

# UNIVERSITY CLUB



Fig. 1. The university club looking south-west at the corner of State and Murray Streets. c. 1940. [series 9/2 University Club, x25-822]

*The University Club began in an old house in 1906. The current building was built as a series of additions to the house in 1908, 1912 and 1924. Ownership of the clubhouse passed to the University in 1933. It now houses the University Club and University offices.*

The University Club was begun by a small group of faculty and university men in early 1906. Principal organizers included President Charles Van Hise, Burr Jones, C. S. Slichter, T. E. Brittingham, Reuben Gold Thwaites, W. F. Vilas, and Edward Birge. By early 1906 considerable organization had taken place: \$40,000 had been raised, a site had been purchased and most of the work done in starting the club. In an introductory article founder H. L. Smith refers to: "establishment of the University club which occupied its new house about February 1..."<sup>1</sup>

Articles of incorporation were filed February 20, 1907. This project did not make the amateur mistake of under-capitalization. The amount raised by the club from sale of stock and bonds (\$40,000) was enough to buy and remodel a clubhouse, build and furnish an addition, pay the first year's taxes and expenses, and maintain a modest emergency fund.<sup>2</sup>

The clubhouse they bought was the old family home of John Barber Parkinson at the corner of State and Murray Streets. Parkinson was a member of the university class of 1860, a regent and faculty member. As Parkinson rose to the post of vice-president he purchased, in 1886, a substantial brick house at State and Murray which was large enough for Parkinson, his wife and their eight children. The house had originally been built and owned by John Sterling, the "Father of the University". In 1905 a fire damaged the house badly enough that the Parkinsons decided to move. The



Fig. 2. The University Club between 1912 and 1924. The old Parkinson House center, with the first two additions: the west, 1912 section at the right, and the 1924 dormitory wing to the south, behind the house on the left. [Meuer Photo, M205]

availability of this property was a strong incentive in the formation of the university club. As early as March 1906 plans had been made to take an option on the Parkinson house by the organization. The title to the property did not change hands until April 1907 (for \$18,000) but the club was already in physical possession when they incorporated in February 1907. The club listed the cost of repairs and remodelling of the fire-damaged house as \$6,000. As remodelled the old house contained the reception hall, club room, dining room, card and writing rooms, and the third floor and attic bedrooms and servants quarters. The club planned additions almost immediately. A sketch published in February 1906 shows a large three story brick building very much like the one eventually constructed on the site. Though unsigned it is possible that this initial design was done by university supervising architect Arthur Peabody. Peabody was a member of the club and applied in April of 1907 for the permission of the regents to do architectural work for the club without compensation. The regents granted permission.<sup>3</sup> The earliest blueprints are unsigned. The 1912 and 1924 additions are the work of local architects, Law, Law and Potter, and they are commonly given credit for the original design.<sup>4</sup> From the beginning the plan was to establish the club in the old Parkinson house and expand as needed. Part of the appeal of the Parkinson property was the size of the lot (86 x 132 feet), which provided room for such expansion.

The first addition to the clubhouse was finished by February 1908 [see Fig. 2]. It was a wing of dark brick with concrete floors and a red tile roof (later lost) on the west side of the old house and connected to it. The new three story wing contained a first floor billiard room, a dining room, which extended through from the old house; the second and third floors were laid out for sleeping quarters and studies, and were connected to the old house through fireproof doors. Each floor had a general toilet and shower room. Nineteen sleeping rooms were provided. In the basement there was a "Conversation Room in Medieval style, with brick paved floor, brick fireplace and arched ceiling, stained glass casement windows, where good cheer as well as good will may be enjoyed."<sup>5</sup> Because the old house still presented a fire hazard, the new part had a fire escape that was accessible from both parts

of the club. After the house was removed, this double entry fire escape remained, and is still present in a little opening in the center of the building. The club's first annual statement shows about 340 members, with 15 members living in the rooms at \$3.50 per week.

The club's lodging facility was doing so well in those early years that in 1912 the club purchased Parkinson's remaining lot to the south of the clubhouse and built a dormitory wing on the south end of the west wing. This addition extended the west wing slightly to the south, then turned east and extended behind the old house all the way east to a new entrance at 438 Murray. It was opened in December of 1912, adding 49 dormitory rooms, arranged so that they could be rented singly or as suites of rooms several of which were equipped with private bathrooms. There was a ladies' parlor on the first floor, two dining rooms, and in the basement a "first class barber shop"<sup>6</sup> Preference would be given to club members, but "all persons connected with the university, as instructors, assistants, graduate students, or members of the legislature who have been at any time students at the University will be welcomed as tenants; but tenants who are not club members will be expected to use the independent entrance on Murray Street."<sup>7</sup>

Few records remain from the next twenty years. In 1911 "The directors have decided to open the restaurant to ladies, when accompanied by a member of the Club, for all meals. Special accommodations [including a lounge with separate entrance and maid, and a ladies' reading room] are provided for ladies, and they are not expected to make use of the Club rooms." In 1913 three nonsmoking rooms are reserved and the club reports that about eighty people per week are using the restaurant for luncheon, and that special dinner parties are served almost every evening. This may have been a harbinger of falling membership, as the university grew larger and more impersonal, and the founders died, became emeritus, or lost interest. An interesting note is that during the influenza epidemic of 1918, because the student infirmary was not finished, the University club was used as an infirmary.<sup>8</sup>

In 1924 the club took out a second mortgage for \$25,000 at 6.5% and used the money to build the last section of the proposed clubhouse. This project removed the old Parkinson house, and built the east section which connected to the north side of the 1912 dormitory section of the club and included the front entrance and parlor sections. This construction brought the clubhouse to the current [1993] configuration. But the heyday of the club was over. As the depression deepened, membership fell and the directors had to take extraordinary steps.

Madison, like all cities based on government and/or universities, was slightly insulated from the national catastrophe of the great depression. The records show that in the years from 1927 through 1931 the club ran in the black in all operations. The club made a profit of about 27% per year on income. Then in 1932 the depression arrived. The club lost about 21% on income. All indications were that this was a serious trend. So on April 17, 1933 the club's directors called a special meeting of the University Clubhouse Association at which were represented 328 out of 458 outstanding shares (42%). The stockholders passed by unanimous vote the resolution to transfer title of the university clubhouse property to the university, subject to the indebtedness of the Association.

Of course it was not quite as simple as this. The club wanted several things from the university in return for the gift. Tax-exempt status for the property was worth about \$3,000 per year. The clubhouse would be connected to the heating and utilities of the university. But in order to prevent a recurrence of the declining membership that had made life so precarious for the club, they proposed to president Glenn Frank that the university *could* (if needed) make faculty membership in the club mandatory. Frank appointed a committee of nineteen to investigate the advisability of accepting the club's offer. This committee included W. H. Kiekhofer, Lelia Bascom, Helen C. White and E. B. Fred.

The committee, on April 21, 1933, presented their findings and recommendations to a faculty meeting. They reported that the club property is estimated in value at about \$300,000; that because of membership shrinkage due to the depression, receipts were down to a point that jeopardizes the

life of the club. They go on to argue that the club is worth saving on several grounds and that the only way known to accomplish that is by University ownership.

The recommendations of the committee are first that the university accept title to the university club and that voluntary membership dues be set at 3/4 of 1% of salary per year, and second that if voluntary membership fails to adequately support the club the regents have the permission of the faculty to make membership mandatory under substantially the same terms. With only minor alterations, the resolutions as presented by the committee were adopted by a vote of 162 to 46. The minority sent a petition to the regents asking them to reject the recommendation of the faculty.

When the board of regents met on April 27, 1933 to consider the matter, they moved to accept the arrangement on the terms of the faculty action, but the vote was nine to four against and the motion was lost. The regents then called professor Kiekhofer to speak, and after further discussion another vote was taken and carried. The new arrangement worked well. The removal of the tax and utility burdens and maintenance costs from club membership made financial solvency possible. Membership was reported at 500 with 70 residents in 1935. All barriers against the use or membership in the club by women were eliminated (Helen C. White became club president in 1933). The difficulties remained with the attempts to run a profitable hotel and restaurant. There is no record that the mandatory membership threat was ever carried out.

A sordid affair took place during the war when an English instructor applied for and got, by mail, membership to live at the club. What was not evident until Arthur Burke showed up at the club in October of 1944, was that Arthur Burke was black. The clubhouse committee refused to let Burke complete paperwork for membership. After cries of outrage from campus groups, some national notice from Time Magazine, and a formal vote by club members, Burke was allowed to reapply and the color barrier was eliminated.<sup>9</sup> The 1950s passed without much incident.

In the 1960s talk began to be heard about anachronisms, efficiency and quiet interment. Sentiment and the continuance of useful function continued to protect the club from fans of efficiency, and from those who looked covetously upon the prime real estate occupied by the club. Then in early 1967 the club directors met with the chancellor and proposed another arrangement that would help both sides. The club would receive \$25,000 for needed remodelling (this is probably the point at which the original leaded glass was removed) and the dining rooms would be catered by the Memorial Union kitchens. The University would take over as badly needed office space all the residence rooms in the south wing of the clubhouse and all of the upper floors. The club was allowed to keep all the space on the two lowest levels, the basement and ground floor. The club also obtained permission to serve liquor. Today [1993] the club is running in the black again with about 850 members, with considerably relaxed admission requirements. The club again has its own kitchen and cooks. The old building is still in decent repair, and the old dormitory wing houses student financial aid offices and other university offices.<sup>10</sup>

1) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, February/March 1908 p. 197, March 1906, p. 249.

2) *Daily Cardinal*, February 21, 1907

3) *Regent's Minutes*, April 17, 1907; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, February/March 1908.

4) *Perspectives of A University*, Gordon Orr, et al.

5) Wisconsin State Historical Society Pamphlet collection, Pam 56-4815, Arthur Peabody.

6) Wisconsin State Historical Society Pamphlet collection, Pam 56-4816.

7) Wisconsin State Historical Society Pamphlet collection, Pam 56-4816.

8) Wisconsin State Historical Society Pamphlet collection, F902/8UN.

9) *Cronon and Jenkins: The University of Wisconsin, A History*, pp. 679-80; *The Daily Cardinal*, November 1, 1944, October 24, 1944.

10) Sites to State Building Commission, October 29, 1969, University Club Criteria for Office Use, July 24, 1969, series 24/9/2-1 box 18.