

## Showing Up

by Kurt Meyer

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I'm not much of a club person. Oh sure, I've joined a few clubs over the years. In Wisconsin in the early '90s, I joined a small Rotary Club, generally 15 or 20 attendees at a morning breakfast meeting. When work obligations made it hard to attend regularly, I resigned, although I still occasionally apply the Rotary four-way test\* to decision-making and support Rotary International's admirable efforts to distribute polio vaccines globally. The organization's "Polio Plus" program all seems so innocent now... from a time when vaccines were viewed as an essential, life-saving benefit.

Recently, I've been exchanging emails with leaders of the Cliff Dwellers Club, a venerable organization located in downtown Chicago. My interest in the Club is rooted in its formation, in 1907, an effort led by "North Iowa's own" Hamlin Garland, the Cliff Dwellers' founder and its first president (one story called him as the Club's moving spirit, another, its driving force). Since the Club's beginning, it's had the same general purpose, "A place where people seriously interested in the arts, both professionally and as committed observers, could (gather) in a congenial, friendly way."

Late summer, when Cliff Dwellers' officers sought to learn more about Garland, their inquiries were eventually routed to me. When I mentioned being in Chicago in October, we set a lunch date at the Club, located across from the Art Institute. From background information about the Club: "The Cliff Dwellers is not like other private clubs... its dues are lower, it quit discriminating sooner, its atmosphere is friendlier, its focus on the arts (music, painting, sculpture, literature, architecture) is clearer, its 'tacky elegance' is unique." Although the tacky quip is a bit snide, the other points are all pluses with me.

Another observation, now several decades old, "In a typical Cliff Dweller combination of formality and forgetfulness, many photographs of (distinguished members) depict people nobody can now recognize." This describes an organization respectful of history without delving into the details. I'm partial to any entity that blends formality with forgetfulness, a phrase that at one time might be applied to a sizeable segment of society.

Throughout his career, Garland devoted considerable time to club-related activities – founding them, leading them, in many instances, corresponding on their behalf, taking minutes at their meetings, etc. It's appropriate to ask why. Garland biographer Keith Newlin suggests a rationale drawn from Garland's Iowa boyhood. "When Hamlin was in his teens, he and his family began to attend the local Grange socials... (T)he Grange was founded to improve the economic, social and intellectual conditions of farmers, but unlike most fraternal orders of the time, it admitted women." (Note: The Grange began in 1867 with women members; the Cliff Dwellers lacked women members until 1984.)

Newlin further explains, "At Grange meetings, Hamlin learned a lesson he never forgot: that social organizations, formed to improve the lot of others while also providing pleasant company, can do

as much for the social good as any overt political activity. This principle would inform every one of the many organizations he would eventually found or join.”

One final comment about the Chicago club, this from several decade ago: “Scratch a Cliff Dweller today and you’re likely to find a self-professed history buff. But (Garland) was looking to the future. Basking in the afterglow of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, he puffed, ‘The rise of Chicago as a literary and art center is a question only of time, and of a very short time; for the Columbian Exposition has taught her capabilities in something higher than business.’”

I’m generally not into clubs, but perhaps a history-buff relationship with the Cliff Dwellers will be different. I’ll keep you posted.

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*\* - Of the things we think, say, or do: Is it the truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build goodwill and better friendships? Will it be beneficial to all concerned?*