

**“A MUGWAMPISH TENDENCY” : 100 YEARS OF LIVING THE LIFE OF THE
CHIT-CHAT CLUB**

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"A Mugwampish Tendency": 100 Years of Living the Life of the Chit-Chat Club

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Chit-Chat Club essay read on January 11, 2010

Mr. President, Mr. Secretary, Gentlemen:

Welcome to the 1,497th hearing of a Chit-Chat club essay - and an equivalent number of dinners consumed since 1874. While the essays have more or less held their ground, notable slippage in the quality of the meals has been apparent since at least the Great Depression. You might ask: How do you know this? You may be old, but hardly old enough to judge the quality and amount of food consumed well over 100 years ago. Hearken to the voice of Langley Porter, speaking in 1941 on "The Early Days of the Chit-Chat Club", in itself a historical goldmine. "The food list for the 14th Annual banquet in 1888 covers 2 pages It begins with green turtle soup, goes on to salmon 2 entrees, stewed terrapin stuffed Fresno turkey, crab mayonnaise, roast quail, desert including champagne jelly and ice cream all washed down with Riesling and Zinfandel and topped off with café noir." I enclose a copy of the original menu. It is exactly as described by Langley Porter.

CHIT-CHAT CLUB
14th ANNUAL MEETING, NOVEMBER 12, 1888

MENU

Eastern Oysters on the Half Shell

RIESLING

Green Turtle aux Qunnelles

Green Olives Tomatoes Celery

Petites Bouchees a la Reine

Sacramento River Salmon a la Chambord
Pomme Duchesse

Faux Filet Picquet a la Duxelles

Chicken Croquettes aux Cahmpignons
French Peas

ZINFANDEL

Stewed Terrapin, Maryland Style

Stuffed Fresno Turkey, Cranberry Sauce
Mashed Potatoes
Baked Sweet Potatoes Cauliflower Hollandaise

PUNCH A LA CARDINALE

Mayonnaise of Crab

Roast Mountain Quail with Water Cresses

Cabinet Pudding, White Sauce
Assorted Fanny Cakes
Champaigne Jelly Vanilla Ice Cream

Café Noir Fruits

Beginning last November almost exactly on the 135th anniversary of the Chit-Chat Club, I have spent many delightful hours in silent conversation with hundreds of wise and witty and often brilliant essayists whose work resides in the Club's records deposited in the Special Collections Library at Stanford. I cannot help but feel humbled while I stand before you as their echo, knowing how many could and would have done greater justice to the pleasant yet daunting task I hope to present this evening. Pleasant, because these ghosts were so able and so ready to entertain us; daunting, because there's so much they tell us in their formal presentations, and in the inadvertent, private, and even confidential, clues to the lives they led, the ideas and beliefs they were passionate about, and shared with their fellow Chit-Chatters. Their formal letters and informal memos rest in the sanctuary of Stanford's great library.

In the cathedral silence of the Special Collections Reading Room, I would at times find myself laughing out loud over some startlingly witty response or surprising turn of phrase just stumbled across in the files. One such moment of unexpected gaiety was occasioned by a passage in the introduction to an essay on Bad Poetry. The orator of the evening explained that a Mr. Wallace had invited Dorothy Parker to speak on the topic, but had received a polite rejection. "Dear Mr. Wallace," wrote Miss Parker, "thank you for your invitation, which I must decline: I am too fucking busy – and vice versa."

I wish to share a few basic facts about the Chit-Chat Archive at Stanford. The collection was originally shipped to Stanford on October 12, 1954 after a successful campaign by Stanford history professor Edgar E. Robinson against considerable competition from The California Historical Society, The California State Library, the San Francisco Public Library, and most particularly, the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley. Three weeks before the boxes went to Stanford, Chit-Chat secretary Osgood Murdock wrote to his eventual successor Edgar M. Kahn, "I don't want to get in the middle of this thing", as he acceded to Professor

Robinson's wishes. All these institutions continue to hold Chit-Chat documents, including at least one essay.

What exactly is the makeup of the collection presently at Stanford?

Over a period of approximately 5 weeks, I examined the entire archive, and prepared a complete catalogue with a line of description for every item in the records. The files from 1887 to 1975 had been previously sorted and loosely catalogued (loosely catalogued means that individual items are not listed but are bundled together and kept in folders tagged with general labels such as Essays, Correspondence, Proceedings and the ubiquitous and mysterious Miscellaneous. Papers delivered to the Library after 1975 remain exactly as they were mailed by the Club's secretaries, awaiting a research librarian to analyze, sort and record them. The collection measures 9.5 linear feet at present, comprised of 17 boxes of folders identified with dates and categories. The first 8 of these boxes (26 folders) were sorted and recorded by Special Collections personnel. I have examined, sorted, and catalogued the contents of all folders from the beginning of the collection to through 2009.

Unfortunately, the collection contains a total of only 372 essays, representing approximately 25% of the essays listed as having been presented at the Monday meetings: only 54 are from the 1st 70 years. There are 35 essays from the decade of 1944 to 1953; 33 from 1954 to 1963; 47 from 1964 to 1973; 53 from 1974 to 1983; 58 from 1984-1993; 47 from 1994 to 2003; and 39 from 2004 through 2009. Thus, a total of 372 essays have been preserved from the approximately 1,500 delivered over the 135 years since the Club was founded. I should also mention that most of the descriptive early information about essays, discussions and other club activities (for instance, by-laws and guest lists) were published in two exquisitely bound hardcover volumes entitled "The First 10 Years of the Chit-Chat Club, 1874-1884" and "Chit Chat Essays, 1884", and two volumes of bound essays in manuscript form, bearing the inscriptions "Chit-Chat Essays, 1940-45" and "Chit-Chat Essays, 1943-1950", containing a total of 42 essays.

One more word about the collection, and I'll proceed to the main thrust of my talk. In addition to the published or bound materials, and the typescripts of additional essays, the archive contains an eclectic mix of documents. Of particular interest are Proceedings of the Annual Dinners where much of the extant information about club activities is sequestered. In addition, reprints of articles written by academic and professionally active club members, press clippings of obituaries, opinion pieces, publications which mention the Chit-Cat Club, and newspaper reports involving individual members; mailed announcements of upcoming meetings, financial statements. Finally, and of great interest for the historian of the Club, are the fairly substantial correspondence files containing letters, notes and informal memos between members and Club secretaries, and communications from outsiders about matters of interest to the Chit-Chat Club. Needless to say, this is low-hanging fruit for someone interested in the impact of passing history on the thoughts and outlook on "nature, the social order, and man's place in the scheme of things" of a group of intellectuals from just about every substantial sector of society" (here I paraphrase the peerless Langley Porter again).

One could go on at length about the unbroken chain of secretaries to the Club, their sometimes astonishingly long tenure and striking dedication, the venues for club meetings found and lost over the decades with finances nearly always in arrears, correspondence about illness, travel, periodic mutations of By-Laws; and of course, most important, the random collection of typed or handwritten essays presented and discussed at meetings.

This evening, I shall present a number of anecdotes and quotations from the archival files, with the aim of exploring the basic character of this very special assembly of men, and the particular qualities that have accounted for keeping together such very disparate personalities in voluntary and harmonious company

uninterruptedly for 135 years and 2 months, with a single, and unimportant exception: not the 1906 earthquake and fire, but an unexpected call to duty with the National Guard by that evening's orator. As early as 1889, on the 15th anniversary of the Club, Sheldon G. Kellogg, president for the evening, expressed the following prescient sentiments: "It is certainly a matter for mutual congratulation that, in a community peculiarly subject to change, a club devoted to the serious discussion of literary and economic questions should have reached so great an age, and should give good promise of a brilliant future. No signs of decay have yet appeared, and with the passing years the merits of such an organization have only become more manifest. " Our country could learn a truly valuable lesson, especially in today's polarized and frenetic environment, if it could fathom the secret of the Club's longevity and equanimity!

As most members are aware, but for the benefit of our guests, I shall recall that the club was conceived almost as a lark by 6 young lawyers dining together at the Cremorne Restaurant on the second Monday of November, 1874. For historic perspective, this immaculate conception occurred only two years before Custer's last stand. The four men who volunteered to come up with a name for the newborn entity met in the law offices of General George A. Nourse, located in the old Pacific Bank Building on Pine and Sansom, and adopted the name Chit-Chat at the suggestion of one Charles H. Phelps. Over the years, at least 4 essays and attendant spirited discussions have been devoted to the name, its meaning, or lack thereof. Personally, I am of the opinion that a most useful suggestion comes from Professor Walter Hart, who indicated in his essay on "Chit-Chat" in 1951 that we ought to consider "Chit" to stand for the essay read each evening, which is then redeemed by the "Chat" that follows.

In the course of that first year of 1874, 19 lawyers were enrolled, but on the Club's first birthday admission was "vouchsafed to plain citizens not living by the law, but in spite of it", according to Wm. B. Kuder who spoke at the 100th Anniversary Dinner. This event was also notable for being the first occasion

when women were invited and welcomed by the Club. The records do not reveal when and how the present practice of inviting women to the December meeting originated, although the issue of inviting women to join the Club has been raised repeatedly, and has caused the only serious division in its long history. Frank H. Sloss, a second generation Chit-Chatter (there have been at least 4 other father-son successions), and an indefatigable writer of nearly flawless essays, penned a poetic toast to the "Ladies of the 100th", which is appended. Permit me to read the second half of the poem for a taste of the flavor of those times which are near to the present in historic terms, yet seem so distant from a cultural and social perspective.

TO THE LADIES

Chit Chat Club

November 11, 1974

A thousand evenings have come and gone,
 A thousand essays been commented on
 (Of variable merit);
 And still we few, we happy few,
 Each month punctiliously renew
 The custom we inherit.

First the cocktails creating a mellow mood,
 Which may or may not be enhanced by the food;
 Next the essay, amusing or serious;
 And then come the comments, perceptive and bright,
 Incisive and trenchant, extremely polite,
 Taking off in directions mysterious.

But when that second Monday arrives,
 It saddens us that a score of wives
 (unless we're much mistaken)
 Will be left alone to grieve and yearn
 Until their absent lords return --
 Abandoned, forlorn, forsaken.

So tonight, with courage resolute,
 A drastic change we institute,
 Approved by every member:

We welcome you ladies among us men,
And we fully intend to invite you again
Each hundredth year, in November.

In pursuing the secret of the club's longevity, one is struck in reading the Proceedings and correspondence by the sheer delight in "the good things of life" the members shared - bonhomie may be the correct term - from the very beginning. This aspect of the club experience is manifested by the 19th gathering of the Chit-Chat Club on July 10, 1893, recorded as the only meeting not held in San Francisco. The venue was an elaborate ranch in Marin's Ross Valley, decorated in Oriental style and named Camp Ho-Ho for the bird that first announced the birth of Confucius, according to the owner of the spread, Chit-Chatter Joseph HasBrouk. The invitation to that summer evening informed that, fittingly, "the Club will discuss Chinese literature". The eclectic and wide-ranging interests of the original membership were also evident from the announcement that one of the 6 founders of the Club, and also the very first essayist, lawyer Arthur Rodgers, who had spoken on "Trade Unions" in 1874, discoursed on ancient Chinese poetry 19 years later at Camp Ho-Ho. The invitation to this meeting urges "Come eat, drink, breathe under the shadow of our great mountain and lovely redwoods, and be good ever after. To get here, take the Sausalito boat and San Rafael train, get off at Tamalpais station, and take any team carrying the Dragon flag. Chino-American dinner at 7 pm, to be followed by a lantern procession, Rodgers' essay, discussion in the Ho-Ho cabin. Pajamas." Letters in the archives further attest to the excellent quality and quantity of the breakfast at the Ho-Ho.

These sybaritic tales from the Marin woods remind us that the quality of the dining experience associated with the monthly meetings continued for several decades in unabated splendor or sumptuous excess, as the long-serving Secretary Charles Murdock would have it. Murdock, who wrote essays with signature titles like "Crime and the Treatment of Criminals", "The Book of Job", "The Policy of Protection", "Religion in Business", "Ibsen and His Dramas", proposed that the savings from eating less could be used to print the Chit-Chat

proceedings. Having located the 1888 menu in the archives, I bring copies for our envious delectation. Two years later, the practice of printing a motto on the menu was adopted. The message on the 8-course menu of 1890 was "Plain living and High thinking".

The culinary aspects of the meetings achieved a symbolic dimension after the Great Earthquake and Fire of 1906. "Come hell or high water", Chit-Chat members were going to eat and drink and think and converse in a manner befitting true gentlemen, or at least like the Parisian elite, according to Secretary Fairfax Wheelan's response to the disaster. The event, recorded in detail, is worthy of lengthy quotation. Less than a month after the earthquake of April 18, 1906, Wheelan sent a notice to every member he could reach: "I am sorry to report to the members of the Chit-Chat Club that the late readjustment between the sedimentary and the sandstone underlying the territory in which our club was wont to pursue its activities, had as one of its sad results, the loss of all our club's records and accounts. Happily, its traditions and a thousand memories of interesting and instructive nights of good cheer and good fellowship remain with us. Many of us feel that the unbroken records of more than 30 years should not be shattered now. We see no reason why geology should be permitted to interfere with literature and the pursuit of truth."

Two days later, on May 16, 1906, Whelan announced "the secretary has found a 'first class grill' located on California Street 2437, near Steiner. He interviewed Mrs. Polastri, the caterer from the previous meeting, as she stood on the curb near her range under the shelter of a rude shed while the night wind wandered eastward, and she promised him to take the bed out of the front room on May 21st, and to arrange places for 20, to provide Skelly, Lea and London as waitresses; and at 6:30 pm to serve (think of it) [you guessed it] oysters on the half shell, "bullyen", crab a la poulette, an entrée, a Roman punch, chops and peas, a dessert and coffee; 7 courses all for \$1.50 per." Whelan also reported

"Mrs. Polastri desires me to state that there is no carpet on the floor. I have assured her of your tolerance."

The essay topic and the discussion on that night of May 21, 1906 revolved around the devastation (all but one of the 20 members present had lost their homes) the deeds of extreme bravery among the victims, and of generosity and help from faraway outsiders. Wheelan described the conclusion of that evening's meeting: "We came forth into the night. Its beauty held the sky. The evening star had sunk below the horizon, but a planet burned clear and bright at the zenith. We were conscious of a closer fraternity, a tenderer fellowship. We parted with the feeling that something divine had happened. It was as if, in our journey between the mystery of birth and the mystery of death, we had come to understand something - inexpressible in words, never to be phrased, but something with a beauty that transcended beauty, with a sweetness that surpassed all sweetness, something allied not to the finite, but fastened irrevocably to the eternal and the infinite. The current in the river of life had been checked for a moment. For a moment the incessant forces that ruffled and tossed its surface had been stilled, and there, reflected clear and deep within the water's bosom, we had been blessed for a moment with a soul-entrancing vision of the majesty and glory of the upper world."

These eloquent lines are redolent with the memory of a bygone moment, like the scent of pressed flowers in an old volume of poetry. At this point, permit me to digress from a linear narrative of the early decades to address the troubling historical question of progress. What is progress? How do we recognize it? Have we really *advanced* across the gulf that separates us from Wheelan's sensibility? What links us to these figures from a distant past? The idea of searching through the obscure files of the Club first occurred to me soon after I had been inducted as a member and became aware that the lives of several former members had touched mine many years ago, or continue to occupy a place in my present interests: Langley Porter, Chauncey Leake and, most particularly, John Saunders,

whose full name, John Bertrand de Cusance Morant Saunders, rang like a distant bell in my memory. Saunders had been forced to resign his position as Chancellor of UCSF in 1966, the year before I joined the faculty. In the preceding year, Saunders came under intense and mounting pressure from the AMA, the Association of American Medical School Deans, and most particularly, Clark Kerr, President of the UC system, himself in trouble with Governor Reagan over the student riots of 1964.

Saunders fell victim to the post-Sputnik revolution in American higher education when he chose to resist the conversion of UCSF, along with most prestigious US medical schools, from a hospital-based center for training competent physicians to a research-driven campus oriented toward scientific progress and the education of future bio-scientists. Saunders represented the case of prominent academic clinicians caught in the juggernaut of these epic transformations. Scientists engaged in conversion of UCSF into the cradle of the future biotechnology industry, publicly confronted Saunders' efforts to block their plans in 1965. The affair received front-page exposure in the local newspapers, which framed it as a struggle between traditional medical paternalism and scientific progress. I had researched these events for my master's thesis on the social transformation of American medicine in the post-World War II period, and was immediately intrigued by the possibility that Saunders might have shared with Chit-Chat brothers his uncensored and private thoughts during his time on the barricades.

Briefly, I found that the Chit-Chat records do contain essays dating from the mid-1960's on the "Crisis at the University of California", including one by a Dean on "Never trust anyone over 30", and the meditations of a Judge on "The student revolt from the standpoint of a college trustee". Yet, Saunders' pen at the time produced only unrelated writings, such as a paper on the language of an obscure African tribe, and inscrutable essays with titles such as " Above and Below the Greasy Grey" composed in 1964. I had given up on Saunders to concentrate on the rich correspondence between Chauncey Leake, another historic UCSF figure of

the period, and the son of the puritanical Charles, secretary Osgood Murdoch, whose tenure extended from 1943 to 1957. Unexpectedly, the 1977 folder yielded a late essay of Saunders' entitled "Progress". It was clear from the first few sentences that here was a deeply considered, scholarly meditation of the question that had driven Saunders from high office. The idea for the essay had been "provoked" by a discussion he attended in early 1977 concerning "the advancement of science and medicine and their influence, or lack thereof, in contributing to existing social needs and order". Saunders came away wondering whether "the concept of progress is in itself no more than an act of faith".

I shall quote only the beginning and final words in Saunders' essay. "The belief in perfectability and the power of reason to bring about improvements in human relations and the conduct of men is open to serious question, enhanced by the loss of educational standards and the weakness of institutions." After an illuminating expedition through the ages to explore the origins and development of the idea of progress, and the related meta-religious assumption of human perfectibility, Saunders concludes with: "Progress is conflict, or progress is understanding. Which? Where is the middle road?" Thus ended the battle over Mount Parnassus.

It has been the custom among many Chit-Chat essayists to compose titles which coyly disguise the true intent or meaning of their essays; others tenaciously cling to straightforward explanatory or declarative headings. I have attempted tonight to honor both traditions in the title "A Mugwampish Tendency": 100 Years of Living the Life of the Chit-Chat Club." I hope to have clarified the reference to living the life; now I turn to the somewhat less apparent meaning of the first part of the title, which refers to another merry night at the club, to a time when the term mugwamp was in common usage. Mugwamp was originally the term for "chief" in the Navaho language. By the latter half of the 19th century, American colloquial usage had changed the noun mugwamp to an adjective denoting independent, aloof behavior by a "Call me Ishmael" type of outside observer. This is evident from Joseph Hutchinson's introduction of the evening's speaker at the

23rd annual meeting on November 8, 1897, Professor O.L. Elliott from Stanford, whose essay addressed the topical issue of "Kit Kat Clubs". In Elliott's opinion, the English Kit Kat gatherings constituted a far more scholarly and serious effort than their lightweight off-shoots, the Chit-Chatters. Elliott suggested that the San Francisco Club consider patterning itself on the English model, which would include fewer distractions such as fancy meals and idle chatter. As President for the evening, Hutchinson introduced the topic with the following remarks: "Our members have a strong *mugwampish* tendency. Consequently, I foresee constant change in our future: tonight it was decided to eliminate the musical part of our assembly; in 1898, there will be no wine; in '99, no tobacco, in 1900, no coffee; in 1901, no dinner; in 1902, no essay; in 1903, no discussion; in 1904 – no club!" Eighty seven years later, an essay on political wit delivered in 1984, opened with a verse on a beer mug President John Kennedy presented to his close friend Dave Powers: "There are three things which are real: God, human folly and laughter. The first two are beyond comprehension, so we must do what we can with the third."

I shall close this incomplete and somewhat mugwampish tour of Chit-Chat's historical records using a quotation from an essay crowned with perhaps the most ingeniously obscure title in the entire collection: "They also surf who only stand and wade". Presented by P.H. Rhinelanders on March 14, 1983, the paper centered on material from a recently published Anthology of Bad Verse. The essay concluded with a parody of John Stuart Mills' autobiographical sonnet "On His Blindness". Rhinelanders modified the title of Milton's otherwise unchanged original, which he presented alongside his own version, entitled "The Minor Poet on His Myopia".

Here is Milton's sonnet, followed by Rhinelanders':

The Major Poet On his Blindness

When I consider how my light is spent,
 E're half my days in this dark world and wide,
 And that one talent, which is death to hide,
 Locked with me useless, though my Soul more bent,

To serve therewith my Maker, and present
 My true account, lest He returning chide.
 Doth God exact my labour, light denied,
 I fondly ask: but patience, to prevent
 That murmur, soon replies: God does not need
 Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve Him best; his State
 Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
 And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest:
 They also serve who only stand and wait.

The Minor Poet on His Myopia

When I consider how my life is spent,
 Through days and nights in this dark world and wide,
 And those small talents which a leaf could hide,
 I wonder what they were and where they went;
 And if they served His purpose who sent
 Them down to my account, thus to provide
 Slight sparks that dimly flamed and quickly died,
 Unseemly aspirations to prevent.
 A cautious listener to the Ocean's din,
 The minor poet serves his minor muse,
 With modest talents, modestly displayed;
 He watches others ride the breakers in,
 Content such daring ventures to refuse:
 They also surf who only stand and wade.

"A cautious listener to the Ocean's din" defines mugwampery of the finest sort.
 The Chit-Chat sort. It seems a formula for the ages.