

SOME NOTES ON THE HISTORY

of the

MT. AIRY CIVIC CLUB

As told to E. Leo Koester

By Albert H. Streithorst

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THE BEGINNING

When the Mt. Airy Civic Club came into being in 1913 there were probably little more than 250 persons living within the area we now regard as Mt. Airy. Two years earlier, in 1911, Mt. Airy was annexed to Cincinnati and some of those papers are in possession of the civic club. The population at that time was estimated at 200 and the total property valuation at \$200,000.

Forty years ago, Mt. Airy was a generous assortment of rural and urban life. There were a few large and handsome houses, some of them are still standing, a number of modest dwellings and a short walk in almost any direction would bring you to a pasture likely tenanted by a few cows and several head of sheep. Having the service of no public transportation system, Mt. Airy hardly grew--it just sort of stood still. Mt. Healthy was a metropolis in 1911 compared to the wide open spaces of Mt. Airy.

None of the charter members of the civic club are living. Regrettably, we can't ask them what was the purpose that brought them together--were they out to get sidewalks, bus service, or maybe they just wanted to get together. At any rate, the organizers--Philip Morton, Charles Dolle, Charles Cramer and a Mr. Heinz--put the club together. They started out with 50 members--and that's a lot, probably 80 per cent of the total male population of Mt. Airy at that time.

The meetings were held in the old Mt. Airy School and Village hall--a landmark at the corner of Colerain and Kirby Avenue until just a few years ago. Anyone who saw that building can think of any number of good reasons for wanting to leave it. However, the civic club met there regularly until March of 1929. It had the virtue of being cheap (only \$1.25 service charge) but it had one very important and vital drawback--alcoholic beverages were not permitted on the premises.

It is easy to understand, therefore, that when the Church of the Little Flower moved into its new properties, the civic club was ready to take over the old. The old is with us today as the social center of Mt. Airy--Casey Jones Cafe. In its amazing history that frame building has served its occupants first as a blacksmith's shop, then as a church, then a civic club and now as a friendly place where you can get, in almost equal shares, a glass of beer, neighborhood gossip and a quart of milk. It is interesting to note here that in the five years the civic club occupied the old blacksmith's shop the rent remained pegged at \$15 a month.

These were the years of the great depression and the leadership of the civic club was both determined and realistic. They were determined about building a better Mt. Airy and they were realistic about the fact that the roof of the blacksmith shop leaked badly and that the space beneath the roof was overloaded with wagon wheels. Whether they were more worried about getting wet or getting conked on the head with a wagon wheel is not part of the record. Nevertheless the club moved--this time to Foster's Hall at Colerain Avenue and Blue Rock. If nothing else, they effected a cut in the rent--it was now only \$10 a month.

THE URGE TO BUILD

In all of these years of moving from place to place, of worry over leaky roofs and beer dispensers and crocks and yeast, there was a restlessness among the members. On the day after Christmas in 1926 it was brought to fruition. On that day the club purchased a plot of ground adjoining Joe Kessing's hardware store to the south. They had grandiose plans--a civic club setting atop an elevation and some 150 feet back from the street. The club put out \$2,100 for the property and then discovered that city zoning restrictions would prevent the kind of building they planned.

This disappointment had little effect on the enthusiasm of the membership. Veritably, they worked Gutzwiller's grove to death. There were picnics and super picnics. There were dances and there were card parties. If the venture netted \$100 or \$1000 the money went into the building fund. While the lot couldn't be used, it was tangible evidence of hopes for a better, more fruitful day.

The club was still meeting at Foster's Hall when there came news of the windfall. Rettingers garage, the building we are assembled in tonight, was for sale. Like the civic club, its owner had great plans that failed to materialize. The deal was a sharp one. Clem Becker, Albert H. Streithorst and Frank Peter put their names on a mortgage for \$10,500 and the Eagle Savings and Loan Company took the lot in for an additional \$3,500. Not yet finished with their financial operations, the same trio managed another note to cover some of the \$4,519 worth of improvements demanded by the new headquarters.

Messrs. Becker, Peter and Streithorst had unbounded confidence in Mt. Airy and the men who comprised the civic club. They also had, let us be sure, the same kind of confidence in the financial possibilities of bratwurst sandwiches and cold beer. Their confidence in the liquid is especially remarkable in as much as few communities boast as much water as Mt. Airy. Those tanks at the corner of North Bend and Colerain Avenue hold no less than 8,500,000 gallons--enough to provide each resident of Cincinnati with a bathtub full.

On the last day of August in 1939 the civic club met for the first time in the elegance of its new headquarters. Note the significance of that date. The great depression was almost history and the nation was soon to begin a program of preparedness. In Mt. Airy Forest there were two units of the Civilian Conservation Corps. Within a few years these young men were to struggle with machine guns and tanks as they now worked with picks and wheelbarrows. Behind them they left one of the nation's most remarkable examples of land reclamation. Many residents of this community can recall when Mt. Airy Forest's hills and valleys were prime examples of the devastation of erosion. Within its 1,345 acres the CCC boys planted more than a million and a half trees, built countless dams, seeded hundreds of open spaces--in short, converted a scrawly waste into a beautiful park.

If the CCC units were builders of merit, they had their counterpart in the members of the civic club. Just as green grass and towering trees give testimony to the work and sweat of the conservation corps, this building is a suitable monument to the determination and vision of those who have labored in this club for 38 years. Take a look at the record. Our debt is almost non-existent. The building now represents a market value of more than \$30,000. Not one cent came from municipal grants or Federal gifts. The money was produced by men who cherished an idea--and most important--were willing to pay for it by all kinds of sacrifices. Quite honestly, they evaluated each project by only one yardstick--how much would it produce for the civic club. The amount of work required was of no importance.

The effectiveness of a civic club is not measured by the comfort and beauty of its headquarters. In our case, it is not even measured by the number of pretty brides who treasure the memory of this building as the place where they first found that a balding father-in-law was a youth at heart. The worth of our club, of any civic club for that matter, might well be judged by its accomplishments. The accomplishments of the Mt. Airy Civic Club are evident on every corner. There is no need to list these accomplishments of brick, of concrete, of sewer pipe. More important, let us tonight celebrate the empty lot, the determination of those who have gone before, the heimgemacht, the septic tanks that are no more--and look ahead with genuine eagerness to the fellowship and hardwork we have inherited.

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