The Great Depression descended heavily upon Michigan. The automotive industry that had propelled the prosperity of the twenties now led the rising unemployment rate. Although only 4.5 million people were unemployed throughout the United States by 1930 (8.9 percent), that number would reach 13 million by 1932.¹ Large industrial cities faced a much higher unemployment rate of almost 50 percent. By 1932, General Motors had laid off around one hundred thousand employees, while Ford had cut almost two-thirds of its workforce.² In 1929, American investments totaled $16.2 billion. By 1932, this number was $800 million.³ Historian William E. Leuchtenberg estimated that by that year, an average of one hundred thousand people in the United States were losing their jobs every week.⁴

In the fall of 1930, resignations trickled into The Players and were the first signs of the greater effect of the Depression on the organization. The Players were loath to lose these men, many of whom were members in good standing who had been actively participating in club life for years. The club quickly took several measures to help accommodate the changing circumstances in member finances. Although the bylaws did not allow the rescinding of dues, one of the first accommodations made was to give those in arrears a season’s grace period to come up with the money. If they could not pay their dues after that time, their resignations would be accepted retroactively. In addition, the board cut dues from $50 to $40 for actives and from $75 to $57.50 for associates (the initiation fee of $100 was not lowered to $50 until 1932),⁵ eliminated the Junior Capers (entertainments for Players’ children), and negotiated with the National Bank of Commerce to lower the mortgage payments.⁶

Even with these measures, resignations soon outpaced applications, but applications still continued to come in, despite the uncer-
tain times. Although many people cut back on expensive leisure activities during the Depression, membership must have been valued as evidenced by the continuing submission of applications. Unfortunately, however, applications numbers were still greatly reduced, and the club could not balance out the rate of resignations and suspensions, severely affecting its ability to pay the bills.

Normally, total unpaid dues might be a few hundred dollars by the end of the season. By March 1931, unpaid dues almost totaled five thousand dollars. In spite of the problems, the club still contributed one acts to a benefit performance given by the Civic Theatre and also to the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment’s benefit at the Masonic Auditorium in January 1932. In addition to contributing to the community and pitching in to keep things running at The Players (discussed later), they maintained the reduced rental fee for charity groups.

As the Depression deepened resignations increased, and the club had to cancel memberships because of nonpayment of dues. Exceptions were not made for those who did not resign willingly, and former mayor of Detroit John C. Lodge was suspended under this policy. This was especially poignant because Lodge was an institution in Detroit politics. The citizens of Detroit loved him so much that he was elected mayor without ever having campaigned for the office.

No one was safe from the repercussions of the Depression, and declining memberships were typical for clubs during its early years. The venerable Detroit Athletic Club (DAC) lost 30 percent of its membership in a single year (roughly one thousand members), although it was back up to full membership by 1936. The DAC had a membership of 2,800 in 1930, down to 1,881 by 1933, but rebounded to 2,800 by 1934. The somewhat smaller Detroit Club took a similar hit. It had grown steadily to a resident membership of 796 in 1929, having recently raised its cap to 800 members. The Detroit Club lost roughly 25 percent of its membership, reaching its lowest point in 1933 with 595 resident members. Its recovery was slower and took well over a decade to regain its pre-Depression numbers.

Those who tried to resign officially from The Players were usually given a grace period of a year or two. If they were still compelled to resign, the board decided that they could be reinstated at a
later date without having to pay the initiation fee. W. Colburn Standish and H. J. Maxwell Grylls, both very active in club activities, tried to resign, but the board refused their resignations.\textsuperscript{15} Walter C. Boynton, one of the founding members, resigned on 25 October 1932, but the board reinstated him with a grace period less than a month later. These men were apparently too important to give up without a fight.

With all of the budget cuts made to maintain membership, The Players could no longer afford a stage crew. \textit{Nunquam Renig} intervened, coveralls were purchased, and Players rolled up their sleeves and crewed their own shows.\textsuperscript{16} The tradition begun of necessity continues to this day. It is interesting that even positions of manual labor are prized as long as they are part of putting on a show at The Players. After World War II, the club returned to a financial position that made it possible to hire stagehands, but it never reverted to the practice of hiring professionals except for an occasional carpenter to help with the sets.

Throughout their history, Players have always been able to laugh at themselves, even when times were difficult. A good example is a brief quotation about an upcoming frolic in the 13 February 1932 edition of \textit{The Player}. The show was \textit{Outside Looking In}, a “tramp play” by Maxwell Anderson adapted from Jim Tully’s \textit{Beggars of Life}:

“Upwards of sixteen actors, so-called, have been busily rehearsing this play ever since they were relieved of more important duties by the crash of ’29. Not that this is important, for gentlemen, this play is directed by Player Vice-President Michael Todd and that means the actors are as nothing compared to the offstage noises.”\textsuperscript{17} The “offstage noises” must have been quite good because the play was repeated not long after the frolic as an invitational so that friends and family could see it (or hear it). The club periodically calls an invitational for an exceptionally well-produced show so that friends and family may attend. This is usually done within a month of the performance. This may be due to interest or to the knowledge that the show would be difficult to produce as part of the May Show.

The addition of a Player crew helped ease the club’s financial difficulties, but production values still had to be cut. Members of the board suggested that shows with few technical requirements be produced, such as vaudeville. One show that fit this bill was \textit{Bardell vs. Pickwick}, an adaptation of Dickens’s \textit{Pickwick Papers}, performed at the April 1933 frolic. It was produced in modern dress, with Players’
wives preparing the food for the frolic instead of having it catered. In addition, each Player attending the frolic was charged a small fee to help defray the cost.\textsuperscript{18}

Even with the problems facing The Players, frolics were produced and business continued to be transacted. In March 1932, the board set about securing the consent of all the contributors to the building fund who were also stockholders in The Players Holding Company. Members quickly gave their consent, and the property was transferred from The Players Holding Company to the club.\textsuperscript{19} Although there are no records of the dissolution of The Players Holding Company after the title was transferred, records from 1926 discuss “liquidating the obligations” of the company, and further discussion in records from 1928 indicate that the company needed to be placed in a “position where it could function properly, or [to] effect a dissolution thereof with an assignment of its rights and assets to The Players.”\textsuperscript{20} As it did transfer its asset (the Players Playhouse) to the club, it can be assumed that the holding company was also dissolved at that time. The club was still in a precarious position, and the banking crisis that hit Michigan early in 1933 did nothing to improve this, as it struggled over the next two years to keep the Playhouse.

By 1935, the board was able to propose ways to keep from defaulting on the mortgage. Players offered several possible changes to the payment schedule to the bank—that the interest on the mortgage be reduced and that this reduction be backdated to May 1933, that payments be made on the interest and not the principal, that any profits garnered from rentals of the Playhouse would be applied to the principal, and that the taxes be kept current. The Guardian Depositors Corporation that held the mortgage readily agreed to these terms, allowing The Players to keep the Players Playhouse.\textsuperscript{21}

The club had abolished honorary membership in 1928, but at the annual meeting in 1933 it instituted a new classification. Although Sam Slade’s tender of resignation never shows up in the minutes, it may have been offered to the board. In a letter that was read at the meeting, Al Weeks suggested to the board that it offer

a new classification of membership, to be known as Life Membership—an honor to be conferred on Players whom the Board of Governors found merited such recognition because of their long and faithful ser-
vice to The Players. This suggestion was put to a motion and carried unanimously, with the amendment that no member under fifty years of age be considered eligible; and that Player Sam Slade be made the first life member. Life membership in The Players is to carry full privileges without dues.22

Player lore says that life membership was instituted specifically to keep Sam in the club, but it developed into a way to reward long-standing members for their years of service to The Players.23 In 1954, the board decided that honorary life membership would be given to a Player who had faithfully served for thirty-five years.24

Like Lodge, though, not every Player was saved from having to cancel his membership. Edsel Ford resigned from The Players in 1933, but this was not the only membership he had to give up. Ford had been hit hard by the bank crisis in Detroit and had been forced to lay off most of his estate employees and to receive help from his father to deal with his shaky position with the banks.25 In all, he resigned from twenty clubs and associations in March 1933, ranging from country and sports clubs to the American Federation of the Arts.26

Other than the introduction of life membership, the other happy note in 1933 was the repeal of Prohibition. The move for repeal was lead by several prominent members of The Players, most notably Henry B. Joy, Emory Clark, and Frederick Alger. Joy and Clark originally had been avid “drys,” but years of open flouting of the law coupled with the possibility of revenue generated by taxes on liquor changed their minds. Joy had an additional reason for despising the enforcement of Prohibition. His Grosse Pointe estate was right on the water, and his boathouse and grounds were frequently raided by police searching for rumrunners. Frequently, rumrunners used the boathouses along Lake St. Clair and the Detroit River for temporary storage as they transported Canadian liquor, and even the posting of guards did not guarantee the safety of one’s property.27

The general dislike of Prohibition ran high. Michigan was the first state to vote for repeal, and the national vote ran close to 73 percent.28 Players celebrated the end of Prohibition with The Cabinet Meeting by Player Al Weeks, depicting Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s first meeting with his cabinet officials. The play ends with FDR demonstrating the New Deal to the “forgotten man” (named simply
A New Deal: Players celebrate the end of Prohibition.
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<sup>a</sup> Suspensions were not recorded until the 1932–33 season.
<sup>b</sup> Reinstatements were not recorded until the 1933–34 season.
<sup>c</sup> Life membership was not established until the end of the 1932–33 season.
<sup>d</sup> Deliquents were not included in the total membership.
“Laborer” in the script) by telling him that not only will there be more jobs, but there will also be 5 percent beer, and to prove it the entire cast (and probably the audience) is served a round.29

The board decreased membership dues again in 1933 to thirty dollars for active members and forty-five dollars for associate members, and The Players had to omit the children’s Christmas show in 1934. By May 1935, Player membership was down to 298 (see table 1).30 As 1935 progressed and some Players were able to get back on their feet and pay their back dues, they were reinstated without having to pay the initiation fee (prior to the Great Depression, the club’s normal practice was to require someone returning to the club after resigning to pay the initiation fee). Despite a slightly better outlook and the ability to deal with the mortgage, the children’s Christmas party was once again canceled in 1935. Although the Depression was still omnipresent (national unemployment was at 20.3 percent), 1935 was the year that saw some happy news for Detroit. Bob-Lo (an island amusement park) resumed operation, and the various Detroit sports teams swept their respective leagues: The Tigers won their first World Series, the Lions won the National Football League championship, and in 1936, the Red Wings won the Stanley Cup.31

The plays produced at The Players reflected a sense that they had weathered the worst, even if they were not yet clear of trouble. Player Sheldon R. Noble’s Portrait of a Man depicted J. B. Hart, president of the Universal Appliance Company, who is about to take his first vacation in years now that he has finally been able to return his company to a sound financial footing. His early lines in the play are clearly representative of the attitudes of those who were responsible for keeping a business open in such times of turmoil:

Things happen, circumstances beyond our control, but given these as the tools to work with, we can mold other developments to our liking. A man likes to talk of his achievements, but today I have reached the conclusion of a phase begun five years ago—and I was broke. In fact most of the world has been broke sometime during the past five years. It’s just a question of who admitted it and who didn’t. I’m still broke but the company is back on its feet. I have finally reached the point where I can open my eyes in the morning and not begin cataloging the grief for the day. It wasn’t much fun eating snowballs and living in a two by four cave dwellers apartment, but it’s paid dividends. Mrs. Hart and I are moving back again to a home instead of a hole in the wall and we’re having a vacation first.32
Regrettably, all is not well with our protagonist, for there are still forces at work trying to take away his fragile stability. For Hart, the problem is in his own house. He discovers that his son has undermined his company’s position by embezzling the company’s stock to use as collateral so that the son can speculate on other stock. This practice was fairly widespread in banks up until the Great Depression. Bankers would use the stock of their own bank in risky investments, thus jeopardizing the savings of those unsuspecting customers who thought their money was safe. Hart’s son tries to justify his actions, but his father is unimpressed and refuses to let his son deny responsibility: “But stealing isn’t a mistake. It’s a basic fault. You can’t confuse the difference between what’s yours and what’s someone else’s you know. Then it’s a question of whether, knowing, you’re strong enough to stand by what you know. … You’re a moral coward.”33 The son later commits suicide rather than face the consequences of his actions, and Hart sets aside his dreams of a vacation and a home of his own to devote himself to once again returning the company to a sound footing.

The overriding tone of the play is that of an honorable, long-suffering man who is cleaning up a mess that is not of his making. He has denied himself and his family many of the basic comforts so that he could do what is right for his company and employees. The sense of betrayal is also profound, made even more so because it is Hart’s son that perpetrates the treachery. This may well have been how many of the Players felt during the Depression, as they struggled to keep their businesses viable.

Notwithstanding the financial problems still facing the club, certain Player traditions (such as the previously mentioned round of beer at the end of *The Cabinet Meeting*) still remained. The Players loved a party, particularly if theatre professionals were involved. Their sense of fellowship encompassed anyone who shared their love of theatre. In March 1935, The Players threw a party for the D’Oyly Carte Opera Company that was passing through Detroit. This British company was formed originally in 1878 by Richard and Helen D’Oyly Carte to produce British comic opera, specifically the works of W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan. The D’Oyly Carte Company owned the performance rights to Gilbert and Sullivan works and was the premiere company for years. When Richard and Helen’s son Rupert took over the company in 1913, he launched a company tour of America. Several successful American tours followed.34 When
the company came to visit The Players, members presented several pieces from Gilbert and Sullivan operettas as entertainment for their professional guests. The company loved the performance and repaid their hosts by performing a few pieces themselves.\textsuperscript{35}

In 1936, The Players produced what was presumably the American premiere of \textit{The Rose of Auvernge or Spoiling the Broth}, an operetta by Jacques Offenbach. The piece was unearthed at the Congressional Library by Player Ray Jacobs, who said that despite some early performances in Paris and London during the 1850s, it had never been published in the United States, and there is no record of it having been produced here.\textsuperscript{36} Even by Player standards, the piece was considered frivolous with an obvious plot, mildly pleasant music, and somewhat strained comedy.\textsuperscript{37} Despite this, it must have been considered good enough for the May Show, as it was the closing act for that performance.

While reviewing the May Show for the \textit{Detroit News}, Cecil Betron waxed poetic about The Players: “There is something so indescribably jolly about a Players’ annual performance that it is equally impossible to refrain from shouting its praises from the chimney tops to a world a bit weary of itself. One could, but one won’t for lack of space, preach a sermon on the Players’ work for civic good. Likewise it seems lamentable that the entire community, man and boy, woman and child, cannot at some time or other have the opportunity to point with as much pardonable pride.”\textsuperscript{38}

Beginning in March 1936, the board began actively trying to recruit ex-Players back into the fold. The board appointed a committee to set up a complementary dinner for the ex-Players that the club wanted to recruit, and the board agreed that any who were interested would be welcomed back without having to pay either the initiation fee or that year’s dues.\textsuperscript{39} By that year’s annual meeting, the membership numbers finally began to increase. Membership rolls showed a total of 322 Players, an increase of 24 over the previous year. The Finance Committee must have felt that people’s fortunes were improving because it recommended that a subscription drive be started to raise enough money to pay down the principal on the mortgage to $25,000 so that it could be refinanced for a longer term. The current terms of the mortgage had it maturing in 1940, and the club was in no condition to have it paid off by that year, although by the following year the club felt secure enough to raise the initiation fee to seventy-five dollars.\textsuperscript{40}
One enduring informal Player tradition of sorts is the revival of past popular shows, often with as many of the original cast members as possible. The January 1937 frolic was an all-revival bill, even down to some of the Afterglow acts. One of these pieces was *Roller Skates Must Be Mended*, a Player original written by Al Weeks for Sam Slade and Edgar Bowen. Bowen had recently passed away, but Slade was able to reprise his original role. This piece is characteristic of The Players’ more dramatic fare:

It’s about an old, broken down harness maker, cheated out of a living by motors, and his attempt to shelter and guard and nourish his ward, a lad too backward to make his way as other boys do. When little Joey is killed by one of the iron devilments that cost him his trade, the old fellow has nothing to live for. Even the affection of his friend Louis scarcely seems a sufficient incentive—but a pair of roller skates must be mended for a cranky customer’s little boy, and the closing picture is one to make you fog your cheaters, with Onkel Heinrich (Slade) priming the pumps.\(^4\)
There is a certain amount of nostalgia at The Players for times gone by. This feeds directly into their love of traditions and formality. The story of how *Roller Skates* came into being is indicative of the soft spot Players have for the past:

Many years ago Player Al Weeks, a writer of recognized ability, and a fine actor as well, got an idea for a play while waiting for a streetcar. This was before the horse became extinct as a beast of burden and horses, being the motive power for many vehicles, required harness. It was, therefore, not unusual to find at least one harness shop in every community. It was in such a shop that Weeks, as he stood gazing through the window, saw a harness-maker busily at work. This craftsman was sitting astride a buck used to facilitate the sewing of leather; a most fascinating apparatus. It had stirrups much like a saddle except they were connected to a wooden vise. Pressure exerted on the stirrups caused the vise to close tightly on the harness to be sewn. The body of the buck was covered with leather and had a high polish from constant use. It was not unlike the common gymnasium buck except for the stirrups and the vise at its head.42

Because this show was a popular one and showed regularly, Weeks had to convince the old harness maker to loan this piece of equipment on more than one occasion. It appears that a few tickets to the May Show were considered a fair trade, and The Players got the buck.43

D'Oyly Carte was once again in town in 1937, this time for a performance of *H.M.S. Pinafore* at the Cass Theatre. The Players threw another party for the company, but this time the members of D'Oyly Carte were treated to a full-blown Player production of *The Book of Etiquette*, by Mark Connelly. In the announcement, the Players call the piece a “marine masterpiece,” obviously a play on the maritime theme of *Pinafore*.44 What no one outside of The Players realized was that this was an example of American humor at the expense of their British guests. The protagonist of *Etiquette* is a “distressed American” among a group of Brits who is trying to find a discrete way to ask directions to the nearest lavatory.45 Luckily, the visiting performers found it hilarious and once again sang for their supper.

This was typical of the humor displayed by the Players through their creative work. The late 1930s and early 1940s saw the introduction of a new playwriting team, Sheldon Noble and Ray Jacobs. By day, Noble was the president of an investment securities
firm, H. W. Noble and Co., Inc., and Jacobs was the vice-president of the First National Bank of Detroit. By night, Noble and Jacobs were known to the club as the resident Gilbert and Sullivan. This was the first time since Weeks and Holliday that The Players had a musical comedy team. Together, they wrote several pieces: *All Aboard*, *Men Working*, *It's a Buoy*, and *Who, Me?* These shows had been made possible not only by their writing but also by the introduction of an all-Player orchestra. An orchestra had been a common feature at the frolics since the beginning of the 1920s, when many of the orchestra members had been hired from the outside, much like the backstage crew. With the budget cuts of the Great Depression, however, Players stepped into the breach left by the necessity of having to let go most of the regular outside help, and by the 1940s they had assembled an impressive all-member orchestra that accompanied most of the frolics.

In *Men Working*, produced in 1937, Noble and Jacobs explore the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) means of creating jobs in a uniquely Player way. The play is set in an older gentlemen’s home, with a WPA project being built next to it—a nudist camp. Following the tradition of the situation comedy, putting together
two very different devices sets the stage for humorous situations. The main plot actually involves a romance between a maid at the gentlemen’s home and a police officer sent to shut down the nudist camp by outraged members of the town. (The older gentlemen have no problem with their new, pretty neighbors.) The play ends with the couple marrying (they call it consolidating), and the idea of consolidation is received so enthusiastically that the home decides to amalgamate itself with the camp next door, becoming a single WPA project: “The Home for Aged Nudists.”

As the 1930s waned, The Players slowly pulled out of its slump. Membership numbers continued to increase, and the club was able to hold the children’s Christmas party for the first time in several years, with a morning performance for the orphans and an afternoon performance for the children of the Players. That same year, membership was further stabilized by making William G. Lerchen (who had been one of the ten signers of the note on the Playhouse), C. Hayward Murphy, and founder Frederick S. Stearns life members. There were still occasional resignations due to inability to pay dues, but these were sporadic and nowhere near the exodus of 1931–33. New members were also being elected in larger numbers (sixteen were elected in November 1937 alone). Another sign of vitality was the January 1938 article in Life magazine that included a two-page photo spread on The Players’ 150th frolic. Neither The Player nor the minutes record how the club warranted the national attention garnered by this article. It is possible that Players such as McKee who worked in publishing in New York and others who had moved out to New York to work in advertising and other fields knew someone who worked at Life. The Scarab Club had been featured in an article in 1937, so there may very well have been some sort of Detroit-New York connection.

Sam Slade celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday in February 1938. In recognition of the occasion, he was asked to present the Gettysburg Address at the February frolic. Abraham Lincoln was by far the most famous role that he performed at The Players. Slade had first performed the role in 1927, and he had given repeat performances on a regular basis. Hirschfield’s makeup was so effective that a portrait was taken of Slade and published in the Detroit News. A print of the portrait is located in The Players’ archives.

The frequency with which Sam Slade was singled out for various honors by The Players confirms his popularity at the club.
Player Henry T. Ewald presented to the club a portrait of Slade painted by Player John S. Coppin in 1940. Later Player lore claims that it was Slade who actually commissioned this portrait and presented it to the club. Coppin had also provided a nude to the club, which hung above the bar (a tradition in many Detroit clubs, including the Detroit Athletic Club). Slade’s portrait not only memorializes one of the most beloved Players but also boasts an interesting history. It, along with what was probably the Nastfrogel nude (a replacement for the Coppin nude that went missing in the 1960s), was stolen from the Players Playhouse during August 1976 (not by an adoring fan), only to turn up much later in the windows of Edward Hickey’s art emporium on East Grand Boulevard and Gratiot Avenue. Although the portrait displayed in the window was identified as the industrialist C. S. Mott, one of the Players recognized Sam. He notified the police, they succeeded in tracing the nude, and both were returned to their rightful places in the Playhouse.

By 1940, trouble was stirring in Europe once again, and the Players’ stage reflected the unrest. Despite the fact that Hitler had already invaded Poland, he is still painted mostly as a figure of fun in a contemporary piece by Sheldon Noble, What the Heil, performed at the January 1940 frolic. Player Harry W. Kerr described the show in an article in The Player:

“What the Heil,” which to begin with snapped with Player Noble’s best dialogue disclosed Players Granse as Der Fuehrer and Forsyth as Goering, who get their heads together in the hall at the Berchtesgaden to work out some more effective plan of chastising the hated English. Nothing seems to be going right. Granse, very Fuehrer, with mustache and Teutonic gutterals, and Forsyth, resplendent in several changes of swank uniforms with enough medals to cover even his expansive front, advance with very witty and well-delivered lines through the various difficulties to a conclusion. Where can they get some help from someone who knows the English “backwards undt forwards?” By some sort of witchcraft known only to Fuehrers, Alexandrina Victoria (Player Hayward S. Thompson), once a visiting Queen of England but really citizen of Saxe-Coburg Gotha, is conjured from her grave and a lively old body she is. She takes command of the situation and evolves a plan to bombard the hungry English with frankfurthers and sauerkraut. Dot’s it. Ve vill do it. And they all sing an amusing song with excellent music by Player Jacobs.
Strangely enough, this was performed on a bill with Eugene O’Neill’s *Ah, Wilderness*.

War was once again encroaching on the serenity of The Players. Unlike during World War I, during this time war plays were frequent and welcomed by the membership. Even though the United States was not yet in the war, Americans definitely knew which side they wanted to win. Player Alan H. Pearson wrote a play for the March 1940 frolic called *Tonight’s the Night*. Unlike the spoof, *What the Heil*, the mood of this piece was a little more menacing, with a German spy taking over an English lighthouse as a means to aid German submarines. In the play, the lighthouse keeper’s son discovers the plot and kills the spy.57

This thriller was on the same bill as a rather large Player-written musical most likely inspired (with a twist) by *Anything Goes*. The musical comedy, *All Aboard*, had music by Ray Jacobs, lyrics by Sheldon Noble (of *What the Heil* fame), and book by Franklin M. Reck and Albert D. Conkey. The show is set in Union Station where several members of the Potwhistle family are trying to surreptitiously meet up with significant others that they are hiding from the rest of
the Potwhistle clan. With the help of the man at the information desk, young loves are brought together, marriages are mended, and everyone makes it to the train on time. The show was quite large by Players’ standards, with a cast of twenty-one and a music director. This was a lot of effort for a show that was intended for a single performance, but it was a rousing success and returned as the final number of the 1940 May Show.

Aside from their many shows that dealt with war issues, the Players were already being asked to contribute to the war effort before the United States officially entered the global conflict. The British War Relief Society asked that The Players contribute one play to their benefit performance in February 1941 at the Scottish Rite Cathedral in the Masonic Temple. The Players try to avoid benefit performances (it is supposedly against a long-standing club policy, but they violate it frequently in times of great need), but they agreed in this case. The Theatre Arts Club was also asked to help, and The Players donated the use of the Playhouse for their rehearsals.

Although the war added an unhappy note to the proceedings, the 1940–41 season marked the thirtieth anniversary of The Players. The club had been unable to celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1935 due to the effects of the Great Depression. One of the ways they marked the thirtieth anniversary was to include articles on snippets of The Players’ early history in The Player. These articles are invaluable now, because they preserve several events in the words of the members who participated in them. Founder Alexander K. Gage reminisced about the years leading up to the club’s beginnings with Guy Brewster Cady. James Strasburg described The Players’ association with bootleggers during Prohibition. Strasburg also recorded Grylls’s and Kapp’s contributions to building the Players Playhouse.

February brought both Presidents’ Day and Sam Slade’s performance as Lincoln at The Players. Since his first appearance as the revered president, the Gettysburg address or a play involving Lincoln had become standard February fare. This year the board memorialized the moment permanently and secured the rights from Samuel French to record the final act of Nor Long Remember, which featured Slade as Lincoln performing the Gettysburg address. Player Frank V. Martin recalled the experience for The Player: “As Sam Slade arose to deliver Lincoln’s immortal Gettysburg speech you could have heard a pin drop. He delivered that eloquent address with a spiritual
understanding that is part of his character. Sam seems the perfect reincarnation of Lincoln. He does not appear to be speaking Lincoln’s words, but rather his own. Sam has the same spiritual understanding of men, the same charitable viewpoint, the same tolerance of all. To The Players Sam Slade is Lincoln and Lincoln is Sam.\textsuperscript{76,65}

As to Slade as a person, Martin had an even stronger sentiment: “I’ve always maintained that if a guy wanted to commit suicide he could dispense with the purchase of a gun or any other lethal device, and simply stroll into the Playhouse on the night of our Frolic and say something derogatory of Sam Slade. Of course the said guy would be a somewhat messy corpse, but a thoroughly dead one.”\textsuperscript{66}

From that high point, 1941 began to go downhill. On Easter Sunday, 13 April 1941, C. Hayward Murphy, a past president, the person that made all the backstage magic work at The Players and the man who had given so much time and effort to the continuation of The Players, died.\textsuperscript{67} Russell Legge, longtime recorder of Player events, also died that year. Player George W. Stark recorded his contributions in the November 1941 edition of The Player:

Russ became a Player in 1920 and his great contributions to this club, outside of his never-failing presence in his first-row chair on the evening of every Frolic, was the series of sketches he made of plays and Players. In this capacity his fancy has captured the face and form of more Detroit men of affairs than any other artist. That he did this with such accuracy and grace was the constant amazement of his subjects.

Not many knew that in the last years of his life he worked with a handicap that would have stopped most men. He was blind in one eye and he saw out of the other only by placing a magnifying glass over the powerful lens of his eye-glasses.

His newspaper friends say that he drew pictures in shorthand. That is to say, he took notes, employing a dot, dash and line system all his own. He depended on these and on his own amazing memory for detail. What emerged on his drawing board was a constant source of wonderment.\textsuperscript{68}

In addition to these losses to The Players, America’s involvement in the war was impending. The board passed a resolution in June that anyone in military service whose duties took him from Detroit did not have to pay dues during his absence.\textsuperscript{69} The board made another change that year to the bylaws allowing everyone but
nonresident members a vote. These changes may have been made to keep associate numbers from dropping further. Their ranks had plummeted throughout the season, and for the first time in the club’s records, actives (158) outnumbered associates (138). Club numbers were also down in general. The rolls record only 363 Players in May 1941.

December witnessed the attack on Pearl Harbor, and America was catapulted into the war. Player Harry Mitchell recorded the event in *The Player* with some particularly nationalist and very prophetic words:

> While we quipped and quaffed and had fun generally at the 173rd Frolic on the night of December 6 the Japs were sneaking up on Pearl Harbor and Manila to strike the first blow with planes and bombs.

> The toothy little gangsters struck treacherously and hard. They don’t like us because we have in this country everything they and their fellow gangsters would sell their souls to have. We have a way of life they don’t even understand. We get what we want by working for it. They’re trying to get what they want by ganging up and stabbing others in the back.

> In the first coup they seemed daring and clever, but they’re scared and desperate. They’ve picked a scrap that will bust them three ways across the middle.70

Once again the country was at war, and The Players felt the need to remind people that there was a place for the club even in trying times. Franklin M. Reck dug through the records to find that it had been business as usual for The Players during the First World War and decided that it should be the same during the Second World War:

> And as men work harder they play harder, too, because private worries go by the board, men are better able to forget everything for a few hours, and have a good time.

> And maybe that’s the safety valve in times like these. That, we suspect, is what happened in the last war. Men gathered on Players’ night and forgot things more completely, laughed harder, and relaxed more thoroughly than ever before. So now we’re engaged in another war, and The Players will become more rich and meaningful to the men who come here, one Saturday night a month, to refresh their spirit in our cockeyed, highly original, somewhat insane form of amateur dramatics.

> So here’s a toast in foaming Bock to Players’ health in the second World War.71
Yet again, *Nunquam Renig* interceded, and The Players pulled together, cut costs, and volunteered to keep the club going. Several of the Players donated gifts, entertainment, and time to make sure that the children’s Christmas party was special that year. The House Committee that ran the party found ways to cut costs in half, which meant more work for them, but happy children. All food and gifts that were left over were sent to the participating orphanages. Player W. Colburn (Olie) Standish was head of this committee and was praised for his efforts. Olie ran the House Committee that had served the late-night supper at the frolics for years. He was best known as the unofficial Players bartender. He would spend most of the frolic night behind the bar in the lobby dressed as an 1890s bartender complete with sleeve garters and handlebar mustache. By day, Olie was an executive at Walker and Co., an outdoor advertising firm.

May 1942 saw numbers at The Players drop further to 334 members. One accommodation had already been made to try to stop this descent: in May 1941, the board had changed the terms of associate membership to allow them to participate in whatever club activities they so chose, but would not force them to do anything. Even if they participated in club activities, they could still retain the title of associate if they wished, but the board could recommend a transfer if their contribution warranted it. Despite these changes, including the modification in 1941 that allowed associates a vote on club activities, associate numbers still continued to drop. In desperation, the board took two additional steps to keep the club numbers up. For the upcoming season, the board decided that any former member could be reinstated by paying a small fee of fifteen dollars, and the initiation fee was lowered from seventy-five dollars to twenty-five dollars for that season to encourage recruitment. Declining numbers were not the only unhappy note that year. Founder H. J. Maxwell Grylls, whose business had built the Players Playhouse, died 21 June 1942.

With the war on, The Players made accommodations in order to adapt the life of the club to a different social climate. The club purchased war damage insurance to cover the Playhouse, and they made the building available gratis to the United Service Organization (USO) for rehearsals. In addition, the board instituted a new class of membership for the duration of the war. Temporary membership was created for “temporary residents of Detroit serving in
the Armed Forces or in other departments of the Government. Such members to be exempt from the payment of initiation fees.” Only a few men appear to have taken advantage of this new class of membership, so it had minimal impact on the club. Also during this time one Player tradition was temporarily suspended. Conspicuous consumption was frowned upon during the war, so Players were allowed to come to the frolics in business suits. Although many thought that tradition was more important, the change was accepted with little grumbling.

For the November frolic the board made another major concession by allowing the performance to be repeated for the benefit of the USO and other war charities. Furthermore, The Players broke with its long-standing tradition and made this a public performance to which tickets were sold. Mary Ellen Menard, a reporter for the *Detroit Free Press*, was impressed with the size of the audience: “Perhaps the fact that proceeds from the show are to be turned over to various war charities had something to do with the tremendous turnout, and we’re sure that Detroit’s ever-growing war consciousness was a direct cause for the lack of dressiness on the part of the ladies.” The show was an abridged version of John Osborn’s *On Borrowed Time* and featured Player Bill Elliot and young Sandy Forsyth, Player Richard Forsyth’s son. The elder Forsyth directed the piece. Sandy Forsyth garnered rave reviews, and even his parents were surprised at his “sheer talent.”

In November 1942, a severe blow was dealt to The Players when Sam Slade died. At his funeral, all of the club members were named honorary pallbearers and six Players performed this last service for him. At the December frolic, Slade was singled out for his final honor. The Barrymore dressing room was renamed “Slade,” and it remains so to this day.

By May 1943, Player numbers had once again increased, bringing the number to 377 members: 35 new active and 45 new associate members had been added. By May 1944, the membership at The Players was once again over the 400 mark. The club was slowly paying down its mortgage, and it had more than two thousand dollars cash on hand. By February 1945, the board felt confident enough to increase the initiation fee to fifty dollars, still twenty-five dollars less than it was before the war.

The summer of 1944 witnessed an interesting event in Player history. After the former office secretary left the position, the board
hired Leona Carroll to replace her. Lee, as she was known, was to mark a new Player tradition. She worked for The Players until her retirement in 1991. At her retirement, a special frolic was held to commemorate the event. Thus Lee is the only woman to ever be invited to attend one of the Players’ noninvitational frolics.

The Players continued to produce war-related plays during World War II. The war even crept into the Afterglows, when troops from the Romulus Air Base performed *These Doggoned Elections* in addition to several musical numbers. War references also showed up in other manifestations. In one instance, a reviewer felt the need to explain what a maid was to the more youthful Players. “For the benefit of our younger readers, we will state that a maid is a type of domestic servant that used to be fairly plentiful before war plants began to pay women better than a dollar an hour but now has entirely disappeared.” Another indication was a curfew that had been instituted because of the war. As a result, the March 1945 frolic was probably the shortest in The Players’ history. March also saw the passing of Founder Alexander K. Gage.

During the 1944–45 season, the board began actively soliciting contributions to the mortgage fund to pay off The Players’ debt. By 24 January 1945, $10,020 had been contributed toward the mortgage fund. In less than a year, The Players had raised almost $18,000 to pay off the mortgage. By the following May, after the new board had been elected at the annual meeting, Player Harvey Campbell climbed onstage with a rod, stuck the mortgage on it, and Player Dick Harfst (the man with the unhappy task of soliciting the money for the mortgage) lit a match and burned it. The ashes now lie in the stage right Winningham vase.

What is particularly striking about this period, from the onset of the Depression until the end of World War II, is that it was business as usual. Despite the social and economic upheaval of these two wide-reaching international events, the club continued to function in much the same way that it had since its early years. All of the frolics were held, even if some were performed on a shoestring and others ended early because of curfews. New members were joining even as the board struggled to pay the bills and to retain the club’s many treasured older members. In addition, some changes had to be made to accommodate the pressures of the time, such as providing the crew for their own shows during the Depression and setting aside
the beloved tuxedo when such displays of wealth were considered improper during World War II.

One of the most interesting departures from tradition is the amount of community service activities The Players engaged in as an institution during this time, even though they repeatedly claim (and reaffirm) that the club has a policy against participating in charity events. The charitable works may be just a reflection of the national attitude during these years that everyone had to pull together and do their part, superseding any minor long-standing club practice. The Players went so far as to go against its commitment to amateur theatre to open its doors to a paying audience to raise money for war charities. *Nunquam Renig* had always ruled at the club in times of crisis; it was now just being expanded outside exclusive Player benefit.

As with the rest of the nation, the conclusion of World War II thrust The Players out of its economic crisis and commenced an era of prosperity. The Players began the new season in 1945 with an incredible sense of stability, both financially and socially. The hard times were over, and The Players was about to enter its second golden age.