papers is a good one. Keeping our papers in a cloud somewhere is altogether fitting and proper. It is also a vast improvement over the archival method employed since the library disaster: Our papers will no longer be stored next to Bartholomew Wood's skeleton under William Turner's bed.

The decision to go digital will impact the entire membership, the tech savvy and computer illiterate alike. Speaking personally, I will have to familiarize myself with many new and challenging computer concepts. Facebook, for example. Or

cyber terms such as zip drive, download and my favorite, pdf file. Sounds very mysterious. But with progress comes new challenges. What about hackers, for example. Anyone with nothing better to do that hack our Athenaeum website deserves what he gets.

The Athenaeum can certainly make one claim to fame, the preparatory atmosphere it has provided to hone the leadership skills of one of Kentucky's bright political and government leaders, Senator Whitney Westerfield. Sen. Westerfield arrived in Frankfort as a freshman senator fully prepared by his Athenaeum experience ready to meet the challenges of new public office. After all, he had spent years in meetings listening to old men discuss arcane topics of little interest to anyone, engaging in aimless discourse and reaching decisions of little or no significance to anyone. Wait a minute; that *is* the Kentucky Senate. No, I'm confused. Well, never mind.

I do think the Athenaeum has a character building role in the lives of its members, myself included, and I can make notable comparisons to my experience in another day and time with a different, but equally character building group, the Jaycees. During our Jaycee meetings there was an incredible amount of serious, thought provoking, profound discussion and reasoning brought to bear on

important, worthwhile issues. We Jaycees wanted to speak with one voice, united and clear on topics so everyone's answer would be unequivocal. This sounds very noble. Actually the unanimity was important for another reason: we all had to get our alibis straight so when our wives asked us what we did at the meeting that night we wouldn't drunkenly admit to gambling and watching dirty movies. But we Jaycee's also had a program akin to the Athenaeum called Speak Up, a public speaking competition, standing on your feet, presenting a speech on the topic of your choice for a trophy. So Speak Up was like Athenaeum, only with prizes. If you take away the prizes, the keg in the Jaycee food booth, the card games and the strippers you have Athenaeum. To avoid appearing holier than thou, the Jaycees also struggled with gender discrimination. We initially voted down efforts to admit female members after the truly important women in our lives objected. No, not our wives: the strippers. By the way, there's a proposal making the rounds that the society annually recognize the best paper of the year. I wish to magnanimously exempt myself and this paper from consideration, thereby denying my fellow members the satisfaction of not voting for me.

As Athenaeum runs headlong into the arms of reform, embracing novel, refreshing concepts like, say, democracy, I hope there's one aspect of the Athenaeum experience that remains unchanged: Rebuttal time, the point in the

meeting when the membership comments on the evenings papers. The thoughts, observations, suggestions and criticism that emerge in rebuttal are consistently helpful, illuminating, wise, instructive, and, as those of you know who are no strangers to these open meetings, harsh, overbearing, unfair, caustic, mean and condescending. But the comments can also be pretty funny, as we learned a few years ago during rebuttal to Mr. Adams's scholarly paper on the near extinction of the American Chesnut tree. A rebuttal comment was offered suggesting that he, a urologist, should be consulted on any future papers dealing with "nuts". After all, he reasoned, he has seen more nuts than anyone else in town. And since we are on the subject of previous papers, I want to dispel the suspicion that this paper is typical of my performance as a presenter. I have one prior scholarly tome to my credit, presented in regular session on the emerging technology of 3-D printing, a remarkable advancement that promises to revolutionize numerous fields of endeavor, including medicine, especially organ transplantation. Doctors and scientists have actually "printed" organs and successfully transplanted them. I was disappointed at first that very few of our physician society members attended my presentation. It's probably just as well. Based on his performance at that previous open meeting, the temptation to extol the benefits of a 3-D organ transplant for certain fellow members of the society

would be too great. Such rebuttal might arguably be beneficial and motivated by altruistic concern. However the well intentioned suggestion someone might benefit from an organ transplant that falls within your particular realm of expertise should probably be weighed carefully against the genuine likelihood of jail time. Think twice, doctor. Speak once.

In conclusion let me say how honored I am to be included in the Athenaeum Society. I am a relative newcomer, but look forward to each meeting, especially the open meetings when we get to see the lovely wives of our members and the charming guests who join us.

And as for institutional reform, I heartily endorse change and further recommend some additional reforms like hats with bison horns, secret handshakes, annual conventions with madcap, sophomoric high jinx, and, naturally, strippers. And in the interest of technological advancement and in keeping with impending reforms, thumb drive versions of this presentation will be available in the lobby after the meeting. Thanks to one and all.

John Atkins

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