

'Literary' clubs had no shelves, but many cases

"There was weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth last night along the levee for three of Bloomington's popular 'clubs,' sailing too close to the wind, had been shipwrecked, exposing to public view several prominent 'literary' lovers and 'gymnasts,' who are now trying to square things with their wives." Bloomington Telephone, Aug. 31, 1906.

It was perhaps an idea whose time had come, but not in 1906. Requests for liquor licenses were having tough sledding in Bloomington during that time, and some "deep thinker" came up with a way to sneak an end run around the law.

A front-page article in the *Telephone* of Aug. 31 explained. "Not long ago the saloons were remonstrated out of business by the good people of the 1st ward. Immediately upon the expiration of his license, 'Tuck' Adams set the fashion by establishing in his old place of business a club which was known among the 'boys' as The Kirkwood Gymnastic Club."

The way the new arrangement worked was that men bought a \$1 membership card, which entitled them to drinks. When the dollar's worth had been used up, it was



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

time to pay dues again. The clubs were chartered by the state.

The gymnastic club fared so well that it soon had competition in the form of another club and another. One of the competitors had a truly sophisticated name — The Literary Club. Continued the *Telephone*, " 'Pete' Williams was the backer of the third club, who rejoiced in no such high-sounding name as the 'Rex Literary' or the 'Kirkwood Gymnastic' but one of the members said: 'What's in a name, anyhow? It's the booze that counts.' "

For the record, the charters of the clubs read, for "the purpose of being to conduct a secret club for gymnastic and social benefits of its members" and one of the others was to "conduct a secret club for literary, mutual and social benefits of its members."

To add some credibility to their charter applications, the clubs listed the names of several prominent Bloomington men as officers. Some of them later said their names had been used without permission.

A *Telephone* reporter had the opportunity of talking to the "president" of one of the clubs and his comments were included in the Sept. 4 article. "The president of one of these clubs, according to his own statement, receives a salary of \$12 a week, not, however, for serving as president, but for working about the club rooms for the club. I never saw a literary meeting in the club rooms, but I have heard several literary subjects discussed."

The "president" made the point that no women were allowed in the Literary Club and described his duties. "I take care of the lunch, cook, wipe the dishes and mop the floors. But I don't put the ice in the box. The iceman does that."

When asked where the bookcases were, the "president" didn't seem to know anything about that. He did volunteer the information that there was a beer cooler upstairs (in the club rooms) into which "we put about six cases of beer."

As for the profitability of the private clubs, the *Telephone* reported explained, "The club has paid no dividends yet, but they are not due until the end of six months. The officers of the club have no bank books, and never made any bank deposits. 'What money we have we carry in our pockets.' An inventory of the liquid assets of the Rex Literary Club revealed that they had on hand 44 quarts of whisky and half gallon of brandy on the shelves.

Apparently the clubs were regarded with some suspicion from the dates they opened their doors. The newspaper relates that the Monroe County prosecutor, Bloomington mayor and local police carried on a very undercover-type investigation "in such a quiet way that the cyclone that hit the levee yesterday afternoon was entirely unexpected."

In all, 35 affidavits were filed, naming the three club organizers. They were charged with selling liquor without a license, being a nuisance and conspiring against the criminal law. Failing prosecution on those counts, the state would be asked to revoke the phony charters.

Next week: The club owners' day in court.

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