

Social Life of the Institute

Although neither the Preamble nor the Constitution of the Henry County Institute of Science mention any other purpose than promoting "the study and diffusion of general knowledge", the hall of the Institute was for many years the center of social life in Trenton.

Even before the Institute was organized, the people of Trenton held a festival in the new building, erected by their public-spirited citizen, to raise money to buy seats, stoves, and other furnishings for the new edifice. The committee in charge announced in the *Mount Pleasant Journal*, "A good substantial supper with coffee, will be furnished. Oysters and confectionaries in abundance. Instrumental music will be part of the entertainment. A general invitation cordially extended to all. Ample preparations will be made for a large attendance. The utmost endeavor will be used to make the Festival an entire success. Turn out and see what the people of Trenton and vicinity will do."

In the *Mount Pleasant Journal* on December 10, 1869, appeared an account of the entertainment. "The Festival given at Trenton, on last

Thursday evening, was a grand success. Notwithstanding the bad weather and the outlandish condition of the roads, there was a very large attendance. The supper was one of Trenton's best, and that is mighty good, and there was plenty to feed all that were there and an abundance left. The amount realized clear of all expenses was \$222.60. Trenton can't be beat on festivals, and in a few weeks they will have, thanks to their enterprising citizen, Mr. Miller, a hall of which they can well feel proud."

The Institute in time became famous for its oyster suppers. On Christmas eve of 1872, an oyster supper and ball netted the organization \$55.36. The bill for oysters amounted to \$12.72. Two years later their Christmas eve oyster supper and ball brought \$42.50 into their treasury.

Christmas eve, however, was not the only night for social occasions. The gathering on April 21, 1874, brought in a net profit of \$50.53. The proceeds of this social affair were used to purchase pictures and to decorate the hall of the library room. The custom of holding reunions on New Year's evening began as early as 1875.

For a number of years the Institute also sponsored a Fourth of July program. For example, on July 4, 1872, the association gave a ball and festival, which netted them \$106.38. When seventeen

members met in a business meeting two days later, they learned that there were four cakes left from the festival. Then "Mr. Wilson moved that we proceed to eat a portion of the cakes and sell the remainder and the motion was carried. After the feast, the chairman proceeded to sell the remainder consisting of one cake to the highest bidder and the cake was knocked down to F. McCray for the sum of seventy-five cents."

In the business meeting of June 24, 1876, it was moved that the Institute "hold a Festival and Social Hop on the evening of the 4th of July, to commence at 5 o'clock P. M." Committees were appointed to secure music, to arrange tables, to provide cakes and dishes, and finally three men were made responsible "to procure the milk of which to make the ice cream". This festival, however, earned a profit of only \$26.95.

On at least one occasion, the Institute arranged a Thanksgiving supper. This social gathering, in 1879, was not open to the public but was limited "to members and their household and two invited guests to each member, with certificates of invitation."

One of the most regularly held social affairs was the celebration in honor of George Miller's birthday. The members, their families, and invited friends met for a coöperative supper on

October 30, 1877, in the first of many such celebrations. The meeting of 1883 was typical. In that year there were fourteen items on the program: Calling to order by President; Music; Reading the biography of Mr. Miller, by S. M. Green; Music; Oration, by Kate Montgomery; Music; Toast: "George Miller", by J. C. Green; Music; Toast: "Literature", by F. McCray; Music; Toast: "Authors", by L. Noel; Music; Remarks by the President of the Institute; Supper.

The Institute often organized literary societies through the winter months and their meetings were well attended by the people of the village and surrounding community. At the meeting of the Institute on December 3, 1881, it was decided to hold literary meetings every two weeks, at which the officers of the Institute would preside. The first program was to consist of an oration by Dr. Douthart, an essay by Miss Montgomery, and the reading of a poetical selection by Mrs. McCray.

The problem of maintaining order was often a serious one at these cultural occasions. "The Trenton Literary Record", Volume I, Number 5, for March 3, 1876, (written in ink), stated that the behavior at literary meetings was much better that winter than it had been the previous season. But the editor of the "Record" was not yet satis-

fied and wrote: "It is not very agreeable to the few who get up the entertainments to be treated in the manner they have been". She then went on to analyze people's reasons for attending, in the following lines:

Some folks go to take a walk
While others go to laugh and talk.
Some go there to show their art (in dressing)
But few go there to take a part.
Some go there their friends to meet
While others go to stamp their feet.
Some go there to clap their hands
And disobey the chair's commands.
Some go there much fault to find
But few go there to improve the mind.
Some go there to make a pun
While others merely go for fun.

The hall was often rented to groups wishing to dance there. It was decided, however, in 1881, that when a group wished to hold a public dance they would have to deposit in advance with the Managers of the Institute a sum of money twice the amount of the rental fee as security for the rental fee "and damages the hall may sustain."

Many political meetings were held in the hall of the Institute. The Republicans held four meetings there in 1892, the Democrats three, and the

Populists two. In 1896, political parties paid for the use of the hall on October 3rd, 12th, and 25th. At other times theatrical companies played there; colored minstrel entertainments were presented; and patent medicine companies rented the hall for days at a time.

But the organization that rented the hall longest was the I. O. O. F. They began using the Institute building at the very beginning of its existence, and by 1900 had paid over \$960 rent. At one time, however, some fault was found with this organization. It was in 1888 that "Sarah Green moved that Mr. McCray request the Odd Fellows to refrain from the use of tobacco while occupying the upper room." The motion carried. Soon after this, the Institute bought from Ben Goldsmith's store six spittoons at thirty cents each. These must have been used consistently, for after that time at regular intervals the janitor handed in special bills of twenty-five cents each for cleaning the spittoons.

Since 1938 the American Legion post at Trenton has been renting the Institute hall. They have taken care of needed repairs and have installed electric lights. Other groups occasionally rent the building, but it no longer is the center of Trenton's social life as it was for almost a half century following its erection in 1869.

MELVIN GINGERICH