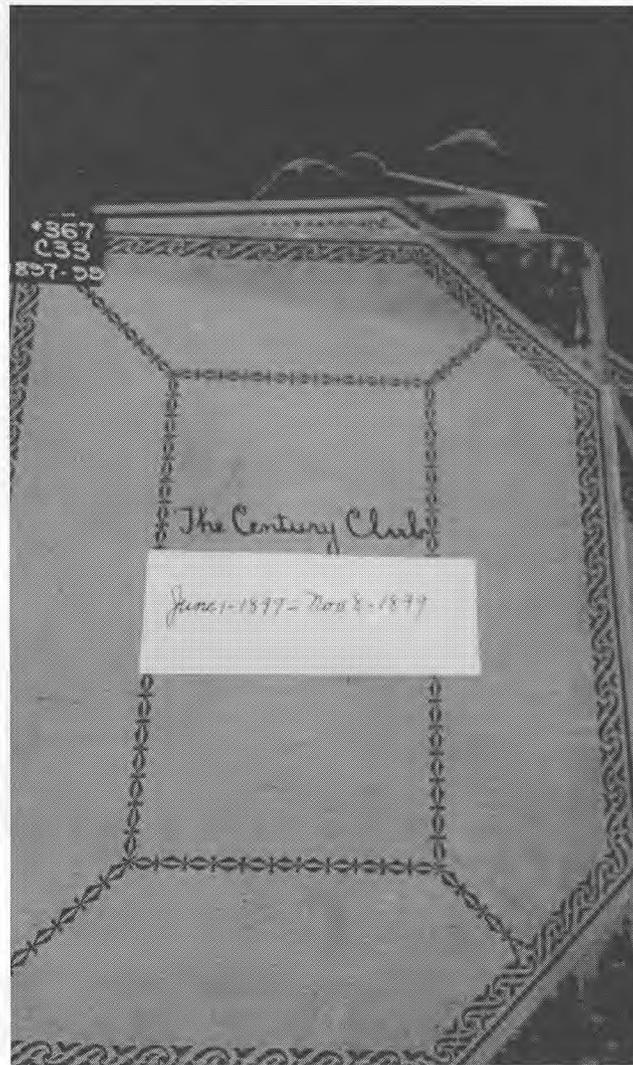

NUGGETS OF HISTORY

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THE CENTURY CLUB – 125 YEARS AND COUNTING

By Julie Snively



One of the minutes books from the Century Club. This one covers the period from 1897 to 1899. Photo courtesy of Julie Snively.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This issue contains a history of the Century Club. This woman's club has been meeting and sharing their knowledge of the world and friendship for over 125 years!

First time *Nuggets* contributor Julie Snively, a retired *Rockford Register Star* reporter, transports us into the heart of the Century Club of Rockford, a close-knit woman's club that continues to thrive more than 125 years after it was founded. Those who recall Helen Hoover Santmyer's best selling 1982 novel, "*...And Ladies of the Club*", will feel right at home as Julie and five of her club colleagues - Sally Hoff, JoMarie Paul, Susan Carlin, Mary Caskey and Maggie Thienemann - open the pages of the Century Club minutes to tell a story of scholarship, hospitality and enduring friendship right here in Rockford, Illinois.

NOTICE TO RESEARCHERS

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 986-4867 (evenings) or 987-5724 (day).

Thomas Powers, Editor

THE CENTURY CLUB – 125 YEARS AND COUNTING

By Julie Snively

On a cold day in January 1887 Ama Taylor invited five friends to her commodious west Rockford home to sip tea and chat about forming a club dedicated to the study of the works of English poet Robert Browning. In coming together for this high-minded purpose, these Rockford ladies were responding to two trends:

- First, Robert Browning was the darling of the literary world. Educated people around the globe wanted to be equipped to discuss him and his poetic works.¹
- Second, in deciding to undertake their study under the auspices of a club, these Rockford women were following the lead of women across the nation who were seeing the benefits of meeting regularly to exchange ideas and pursue common interests in literature, the arts or any other topic that struck their fancy.²

The Browning Club, the straightforward name they selected for their new organization, began meeting weekly at Ama's home at 739 N. Church St.³ Soon, others were attracted to their endeavors and five additional women were invited to join. In 1889, after completing an exhaustive study of Robert Browning, the ladies were ready to move on to another topic. They changed the club name to The English Club and undertook a daunting study of all things English, from English history and literature to religion, nationality and, even the development of the English language.

Then, in 1891, the organization once again morphed, becoming the Century Club of Rockford, Illinois⁴. This club continues to thrive today, more than 125 years after Ama issued the invitation to the first meeting. This

¹Doris Mosser, *Century Club 101: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning*, a paper on the lives and works of the Brownings delivered to the Century Club membership on March 12, 2012.

²General Federation of Women's Clubs web site: www.gfwc.org/history

³The City of Rockford in 1893 renumbered street addresses, a numbering system that remains in effect today. This address and all of the addresses in the article reflect that change.

⁴The primary sources for this article are the Century Club Minutes books, which are part of the reference collection in the Local History Room at the Rockford Public Library. The minutes include entries from meetings of The Browning Club and The English Club.

milestone was marked on Sept. 10, 2012, when all 20 active members of the Century Club and four of the club's eight emeritus members gathered for a gala anniversary luncheon. The event, co-chaired by Marcia Cook and Becky Thorsen, was held at Briggs Mansion, 1244 East State Street.

The cornerstones of scholarship, friendship and hospitality that characterized the club in its formative years still are the underpinnings of the group today, said JoMarie Paul, now in her 24th year in the club. "We cherish our membership and make a solid commitment," JoMarie explained. "No one is absent unless there is illness or they are traveling. It's the most rewarding group I've ever belonged to."

Susan Carlin, a member since 2000, said the club has given her a chance to make new friends and deepen old friendships. "Lots of socializing and laughter takes place before and during lunch," she said. "The programs we present may, or may not, be very serious, but we try not to take ourselves too seriously."

While the original members met weekly, the club now meets on the second Monday of each month, October through May. Each year eight members take turns hosting one of the monthly luncheons. Eight other members are responsible for researching and presenting scholarly papers on topics of their choice at one of the luncheons. Officers are neither required to present papers nor host a lunch. Dues are \$2 per year for active members. Emeritus members are welcome at meetings, but are not asked to pay dues, prepare papers or host a lunch. Membership is by invitation.

The program for the anniversary lunch put the spotlight on the lives of the six ladies present at the initial meeting in 1887. Introducing the program, Century Club President Pam Keeling called on those present to welcome the "ghosts" of the six founders. "I know you will enjoy meeting them and the brief step back into the past of our Century Club," Pam said.

One by one, the six program committee members, who had researched the lives of the founders, stepped forward to tell the stories of the women as if they were there to give first-hand glimpses into their lives.

Sally Hoff portrayed Ama Taylor, the hostess and wife of Horace Taylor, an attorney and onetime state legislator; JoMarie Paul appeared as Ellen Starr, second wife of Melancton Starr, a banker; Susan Carlin was Ellen Bettes, wife of William Bettes, a semi-retired businessman; Mary Caskey was Hattie Rowland, wife of Robert Rowland, a druggist; Maggie Thienemann was Mary Ticknor, wife of A.K. Ticknor, a businessman, and Julie Snively was Harriet Blakeman, a maiden lady whose father was a businessman.

The starting point for research was a paper originally presented to the Club in 1966 by the late Barbara Galloway, the club's longtime unofficial historian. Barbara, who updated and revised the paper in 1986, had delved deeply into the Century Club minutes books, which in 1957⁵ became part of the reference collection of the Local History Room at the Rockford Public Library's main branch. The library now has a total of 21 Century Club minutes books. Until 1995, all were handwritten.

The anniversary program committee members followed many leads seeking information about their subjects. They spent hours in the library's Local History Room, consulting Century Club minutes books; running down newspaper obituaries; scouring city directory entries; finding death certificates; checking out U.S. Census data, and studying plats of Greenwood Cemetery, where most of the ladies and their families are buried. They were assisted immeasurably by Local History Room staff, as well as by staff at Midway Village Museum. Online genealogy and history sources also were helpful.

Perhaps not surprising, the early Century Club members came from prosperous households, where they had maids and other domestic help that allowed them to spend the time required to undertake the necessary reading and report writing. Most of the men in their lives were entrepreneurs who came to the Rockford area during the 1850s, a decade in which fortunes were made as the town's population grew from about 2,500 to 8,100. By 1900, the city had more than 31,000 residents.

⁵ Jean Lythgoe, Librarian, Local History Room, Rockford Public Library

The ladies lived in the same west side neighborhood -- the area that today is in the vicinity of Riverfront Museum Park. Most of them also worshipped at the same church, Second Congregational Church.⁶



"A Birdseye view looking north from the Court House"

Published by the Rockford Real Estate Exchange, Rockford, IL, in 1893

Probably, the most important factor that drew these women together was their intellectual curiosity and thirst for knowledge. Some -- and perhaps all -- were exceptionally well educated. In 1844, Ellen Bettes studied at Cazenovia Seminary in Cazenovia, N.Y., a Methodist college that was a pioneer in coeducation. Her classmates included Leland Stanford, the founder of Stanford University.⁷

⁶ Rockford city directories, obituaries in Rockford newspapers, *Past and Present of the City of Rockford and Winnebago County, Illinois* by Charles A. Church, Chicago: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1905; *Sinnissippi Saga: A History of Rockford and Winnebago County, Illinois*, Hal Nelson, Editor; Rockford, IL: Winnebago County Sesquicentennial Committee, 1968

⁷ *First Fifty Years of Cazenovia Seminary: 1825 - 1875*, by Rev. William Reddy, Cazenovia, N.Y., Nelson and Phillips, New York, 1877,

In 1847 Ama Taylor, the first club president, graduated from Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, now Mount Holyoke College. She studied under pioneer educator Mary Lyons, who believed women deserved an education as rigorous as that offered to men⁸.

In 1879, Harriet Blakeman, who had been educated in Rockford Public Schools, went East to the Boston area to attend Wellesley College, which had opened its doors just four years before. Although she did not take a degree from Wellesley, Harriet attended the prestigious women's college for three years.⁹

Hattie Rowland, whose obituary described her as a woman of "unusual intellectual power," attended Rockford College, where she studied music and German.¹⁰ Although the research did not uncover specifics about Ellen Starr's education, her obit noted that she studied "in the best New England institutions."¹¹ No information was found about the education of Mary Ticknor, the most elusive of the subjects.

Sally Hoff says she was surprised how much she found in common with her subject, Ama Taylor. Both came to Rockford from the East because of job opportunities for their husbands; both were educated at women's colleges that are members of the Seven Sisters Consortium – Ama at Mount Holyoke and Sally at Wellesley. Ama was a founding member of Second Congregational Church and Sally was among leaders of Second Congregational's recent federation with First Presbyterian Church. And, finally, Ama was a member of the Rockford School Board and Sally serves on the Pecatonica Board of Education.

"Ama and I would have a lot to talk about," Sally said.

Much credit must be given to Ama for keeping a steady hand on the club helm during the formative years. She served as president of the Century Club for nearly 28 years. Barbara Galloway noted in her paper that in 1908, when she'd been president for 20 years, Ama, by then 80, begged the club to allow

⁸ *Register Republic* obituary, Feb. 1, 1915.

⁹ Wellesley College Archives.

¹⁰ Rockford College Archives

¹¹ *Rockford Morning Star*, Aug. 2, 1922

Current affairs figured prominently during Ama's tenure. A half hour of each weekly meeting, which generally ran from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m., was devoted to reports from members on developments in the foreign country she was responsible for monitoring. At one of the meetings in 1899, Ama asked members to be prepared with an opinion on three subjects slated for debate in Congress that year – Cuban autonomy; the propriety of any interference by the U.S. government in Cuban affairs, and annexation of Hawaii. Sticklers for correctness, the women appointed a club orthoepist, whose duty it was to report mispronounced words.

In 1896, when the club joined with other local organizations to present a lecture series, Ama opened the front parlors of her home to host a talk by James H. Breasted, a Rockford native then beginning to make his name as an Egyptologist. No doubt, the ladies watched with interest as Breasted went on to found the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, and later be credited as the expert who confirmed that Howard Carter, indeed, had discovered King Tut's tomb.¹²

The club also took an active role in local public affairs; supported organization of the Rockford Woman's Club and, during World War I, did a lot of knitting for the Red Cross.

For many years now, members have had free reign in selecting topics for their papers, which they read at meetings. An unwritten rule is that a paper should take no more than 40 minutes to read. Over the years, the ladies have covered a wide range of topics, from the enfranchisement of women to integration, the Arab mind, Mother Goose, the psychology of gardening, the Bronte family, the history of the New York Times and Nazi stolen art.

Jean Bodorff's prescient reports on "Telecommunications" (1987) and "Coping with the Internet" (1995) gave the Century Club a heads up about the technology revolution before many understood it was underway. Club member Doris Mosser recently had lunch with Jean, now 100, an emeritus member who joined a remarkable 57 years ago. In a subsequent email exchange with Jean's

¹²An expense report in the Century Club Minutes for 1995-96, noted these expenses for Professor Breasted's appearance and the reception that followed: rental of 50 chairs, \$1.50; cake and ice, \$3.88; speaker, \$6.00. His topic was "World's First Reformer: Amenhotep IV."

son, Richard Bodorff, of Washington, D.C., Doris learned that Jean was computer literate and on the Internet before either of her children. "She was active on the Internet until three or four years go," Richard wrote.

Not all programs are serious: Lighthearted topics also are welcome, such as a 2009 program by current member Patti Rzycki, titled "*The Play's the Thing.*" Patti (a second generation club member-- her mother, Joan Hoffman, also belonged) "staged" an impromptu production of a play based on Little Red Riding Hood that she'd written in a sophomore English class at East High School. The assignment challenged students to write a fairy tale as if it had been composed by Shakespeare.

She'd received a rave review from her teacher, but her play had never been performed -- not until Patti arranged the Century Club premiere with a cast quickly assembled from the more than willing members. "With no rehearsal, but a lifetime of literary interests, my Century Club friends brought the play to life with unexpected voices, drama, and hilarity. We laughed until we cried," Patti said.

But, whatever the subject matter, the Century Clubbers don't take preparation of their programs lightly. Member Mary Caskey is the daughter of Helen Bartlett Boswell, who joined Century Club in 1936. "When I was growing up, I remember Mom saying, "Now, girls, it needs to be a little quieter for the next few weeks while I work on my Century Club paper.". Her mother's last topic, given in 1982, was on the Sinai Peninsula.

When Mary joined in 1978, the club still was meeting twice a month, meaning members had to prepare a paper and host a lunch each year. Mary, then holding down a job at Rock Valley College, recognized a change was needed if the club were to attract the younger members it needed to survive. "Members told me that in joining I'd lowered the average age by 10 years," Mary said. "I suggested they meet once a month rather than twice to accommodate the schedules of younger, possibly working, women. Fortunately, I think, they agreed."

Today, the Century Club active membership does include women who have careers outside the home. The members range in age from women in their 50s

to those in their early 80s. At this point, members agree: Century Club is going strong. The lives of women may have drastically changed over the years, but women today still are drawn to the fellowship of kindred spirits.

"When I realize that for 125 years, Rockford women have been meeting to present interesting, often scholarly, papers and to enjoy each other's company, I am impressed," Mary Caskey said. "And, I am honored to be part of that strand of local history."



Current members of the Century Club

Top to bottom, Carma Yoder, Doris Mosser, Carolyn Greenlaw, Pam Keeling, Marty Smith, Susan Carlin, Barb LaSalle, Patti Rzycki, Karen Levis, Maggie Thienemann, Becky Thorsen, Liz Dickinson, Carolyn Plummer, Marcia Cook, Sally Baker, Jo Paul, Julie Snively, Sally Hoff, Mary Caskey, Sandy Elliott, Marge Morrow, Shirley Holzworth. Active members not pictured are Bobbie Holzwarth and Beth Howard.

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