

The Art of the Chemists' Club

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Student organizations devoted to the study of chemistry have a long history extending back to the late 18th century and the very beginnings of modern chemistry as initiated by the so-called “chemical revolution” of the French chemist, Antoine Lavoisier, and his various collaborators in the years 1770-1790. The earliest documented examples of such organizations involved groups of medical students with chemical interests at the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow in Scotland (1) and at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia (2, 3). By the second half of the 19th century such student organizations were not uncommon at larger

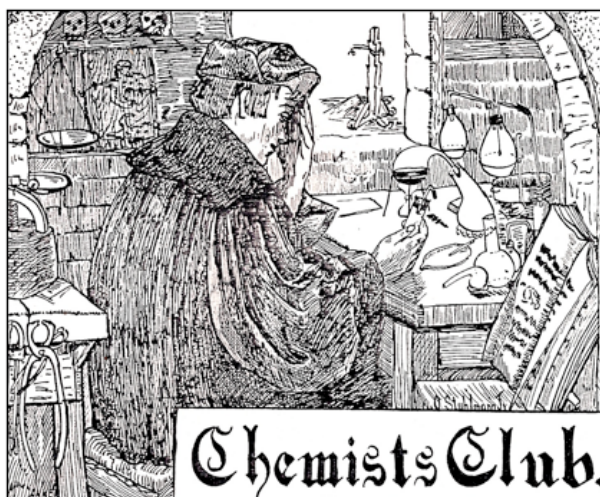


Figure 1. The Chemists' Club as depicted in the student yearbook for 1907.

colleges and universities, though only a few of them have been documented in any detail by historians (4, 5).

As might be expected, most of these organizations were short-lived, seldom surviving either the graduation of their initial student organizers or the tenure of their faculty advisors. In most cases their activities were confined to social dinners and the sponsorship of chemically relevant talks by guest speakers. In some cases, they actually sponsored the presentation of original research papers and reports by their members and, in even fewer cases, actually published proceedings and transactions, though, like the parent organizations themselves, these were usually short-lived and



Figure 2. A second vignette for the Chemists' Club from the student yearbook for 1907.

seldom had any impact beyond the confines of the school or university which sponsored them. An important exception to this rule, however, was the series of historical reprint pamphlets issued during the early decades of the 20th century by Leonard Dobbin and the Alembic Club of the University of Edinburgh, which are still referenced by current historians of chemistry (6).

For most of the 18th and 19th centuries these student organizations referred to themselves as “Chemical Societies.” However, with the rise of true professional chemical societies in the second half of the 19th-century, this pretense faded, and by the early 20th century the more modest designation of “Chemical Club” had become increasingly common, as reflected in the history of the student “Chemists' Club” at the University of Cincinnati (7).

First organized in 1903 by the Department Head, Thomas Evans, as a journal club for the department's chemistry majors, the initial club consisted of seven students and four faculty. It originally met once a

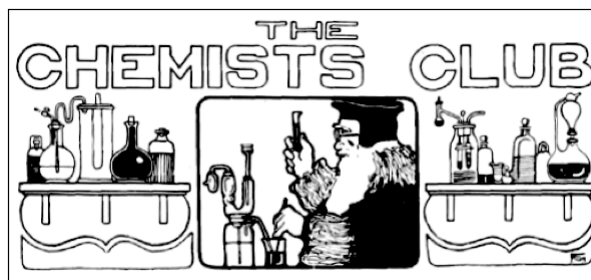


Figure 3. The Chemists' Club as depicted in the student yearbooks for 1908, 1910 and 1912, and obviously drawn by the same artist (R. Miller) as figure 2.

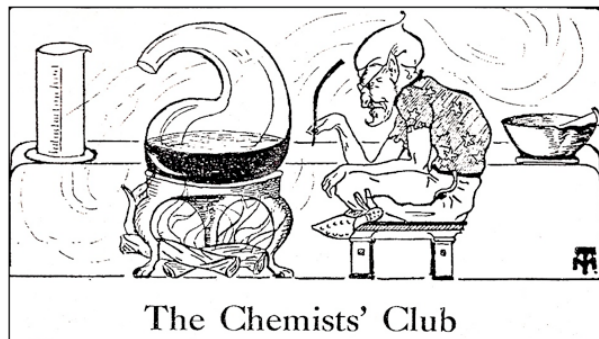


Figure 4. The Chemists' Club as depicted in the student yearbook for 1913.

month at 6:00 pm in the University Dining Room in old McMicken Hall, where the University "lunch lady" – one Mrs. Kelsch – would serve the members supper, after which they would adjourn to the Chemistry Library in the same building for the club's stated purpose – "to keep in touch with present-day advances in chemistry through the reading and discussion of papers on popular subjects."

However, by 1919 the club (9):

... had outgrown all of its old haunts and with the erection of the new chemistry building [in 1916], there

has come a rapid growth in the Chemistry Department and a consequent increase in the membership of the club. Now enthusiastic monthly meetings are held in the Commons and the Club is addressed by prominent chemists. Chemists' Club boat rides, dances, and musicals are affairs in university life anticipated with enthusiasm by all chemistry students.

Since all chemistry faculty and all chemistry majors beyond the freshman year were automatically members of the club, the membership lists and group photos found in the various student yearbooks provide us – at least for the early years – with a fairly accurate account of who was in the chemistry department, as well as with an indication of important demographic changes. Thus, for example, we can fairly accurately determine at what point the department began to attract a significant number of women students, since, prior to 1910, all of the group photos of the club show only men. However, beginning in 1912, an increasing number of young women are included (figure 5) and indeed the entry for 1915 (figure 6) lists Leonora Neuffer – the first woman to receive a doctoral degree from the department and eventually its first female faculty member – as the club's president.

Unhappily as both the club's membership and the enrollment of the University as a whole continued to



Figure 5. The Chemists' Club for 1915 showing the increasing number of women students in the Chemistry Department. The Department Head, Lauder Jones, is in the far back, framed in the left door panel. Associate Professor Harry Shipley Fry is on the extreme far left and Instructor Earl Farnau is on the extreme far right. Taken in front of old Hanna Hall.

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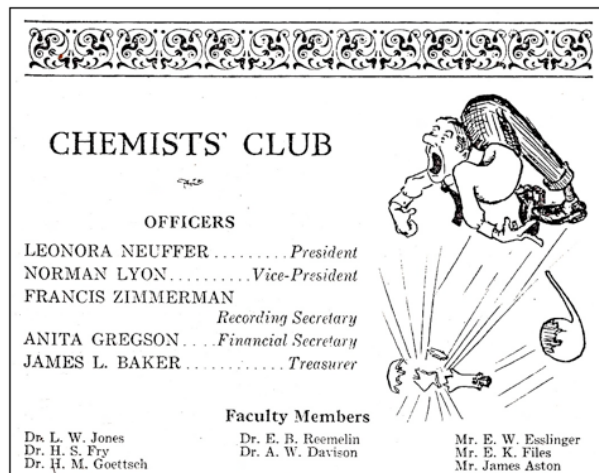


Figure 6. The Chemists' Club as depicted in the student yearbook for 1915.

increase, the amount of useful information in the yearbooks began, for practical reasons, to correspondingly decrease. Starting around 1919 fewer and fewer students and faculty began to show up for the group photo and by 1928 only the club's officers, rather than the complete membership, were being listed. Starting in 1931 the club itself is no longer mentioned in the yearbooks, thus apparently signaling its final demise after nearly three decades of existence.

With two exceptions, the only surviving records of the UC Chemists' Club are its annual entries in the student yearbooks. Hence, aside from the group photos and membership lists, there is no record of what papers were read at its meetings, what current topics were discussed, or who the various invited speakers were. However, the yearbooks do provide one additional historical legacy in the form of the art work used to decorate the club's annual listing. This was almost certainly not provided by the club itself but rather by whichever art student decided to work on the yearbook for the year in question. This is apparent from the fact



Figure 7. The Chemists' Club as depicted in the student yearbook for 1920.

that the art work almost invariably deals in distorted or imaginary forms of chemical apparatus (figures 1-4) and cultural clichés concerning chemistry, ranging from the lure and mysticism of the alchemist (figures 1 and 3) and evil magician (figure 4) to the predictable cartoon explosion (figure 6), and the chemist as heroic worker (figure 7). Equally intriguing are the changing art styles, which allow anyone who knows about various trends and fads in commercial art to easily date most of the drawings within a decade or so. This is particularly the case with figure 8, which imitates the well-known style of the quintessential Jazz-Age cartoonist, John Held Jr. (10).

The two exceptions are in the form of surviving menus and programs for several of the club's annual initiation dinners. The first, dating from 25 May 1914, was held jointly with the Blue Hydra Society, which



Figure 8. The Chemists' Club as depicted in the student yearbook for 1925 in the style of the popular illustrator of flappers and the Jazz age, John Held Jr.

was the name of the University's biology club. As usual it was held at 6:00 pm sharp in the University Dining room and featured brief remarks by H. M. Benedict of the Biology Department and Lauder Jones of the Chemistry Department, followed by songs performed by Harry Shipley Fry's sister, Lilius Fry, and a poetry reading by Leonora Neuffer. For the meal itself, Mrs. Kelsch offered roast lamb with mint sauce and escalloped potatoes, accompanied by bread and butter, peas, asparagus-hollandaise and lemonade, followed by coffee and a choice of nut bread, strawberry sherbet, or cake for dessert. The second is for a

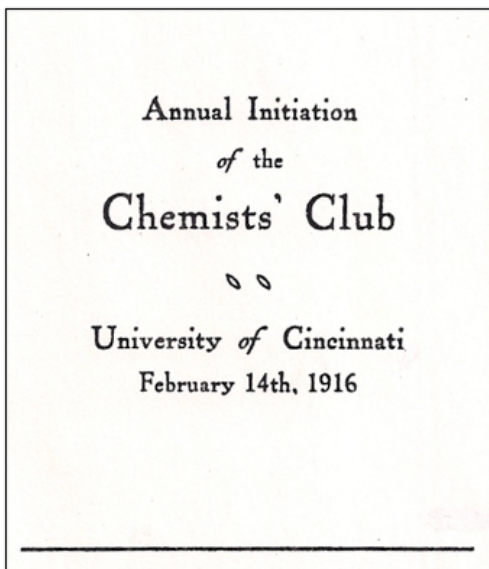


Figure 9. Invitation to the Annual Initiation Dinner of the Chemists' Club for 1914.

similar dinner held on 14 February 1916 (figure 9). It began with a series of toasts led by local pharmacist and toastmaster, John Uri Lloyd, and brief remarks by faculty members, Harry Shipley Fry and Henry Goettsch. This was followed by musical performances by the University Orchestra and poetry readings by "Miss Zelma Jacobs." For dinner the budding chemists were served roast veal with dressing and mashed potatoes, accompanied by buttered rolls and lima beans in cream sauce, followed by coffee and a choice of either cupid's delight or sweetbreads for dessert.

Of course, the Chemists' Club wasn't the only UC student organization devoted to chemistry. In 1914 a chemical fraternity known as Chi Sigma Pi was founded at UC (11). Based on a defunct organization known as the Chemical Engineers' Society, in 1917 it petitioned to become the Alpha Delta chapter of the nationally-based Alpha Chi Sigma Chemical Fraternity (12). Exclusively male by definition, it was largely concerned with maintaining a fraternity house, along with the usual attendant social activities, and became defunct in the 1970s. A chapter of the Phi Lambda Upsilon Honorary Chemical Society was formed at UC in 1939 but is also now defunct, as is the original ACS Student Affiliates Chapter, which was formed in 1952. This was revived a second time in 1969, with twelve students and Marshall Wilson as the faculty advisor, but once again became inactive in the 1980s. Its cur-

rent successor, known as the ChemCats, along with the Graduate Students' Association, are now the only two student-based organizations presently active in the Department.

References and Notes

1. J. Kendall, "Some Eighteenth-Century Chemical Societies," *Endeavour*, **1942**, *1*, 106-109.
2. W. D. Miles, "Early American Chemical Societies," *Chymia*, **1950**, *3*, 95-113.
3. W. D. Miles, "The Columbian Chemical Society," *Chymia*, **1959**, *5*, 145-154.
4. P. W. Boutwell, "The Chemical Society of Beloit College, 1863-1866," *Trans. Wis. Acad. Sci. Arts, Lett.*, **1952**, *41*, 83-94.
5. E. K. Bacon, "A Precursor of the American Chemical Society – Chandler and the Chemical Society of Union College," *Chymia*, **1965**, *10*, 185-198.
6. Known as the *Alembic Club Reprints*, they eventually numbered 22, including two hardcover books. These pamphlets were being reprinted as late as the 1960s and are well known among professional historians of chemistry.
7. It is interesting to note that the name is identical to that of the more famous Chemists' Club of New York. This, however, was a professional club for chemists in the New York area founded in 1898. It occupied an entire building on 41st Street in New York City and included a reading lounge, auditorium and lecture room, reference library, dining room, bar, and conservatory, as well as rentable laboratory and office space on the upper floors. See the booklet *The Chemists' Club: One Hundred Years in the Chemical Community*, Chemical Heritage Foundation: Philadelphia, PA, 1998.
8. Typical of the lack of documentation and continuity which plagued most of these student organizations, later accounts in the student yearbook would claim that the club was founded in 1906 and still others give a date of 1911, though the yearbooks clearly show the club was first listed in 1903. No listing is found in the yearbooks for 1905, 1906 and 1911, suggesting breaks in its continuity and a series of necessary "refoundings."
9. *The Cincinnati*, **1919**, *26*, 106.
10. C. J. Weinhardt, *The Most of John Held Jr.*, Greene Press: Brattleboro, VT, 1972.
11. The written records of the short-lived Chi Sigma Pi fraternity were accidentally discovered in the attic of the Phi Delta Theta fraternity house in 1987 and transferred to the Oesper Collections.
12. H. A. Curtis, *A History of the Alpha Chi Sigma Fraternity, 1902-1927*, AXΣ: Madison, WI, 1927, pp. 131-134.