

## Nineteenth Century Literary Societies

In the early nineteenth century printing underwent a revolution. Friedrich Koenig and Andreas Friedrich Bauer patented their steam powered printing press in 1810 and a bit later they developed the technology for printing on both sides of a sheet of paper. This was followed by the invention of the rotary printing press by Richard M. Hoe in 1843. In the early part of that century most serious authors survived on earnings from their work being serialized in magazines and newspapers that were now being mass produced on those presses. The works of Edgar Allan Poe and Harriet Beecher Stowe were first published this way. When Edgar Allan Poe<sup>1</sup> tried to be one of the first authors to make a living by publishing his original works in book form, he was not very successful. However, after Stowe's book **Uncle Tom's Cabin** appeared in book form, it was a runaway success. As the century progressed, many authors such as Mark Twain, and Charles Dickens<sup>2</sup> succeeded in supporting themselves on the income from their published books. Thus, by the middle of nineteenth century there was the confluence of more people attending school where they learned to read, creating a market for the thousands of books now available at affordable prices. With so many books available and a population hungry for the new books, people began organizing local literary societies where they would meet, discuss and exchange books<sup>3</sup>.

While books were the reason for the establishment of literary societies, their meetings were not completely devoted to books. They evolved into places where the local inhabitants could socialize, enjoy music and other entertainment, and debate the issues of the day. Of interest was that they tended not to have their meetings in churches and most met in local schools. From the newspaper reports of the time the debate topics included whether a new workhouse or courthouse should be built, the "free silver" standard, labor issues such as whether there should be an eight hour work day, and politics. Sometimes the meetings would get out of hand. In a report in the 1888 Pittsburgh Press about the Baldwin Township Literary Society is this: "It is here that the weekly exchange of news, the courtships, and the fights between the pugilistic portion of the young element within a radius of several miles take place." The mentioned pugilistic fight was over politics during the Grover Cleveland's second presidential campaign<sup>4</sup>. On occasion, members also participated in "Marches" such as on Washington's Birthday and other

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<sup>1</sup> One of several serials to publish Poe's early work was the Saturday Evening Post owned by a Morton McMichael who later became Mayor of Philadelphia. I am fairly sure we are related to Morton, but I have not tried to figure out how.

<sup>2</sup> My Great Grandfather John McMichael, Jr. was an avid reader of Charles Dickens and had a collection of all his books. When Dickens passed through Pittsburgh, he was excited to be able hear Dickens speak in person. According to my father, John was so disgusted with the pejorative comments Dickens made about Americans, he immediately disposed of his collection.

<sup>3</sup> This was obviously an important development of the nineteenth century, but in researching literary societies, I found no academic studies of this phenomenon!

<sup>4</sup> Grover Cleveland ran for president three times. Although he won the popular vote every time, he did not win the electoral college on his second run. He is the only president to serve two nonconsecutive terms.

holidays. They even organized baseball teams that played one another. Thus, while calling themselves literary societies, they were often more like social clubs where locals could mingle. (At the end I give a list of some of the local literary societies I discovered in the course of preparing this article.)

Now we come to the reason I am writing about these literary societies. Several of our ancestors attended these literary societies. My Grandfather Calhoun McMichael met his wife at the Hickman School Literary Society in Collier Township. His sister Flora McMichael met her husband William McConnell Sturgeon at the Good Will Literary Society that met at the McKee School in North Fayette Township where Maud McMichael, their sister, was the secretary in 1877. Finally, Flora was also a regular attendee of the Franklin Literary Society<sup>5</sup> that met at the Plumstead Opera House in Robinson Township<sup>6</sup>. Among the papers that I inherited from my Cousin William Vogel, I found a notebook containing several entries in Flora's hand chronicling the happenings at that literary society. The following is a transcript of what she wrote in 1875:

#### **The Most Noteworthy Incidents of Franklin Literary Society for Term Second**

Another pleasant term of our Monday evening meetings have passed over our heads, and now near the close, your humble servant is appointed to sum up in few words the weather reports, condition of the roads, average attendance, the merit of performances, the number of evenings we had moonshine and the number we didn't have, and to compare leap year privileges with common years. If we discover that the Franklin ladies have not been improving their opportunities, we don't propose to let them have another leap year for four years more<sup>7</sup>. Well in short, we are to say "Much in little" or to tell everything of importance concerning our society from the awkwardness of Jim Riddle to the beauty of Sam Adam's teeth. The incidents are many, but the words must of necessity be few and as circumstances have prevented by being present with you often, I must depend on the wafting of the society to my ears by the birds of spring and since birds are very uncertain, if I make any doubtful assertions, please oblige me by blaming the birds. Our Society met for its second term Nov 1<sup>st</sup> at Franklin Hall and has since continued its meetings every Monday evening up to the present time, March 27<sup>th</sup>.

We have been favored with all kinds of weather, first good, then bad, then clear, then cloudy, then calm, then stormy, rainy, snowy, blowy, warm then cold and freezing. The roads have been excellent for people who like walking. Sometimes they were frozen, but often muddy, damp and awful muddy, and lastly, simply impassable. We occasionally had moonshine, oftener moony couples, but since the moon is always changing and not to be relied on, we, as a learned society, passed a resolution to the effect that we could do without it when it wasn't in our hands. Our Society as a general thing, has been a success, although it met with some very serious drawbacks. Two or three of our meetings were buried in the mud with only the Adams boys and Jim Riddle leaning on Sam Foster's arm to mourn after them and our last appointment got swamped in a snowdrift and before assistance could reach it, it had

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<sup>5</sup> The Franklin Literary Society seems to have been a predecessor to the Good Will Literary Society. Individual societies seem not to have endured for long periods of time.

<sup>6</sup> From the maps of that era, the Plumstead was located at or near where the Robinson Square Mall is today.

<sup>7</sup> Above this in the margin is written Feb. 22<sup>nd</sup> '75. This was not a leap year. It was a reference to the tradition that ladies may propose to a man during a leap year.

perished. Then one of our most influential members, Samuel Scott Jr, went west. We first thought of closing the society, but after thinking the matter over, we appointed John Palmer to fill the vacancy. Then a committee on constitution was appointed and this band of wiseacres met, proposed and drafted up for adoption some articles that seemed to meet society's demands. They were accepted, but in the absence of the fore mentioned committee, they were laid aside again. Next, Jim Riddle took it into his head that to appear well on Wednesday evening, he must not exert himself too much on Monday night. We coaxed, scolded and argued with him, but he was set on looking well at the McKees school house, and would so have continued to think if John Adams had not proved to him by practical demonstration that it was possible to take part in Society and take a girl home on Wednesday evening too. Our trouble was at an end with him, but Priscilla Scott needed disciplining. She captured a Mr. Kelso one evening and in consequence the next night her performance was not so good. Then someone discovered that Sam Guy cut his performance short on account of the attractions of McCurdy's parlor. As this is a penitentiary act, we threatened him with all kinds of punishment and at last was going to expel him and allow the law to take its course, but our ever wise Doctor examined the boy and pronounced a very bad case of "heart-disease." The prescription was one, two, and three, and even four nights in the week when there could be found any excuse for calling so often. Our latest misfortune is the departure of James Hall for the west, but with all our discouragements, we have had first class performances, discussions on popular topics of the day by ones who understand what they are talking about. The improvement in our little folks is very noticeable, and we have been encouraged by many kind words and actions despite the wind and weather. And since it is not fair to look at only one side of the question, we will briefly notice some of our attractions. The first is an Orchestra composed of the leader of the musicians from the Opera house at Greggs Junction, Grant's chief fiddler from the white house, the leader of the band from the long branch theater on Campbell's run and lastly the great and incomparable Kelso, about whom the whole of Europe is in a furore at the present time. Our music has been of the very best as it should be, for we pay this band two million thanks for the season. In members, we have increased in quality as well as numbers. First Annie Adams joined our ranks, and pleased us so well that we elected her as president for first term of office for her sound reasoning and good common sense we have few to compare with her. She seems to understand "These natures of ours" and can tell us the value of an "Education" and explain to us the "Knowledge of the Sciences." Jennie Perkins has been another acquisition. Then L.W. Conway who knows the benefit of a good society came forward with his little brother Rob and big sisters Mary and Ida who have all proved themselves useful members. After Thanksgiving, Samuel Scott returned, and to his already great wisdom, he had added an idea of the outside world. His debut was made in an extempore performance on the west, but it is to be feared his companions were not of the best while there. As shortly after his return, he declared before society that he preferred the "broad road" before the "narrow way" every time. We all saw the necessity of taking our younger members from under his influence, but we first talked to Samuel, and prevailed on him to keep such dangerous views to himself and thus abbreviated this difficulty. After New Years, another literary celebrity, Annie McGreggor joined our ranks. One of the features to promote peace and harmony among our members is a committee of enquiry. It is the committee's duty, when anything suspicious or criminal comes to their notice to enquire into the matter and set the offenders right. Not long since Jim Riddle was missed from society, and a member of this committee being sent after him, found him at Montour's choir meeting seated behind Sadie Adams. When the pate was given out, Jim joined in the tune in a very base voice "with these words. 'Sadie. Had we ne'er loved sae kindly; had we ne'er loved sae blindly; never met—never parted, we ne'er had been sae broken hearted. Instead of the words to the tune 'Good night'" he sung "And now farewell, and if farewell forever, he forever fare thee well."

The moment meeting adjourned, the committee man arrested Jim and marched him before the other members. Told where he was and how engaged, he received a severe reprimand from them. They also told him they wanted to hear more complaints from the ladies concerning his fickleness. Jim commenced crying and said it was all meant in fun and he was only having a good time. They gave him some good advice and told him to pattern after John Adams in the future. Jim went away muttering to himself, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." The committeers are afraid he is not safe, and warn him to beware or his jesting will end in earnest yet. They heard not long since that Will Kelso had eaten 150 oysters and then because he couldn't eat any more, filled his pockets. They have issued a

warrant for his arrest, petty larceny is the charge. Eliza J. Scott was up before them for stealing Isaac Stewart's horse blanket. They let her off because she returned the stolen property and bribed the committee with ten dollars apiece. One of this committee said Dr. Burket liked bad weather on Monday evening so the member of society who ventured out would get sick and then he would have something to do until the next meeting, but another member says this is a lie, for it is a rule of all such societies that assistance from one member to another is always gratis and the doctor don't like traveling around for nothing. The Dr. thinks of making them both give libel's.

They interviewed Sam Guy and he says he likes music and needs exercise and tells so many stories that they really think there is some attraction at McCurdy's for him and come to the conclusion that advice to him would only be thrown away. Our next nine days wonder was that Samuel Foster met John Keyser one moonlit night when the moon wasn't shining. Knocked him down with a dozen eggs he had stolen from Mr. Smith and took Charles Dickens knife and fork from him and gave them to Jim Riddle. As we profess to be an honest society, not having any connexion with the Washington or Harrisburgh rings, we laid aside our list of performances for one evening and tried the offender for murder in the first degree and high treason. Dr. Burket and W.H. Kelso as U.S. attorneys pled the cause of the plaintiff with choice selections from Shakespeer and Mrs. Candle's lecture. L.W. Conway and Thomas Stewart in equally effective speeches pled the cause of the defendant with references from Beadles dime novels and "Uncle Tom's Cabin," but the jury like some more juries we read about couldn't agree. So Judges Hall and Edmundson sent the prisoner back to jail to be fed the best money could buy while the jury were commanded to remain in the box and just get one meal a day (consisting of mush and milk) until they agreed. We suppose they all agreed to leave the box, as they were not there our next night of meeting. Still another of our attractions is a quartette club, and although they have not been practicing together long, we feel confident that the Allegheny Club would hide behind a locust stump if they could hear this band of Orolin gales. This club is known as the Skylark quartette, some of the little boys call them the mud larks, but it is because they don't know any better. Isaac Stewart tells us that "Dancing" is a healthy exercise and to remember his advice in the future. George Riddle announced one evening that all the tobacco in Palmersville was frosted. Daniel Hoffman thinks this is well and sings to also "beware" of the bottle. Sam Adams agrees with him, but the next moment astonishes us by trying to feed the "The Gladiator" pumpkins. Sam Scott goes up to him and says if his memory serves him right, it is infidelity to do that and if he had a cane he would chastise him on the spot. Sam Adams told him he had better spell "able" first. Sam then acknowledges that he don't know either Cain or Able, but insists on Sam Adams eating some soft corn. John Adams seeing that the farmer couldn't get along without the blacksmith said to Sam Scott that if he could just let his little brother alone he could go to Prices with him, providing he would go see Lizzie. The compact was sealed by their shaking hands and kissing. Andrew McCurdy seeing there is no chance for him at Prices, goes to the Revolutionary War. Maud McMichael, after discoursing on the advantages of good language, demands charity and James Phillips makes her the magnificent present of a horse blanket and then accompanies Barbara Fretchie home. Jennie Perkins comes in burdened down with so many traps that we feel weary about her, but the way she talks on the Woman suffrage question convinces us that she is able to take care of herself

Priscilla Scott comes out picking up pins. "Small things make up life" is her motto. Laura McCurdy says what we might do if Sam Guy would only quit using "Slang" phrases. Will Adams says he has too many traps to attend to he hasn't time to prepare performances for society. The boy stood on the burning deck and when the smoke cleared way, who was it but John Edmunston eating peanuts by the peck. Then on the stage leaning in a lazy attitude against the wall with an axe by his side is John Verner, "Woodsmen spare that tree." We all understand why the tree is going to be spared. We turn towards the door and see Dr. Burket and Sam Stewart coming in with their arms full of novels, but they are hardly in until Sam Conway and Will Kelso meet them and try to put them out but fail. In a few moments, each member is in possession of his or her favorite novel, and now as you are all busy we will bid you good night.

Literary societies known to have met in the immediate vicinity of where our ancestors lived:

Hickman School Literary Society	Hickman School, Collier Township
Nonpareil Literary Society	No. 2 School, North Fayette Township
Franklin Literary Society	Plumstead Opera House, Robison Township
Unknown name	No. 1 School, North Fayette Township
Mark Twain Literary Society	“near willow fringed Montours”
Independent Literary Society	Mount Nebo School, South Fayette Township
Chartiers Literary Society	?
Scenery Hill Lit. Soc.	Gladden School House, Cecil Township
Irving Literary Society	Oakdale Classical and Normal Institute
Good Will Literary Society	McKee School, North Fayette Township
Hoyes Summit Literary Society <sup>8</sup>	Pigeon Creek Presby. Church

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<sup>8</sup> The Hoyes Literary Society may have been one of the first to be organized in the area, being formed in 1845.