

3-1-1942

# A Study Club for Men

Walter H. Beall

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Beall, Walter H. "A Study Club for Men." *The Palimpsest* 23 (1942), 73-84.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol23/iss3/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).



# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XXIII

ISSUED IN MARCH 1942

NO. 3

COPYRIGHT 1942 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA



## A Study Club for Men

The Historical and Literary Club has maintained an organization and a program of study at West Union, Iowa, ever since 1880. Composed of fifteen men, the "H. A. L." has been repeatedly claimed, without contradiction, to be the oldest men's study club in Iowa, and indeed so far as local information goes no men's study club anywhere in the United States has a record going further back than this one.

Amazing enough is the fact that one of the club's charter members, H. P. Hancock, still lives at the age of eighty-nine and holds membership in the club, though by reason of his having a winter home in Florida he seldom attends any of the sessions, which continue week by week from November till April. Mr. Hancock came from New York State to Iowa in 1880, and as a young attorney set up an office in West Union, where he has remained ever since, until now, in his sixty-second year of practice in the same town he is the oldest



lawyer in the Thirteenth Judicial District. However, Byron W. Newberry of Strawberry Point, though a year younger, antedates Mr. Hancock in the beginning of his law practice.

Though comings and goings keep the H. A. L. roster changing a good deal in the lower brackets, seniority comes slowly, as will be seen from the dates when some of the members joined — H. P. Hancock in 1880, Frank Camp in 1897, W. J. Rogers in 1898, Walter H. Beall in 1907. After the year last named there is an interval of ten years before the group which has held membership less than a quarter of a century is reached.

Among the names remembered as those of early-day members of the club is that of P. F. Sturgis, whose rugged individuality long molded the club's traditions. He was a merchant and the political boss of Fayette County. Other prominent study club members were Oscar W. Rogers, attorney, inventor, and the first white child born in West Union; C. H. Talmadge, editor of the *West Union Gazette*; F. Y. Whitmore, banker; the Reverend James Mulligan, Catholic pastor; William E. Fuller, Congressman; Walter H. Butler, Congressman; J. B. Knoepfler, State Superintendent of Public Instruction; W. B. Lakin, State Senator; the Reverend W. O. Ruston, Presbyterian pastor; and Thomas L. Green, business man.



Attempts at times to get specific information from Mr. Hancock about the earliest days of the club have not been entirely successful. "The rolling mists of fifty years" had somewhat obscured his recollections even on the semi-centennial occasion in 1930. Perhaps modesty also played a part, for it is highly probable that the original suggestion to organize came from Mr. Hancock himself, because 1880 was his first year out of college, also his first year in West Union, when that tremendous concentration on the written word which is his notable trait was already marked in the set of his nature. All he will say is that "several of us thought we ought to get together and exchange ideas." If the suggestion did not come from Mr. Hancock, then the next best guess would be that it came from P. F. Sturgis, whose devotion to the club and interest in its discussions were perhaps equal to those of Mr. Hancock, though death cut his tenure of membership far shorter.

If any one has been able to say in the past thirty or forty years exactly when and where the first meeting of the H. A. L. club was held, such knowledge is not now available. For many years the meeting place was Mr. Hancock's office, but a change had to be made a few years ago when he began spending his winters at his "Little White House" at Merritt, Florida. The law office of



Antes & Antes is now the place of the sessions. The club at first met on Saturday nights, then Friday, but for forty-five years the meeting night has been on Monday.

On the first written page of the oldest minute book now in possession of the club, the constitution is preceded by the following preamble:

"We, the undersigned, who have associated ourselves together for mutual social benefit, and the cultivation of historical and general literary knowledge, do ordain the following rules and regulations by which we jointly agree to be governed."

The belief is held that when the club was founded it started with fewer than the permitted fifteen names on the roll, but the exact number of the original membership is not known, and it is remembered by present members that as far back as thirty years ago old members were heard to differ in discussion of the question whether certain old-time members were actually on the charter list or not.

After a careful checkup of old minutes, letters from former members, and Mr. Hancock's recollection, the present secretary has put into the records a list of all known members, past and present, living or dead. Of these only seven are reputed to have been on the charter list: H. P. Hancock,



Thomas L. Green, W. B. Lakin, P. F. Sturgis, W. O. Ruston, Oscar W. Rogers, and Charles H. Talmadge.

The written records of the club which have been preserved go back only to 1894, so that no means exist for checking up on the interesting years of the club's infancy. The minutes which have been preserved since 1894 are as a rule brief, telling only when and where the club met, who were present, and who led the discussion. They contain the same items from week to week, with little variety. No record of any of the great battles which were waged in the closed chamber exists except on the dimming tablets of human memory.

Traditions tell, however, of battles over the authorship of the Shakespearean plays which were waged intermittently over a long period, with P. F. Sturgis as the protagonist of the Baconian theory. And one churchman was reputed to have given up his membership because he grew weary of the persistent injection into the discussions by two or three members of their free thinking opinions.

Of programs in the proper use of that word there are none, as each session follows the same pattern — one member speaking as leader on the assigned subject and each of the other members being given a chance to add remarks in turn. For



a time some forty years ago the fashion was to propose questions in debatable form, and once in a while a secretary improved this opportunity to expand the minutes a little. On March 1, 1897, C. A. Diehl wrote: " 'Is Our Country Retrograding?' was discussed with C. A. Diehl as leader. After a heated discussion lasting until a late hour, the club seemed to be of the opinion that the country was safe. The warning voices of the leader and Tom Green availed naught."

Tradition and custom have great force in the H. A. L. Yet in one respect at least the years have wrought a great change. A generation ago an intellectual battle was likely to break out any time at a moment's notice, and the hotter it got the more bragging was done over the success of the session when the members compared notes the next day. Authorities were consulted to back up assertions, and the old subject would be dragged into later discussions to give some worsted debater a comeback. In later years much of the sharp edge of controversy has been dulled.

In these battles the Hon. William E. Fuller, after his return from Washington, D. C., in 1907, gave some of the young members a training which was painful at the moment but highly valuable in the end. He had a well-stored mind from a widely ranging library, besides forty years of per-



sonal acquaintance with hundreds of nationally known public men. Having served as member of the State legislature, Representative in Congress, and Assistant Attorney General of the United States, he was skilled in dialectics. At least one new member, after being taken down the line by Mr. Fuller a few times, came to appreciate Henry Adams's dictum, "In the H. A. L. there is no friend like an authenticated fact."

The club has never had anything like a crisis in its affairs. Though any organization could hardly endure for sixty-two years without having its ups and downs, the H. A. L. has never faced apparent danger of death either from violent quarrels or gradual decay.

The most memorable session of the club was the one held on the fiftieth anniversary in 1930 at the home of Mr. and Mrs. H. P. Hancock. In the *Argo-Gazette's* account of that occasion it was stated that "the high spot of the evening was when Secretary W. H. Antes read twenty-nine letters and telegrams from former H. A. L. members in eleven States, each recalling club memories of the long ago, and making congratulations to Mr. Hancock the chief burden of the message. Earl Chandler of Seattle, Grant Finch of Danbury, Conn., W. E. Van Buren of St. Cloud, Fla., W. W. Peebles of Alvin, Texas, and Theo von



Rolf and W. W. Comstock of Hollywood, California, boxed the compass from the far corners of the United States, while the concluding greeting was from the Rev. Dr. George Elliott of New York City, editor of the *Methodist Review*, who went back in memory for forty-six years to recall his residence in West Union and his club membership." These greetings were presented to Mr. Hancock in a bound volume.

Among the living ex-members, the most distinguished is the Reverend Merton S. Rice, now of Detroit. Some other former members who at last accounts were still living are the Reverend George Elliott, Detroit; the Reverend John Gammons, Cresco; Dr. Grant E. Finch of Yale University; the Reverend W. G. Crowder, Cedar Falls; Henry L. Adams, Des Moines; King R. Palmer, Des Moines; and C. A. Diehl, Des Moines.

If there is anything that puts complete satisfaction into the breast of a present H. A. L. member, it is one of those not infrequent occasions when some long gone resident of the city says, or writes in a letter, "I valued my H. A. L. membership above anything else in West Union"; or "I consider the H. A. L. club the strongest influence in my intellectual life."

The only three-generation sequence in the club's membership is still represented by two mem-



bers. The three names are those of Frank Camp, now on the inactive list; the late Ruel P. Camp; and John P. Camp, now active. All were of the banking occupation. The present president and secretary, respectively, are Charles W. Antes and his father, W. H. Antes, who are law partners.

The membership has been drawn most largely from schoolmen, ministers, attorneys, and editors, though the club is seldom without a business man, generally a banker, and occasionally a farmer is induced to enter. County officers, dentists, station agents, physicians, and merchants have figured on the rolls. It is said that in the past thirty-five years, and probably longer, no man coming to West Union as a city superintendent, county superintendent, Methodist pastor, or Presbyterian pastor, has failed to belong to the H. A. L. club.

New members, after proposals wait one week, may be admitted to fill vacancies in the complement of fifteen if not more than one vote is cast against them. Within the past year a change was made to enlarge the roster of working membership by inserting the word "active" in the constitutional clause limiting the total to fifteen, so that placing the two oldest members on the inactive list still leaves fifteen men taking part in the studies.

As a rule, however, the club is conservative, and seldom makes a change in the method of study.



The choice of topics for discussion is made just as it was sixty-two years ago. Each member drops a signed slip into the secretary's hat. The secretary reads the topics proposed, but does not read the signatures. On a motion, one of the topics is selected for discussion two weeks later, then the secretary reveals the name of the member proposing it, who is said to be "stuck" to lead.

The subjects are often historical, these being handled usually on a biographical basis; and literary subjects also are likely to partake of the biographical cast. Geography also often comes in, but a battle, a play of Shakespeare, an historical period, or a country will be chosen as a topic at frequent intervals. Practically every leading personage in the public or literary affairs of the United States or Great Britain has been discussed, many of them several times; while the rest of the world is freely ranged for soldiers, statesmen, industrialists, writers, musicians, philanthropists, and notable battles or civil assemblages.

That the members range widely in their intellectual interests is shown by the list of topics which followed week by week in the club year 1935-36: The Earl of Strafford; William H. Prescott; George Dewey; Plato; Denmark; Ibsen; A. W. Greely; Charles Dickens; Russia; Rudyard Kipling.



That forty years have not made too much difference in the line of research carried on by the members is shown by the following list of topics covering the club year of 1895-96: Josephine; Lady Jane Grey; National Characters; Duke of Wellington; Louis XIV; Henry VIII; Elizabeth; Martin Luther; Influence of the Puritans; William II; Isabella of Spain; Laws of Heredity; Should Cuba be Granted Belligerent Rights by Our Government; The Silver Question; Antiquities.

In the weekly discussions the leader has twenty-five minutes for opening, which may be from manuscript, from notes, or from memory. The president then calls in such order as he chooses for the other members to take ten minutes each, after which the leader has five minutes in which to gather up the fragments.

The club year formerly ran from early in November till late in May, but since the advent of the automobile age the spring adjournment usually comes before the middle of April. In February an annual banquet is held, with the ladies attending, at which the subjects are almost invariably aspects of the lives of Washington or Lincoln, with three speakers drawn by lot. Of late years Benjamin Franklin has been admitted as a worthy subject in this select circle of anniversary topics.

The sessions of this study organization, while



usually not so hilarious as those of a luncheon club, yet do not lack the social or humorous elements. The member who is not out of town on meeting night almost always finds that any other excuse for absence falls on deaf ears, because the penalty, a treat for the entire membership, is one in which each member feels a direct personal interest. The imposition of a fine is usually accomplished in an atmosphere of cheerfulness.

WALTER H. BEALL