2. The Strolling Players: The Early Years, 1910–1929

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The idea of forming a theatrical club in Detroit developed over several years. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the coed Comedy Club had produced theatrical works, but it disbanded in 1903 due to lack of interest and participation. In 1906, the Fine Arts Society was formed “to bring together professional and amateur lovers of the Arts,” picking up the theatrical torch by including plays in its arts-related club activities. In addition, other Detroit social clubs such as the University Club and the Detroit Boat Club presented skits or plays by and for their members.

The Players was the brainchild of Guy Brewster Cady, who started out in the wholesale grocery business and then moved into designing advertising displays for windows and counters. In a brief history on the founding of the club, he revealed that the “idea of a Dramatic Club for gentlemen only” had been on his mind for years. Alexander K. Gage described the meeting, in the fall of 1909, at which Cady approached him with the idea for a new club:

I was visiting Guy Brewster Cady in his “Emporium of Nick Nacks” on Library Avenue, just off John R Street, one afternoon and he broached the idea of an organization like the old Comedy Club in which we both had been active; but with a membership of men—and no women. The Fine Arts Society with its membership, composed of ladies and gentlemen, was doing a fine job dramatically as well as musically. It had taken over much of the interest of many of the more active members of the Comedy Club.

But it seemed that there was room for a Club of men. There were a number of similar organizations in other cities. One or the other of us was more or less familiar with several: The Lambs, The Hermits, The Bohemian Club, and also the Sock and Buskin, the Hasty Pudding, the Jesters and the Mask and Wig among the Colleges and Universities.
Alexander agreed, and it took a little more than a year for Cady to finalize the idea.

The club was born on the evening of 10 December 1910, in Richter’s, a German restaurant on State Street just west of Woodward Avenue in Detroit. According to Player William B. Gregory, Richter’s was “a sterling pre-prohibition emporium for the dispensing of liquid cheer.” It was the “haunt of the actresses and actors from the old Garrick Theatre—favorite hangout for the staff of the Detroit News.”

Cady invited several men that he thought would be interested in a new club, but of the twelve invited, only four were in attendance. Besides Cady and Gage, H. J. Maxwell Grylls, Leonard R. Carley, and William W. Talman were in attendance that night. A second meeting was held eleven days later where Charles P. Larned, Kirkland B. Alexander, and Frederick S. Stearns joined. They discussed writing the club’s constitution, and Larned, Carley, and Cady were assigned to write the first draft. By 4 January 1911 two more men had joined in the proceedings, Walter C. Boynton and Ernest S. Witbeck, thus providing the necessary ten charter members to form the club. The attending members made some small changes to the drafted constitution, and on 11 January 1911, at the University Club of Detroit, the ten charter members read and accepted the revised constitution and signed the Articles of Association. Three days later, they set about the business of the club, electing officers (Larned was the first president), setting up committees, and looking for a place to meet. According to the Articles of Association, the purpose of The Players was “for the encouragement and development of amateur dramatic talent and for the presentation of stage entertainments.”

Membership was originally divided into three categories: active, associate, and nonresident. The initiation fee was fifteen dollars and the yearly dues were ten dollars, although associate dues were raised to fifteen dollars in 1914. In 1913, honorary members were added for the same fifteen-dollar initiation fee and yearly dues of fifteen dollars. Although the minutes record “an evening of vaudeville [during which] each and every member had some little ‘stunt’ to do” in May 1911, the first official “frolic,” as their performances were soon named, was held at the Twentieth Century Club on 26 October 1911. It was a vaudeville piece (basically a collection of variety acts) probably because it was the easiest genre of theatre to produce with little rehearsal and no set. It is interesting to note that the Twentieth Century Club was a women’s social club, whose “Drama Coterie”
had become active enough that the club had decided to build its own theatre.\textsuperscript{11}

The Players soon built upon this foundation, and the next month’s entertainment consisted of “a playlet, some music by about eight of the Players, and a sketch by three members in a Dutch dialect” to be held at the University Club.\textsuperscript{12} In the early years of the club, the board typically decided on the plays the club performed and who would be cast in them. By 1916, this had become a somewhat unwieldy task, and the board established a Plays Committee (later called the Script Committee) to read and recommend scripts to the board, who would then choose which scripts and in what order they would be performed, although casting still fell to the board.\textsuperscript{13} This arrangement stood until 1953, when the committee became “Script and Casting,” which has remained the major body through which plays and casts are chosen.\textsuperscript{14}

Initially, frolics were limited to members only. Upon later discussion, the performers voiced their desire to perform to a moderately sized crowd. Because The Players had only twenty-seven members at the time, the board of governors allowed invited guests to the December frolic.\textsuperscript{15} Not long after this performance, the club discussed the idea of public performances, or at least the possibility of one in April.\textsuperscript{16} This was the first mention of the Spring Invitational, soon to become the traditional—and for many years the only—public performance of The Players’ best work. As the members wanted to put on the best show possible, they decided that the April performance should consist of three one-act plays, each of which would be performed separately at the January, February, and March frolics as a kind of dress rehearsal that allowed for suggestions and criticism from the other Players.\textsuperscript{17}

The precedent for the composition of the May Show (officially known as the Spring Invitational, but seldom called that by the members) was set later by the 1914–15 board. When that board debated the possible content, Player Walter C. Boynton hit upon a solution that was roundly accepted. The board had tossed around the idea of performing a musical of some kind, but Boynton told them to “give up the idea of a musical opera and give a performance made up of the best of the monthly shows of that season at the public performance.”\textsuperscript{18} This allowed the club to maintain its private nature, but held out the possibility that if the show was good, family and friends would still get to see it in May. A 1917 copy of The Player
(the Club’s newsletter) finally settled the objective of the May Show: “Beyond being an anniversary affair, [it] should be to give our friends an idea of the sort of entertainment we indulge in at our regular stag performances.” What was left unsaid, but can be inferred with a fair amount of certainty, is that it was also an opportunity for Players to prove to their wives and other loved ones that they really were telling the truth about what occurred at the monthly frolics.

The first time the possibility of a public performance was discussed, the question of getting women to take the female roles was raised, but no definitive action was taken. Because their club was founded as an exclusively male society, to admit women into their main social activity would have fundamentally altered the nature of the club. There were other less exclusive opportunities for theatre experiences and a variety of gender mixes. The Fine Arts Society provided an outlet for men and women to produce theatre, and an all-female social club, Theatre Arts, had also formed in 1910 to produce drama. Many of the early members of the Theatre Arts Club were wives or daughters of Players and were also members of the Fine Arts Society. One of the Theatre Arts Club’s founding members, Lillie Whitney Larned, was married to Charles P. Larned, one of the founding Players. According to Alice Tarbell Crathern’s book that chronicles the contributions of women to Detroit, Lillie’s brothers “owned and ran the Whitney Opera House, so she came naturally by her interest in the theatre.” All-male societies were the norm in club life, but the Fine Arts Society and the Theatre Arts Club provided other types of companionship combined with theatre.

The Players functioned like most private clubs. As was standard, new members had to be proposed by current members, and for many years, a single blackball could keep a prospective member out of the club. Guests had to be invited by the board of governors and would be turned away at the door if the Players inviting them had not forewarned the board. Thus the exclusive nature of the club made it possible for a select group of men with a common purpose to socialize in comfort: the members of The Players could feel free to drink beer, watch a show, and relax among their friends.

Unfortunately, interest in the club appears to have dropped off shortly after the minutes entry discussing the possibility of a Spring Invitational in February 1912, and there are no more minutes until January 1913. Because the minutes were religiously kept from the beginning in 1910, and were again kept faithfully after this ten-
month gap until 1981, it is relatively safe to assume that there were problems that interfered with Player activities. In addition, the first minutes that resume in 1913 note that it was necessary to “revivify” the club. These minutes record “[a barn-storming] party that the Players offered their friends … at the Century Building. [Following the party] most of the members of the Club, having the welfare of the Club at heart, met at the University Club. After a discussion relative to the present condition of the Club it was suggested that a new Board of Governors be elected who should devote their energies to the revivifying of the society.” This appeared to work, as the club has not lapsed since.

That year, the board made several decisions about how The Players would be run and whether it would be a truly amateur organization. The first major Player invitational occurred on 11 April 1913 at the Garden Theatre in Detroit for one of its first big successes, *Hairlooms*. *Hairlooms* was a musical comedy, with music written by Player Willard S. Hill and libretto by Players Horace B. Peabody and Kirkland B. Alexander. “The plot, what there was of it, dealt with the travels of an American millionaire who fell into the hands of a pair of scheming Spaniards who feel entitled to some of his money, but this, of course, was lost sight of completely upon any excuse whatever.” The unidentified author of the *Detroit News* article reviewing the production seemed almost surprised at how well the show was put together. “It was anything but amateurish as a production, however. There was a catchy swing to the music and abundant cleverness in the lines, the settings were thoroughly adequate, and above all, the entire company showed careful training and real talent.”

This show not only proved that the members of The Players could put on a successful show but also displayed some of their sense of humor. In the section of the program normally reserved for acknowledgments, The Players listed an aside:

> We desire to thank the management of the Garden Theatre for risking the play house in our hands. Consequently we request the audience to postpone any retaliatory measures until we’re out of the theatre.

> We desire to thank the Police Commissioner for charitable forbearance.

> For certain essential but indefinable portions of the costumerie, we desire to thank certain ladies who, at this moment, being members of
the audience, are viewing the maltreatment of their raiment with logical 
misgivings.
Most of all, we desire to thank the audience for its optimism and self 
control. This perhaps is premature. But we’ll take a chance.25

It is worth noting that The Players’ crest is a comedy mask, and its 
ancestry is rooted in the Comedy Club. Members of The Players 
want to enjoy themselves, and although they work hard, they refuse 
to take themselves too seriously.

The successful Hairlooms production prompted discussion of 
a public performance for a paying audience, and a general meeting 
of all those of active membership status was called in April 1913 to 
discuss the matter: “It was the sense of the meeting that any perfor-
mances in the future, given by THE PLAYERS should not be given for 
any money consideration. It was argued that such a policy would put 
the club on a unique basis and keep it free from the charge that there 
was any professionalism about the Organization. It would mean that 
the performances would be given solely for the enjoyment of the 
invited guests of the Club Members.”26

The next board meeting settled this position by voting unan-
imously that “it be the future policy of THE PLAYERS that all perfor-
mances be by invitations only—that no tickets to performances be 
sold.”27 The board decided at the same time that there would be one 
big performance every year in the spring, though the minutes do 
not specifically say that this performance would be open to invited 
guests. The minutes record that a “Frolic or Stunt Night” was held 
for a few invited guests in May 1913, but no record of what was per-
formed remains.

This refusal to open Player performances to the public clearly 
illustrates the nature of the club. Admitting the public would have 
changed the feel of the occasion for the members in the audience and 
for those onstage. When the audience is composed solely of Players, 
it is a very intimate and convivial atmosphere. Even if something 
goes wrong onstage, it is often just part of the fun to see how the 
performers will get out of the bind. Jokes often take on a special sig-
nificance due to the shared history that exists between the perform-
ers and the audience. In essence, everyone is an insider; no one is 
excluded from any of the meanings in any of the performances. The 
pressure of a paying public audience would have detracted from the 
social nature of the club. It did not wish to be a community theatre 
but rather a gentleman’s club.
Although there have always been a handful of members who have worked professionally in the entertainment industry, few of the rest of the membership have any training or experience. Some members merely enjoyed watching theatre and preferred to be audience members. The categories of active and associate membership had been created to accommodate just such a division. Associates would pay higher dues and provide the audience while actives would pay lower dues and provide the labor for the shows. At first, all members were active; no associates show up in the minutes until 1913.\textsuperscript{28} The actives’ efforts in producing the club’s entertainments made up the monetary difference between the two categories, and this division was not unusual among other private theatrical clubs.\textsuperscript{29} Although every member enjoyed good theatre, not everyone was the most accomplished artist. By removing the possibility of a non-Player audience except for only the most polished performances, ardent amateurs whose enthusiasm may have outweighed ability had a chance to participate in something they enjoyed for an understanding audience.

Although The Players is devoted to remaining an amateur organization, it does not take participation in plays lightly. For many years, when the board of governors chose plays for the frolics and cast them, they did so frolic by frolic, even after the Script Committee was established. It would be decades before the Script and Casting Committee chose the entire season ahead of time. Even when membership numbers were low in the early years, failure to accept an assignment without a suitable explanation in writing would lead to an immediate transfer to associate status.\textsuperscript{30} Because the active status members participated in the production of plays and committees, they held the only vote on club matters. Associates provided the audience but had no official vote. This system was, however, altered to allow associates to vote in 1941.

This insistence on participation is reflected in the club motto, \textit{Nunquam Renig}, which has been translated \textit{very} roughly by Al Weeks as “None Shall Refuse”\textsuperscript{31} and by others as “Never Refuse,” although “Never Renig” is a closer translation. The motto is normally invoked whenever there is a job that needs to be done or a crisis that needs to be solved. Its exact origins are unclear, but it became part of The Players very early and was incorporated into The Player crest by Edgar Bowen. The best explanation of the motto appears in the 26 January 1952 edition of \textit{The Player}. W. E. Kapp wrote a brief synop-
sis of the early history of The Players and provides the following insight (the slightly inaccurate quote from Al Weeks is from the introduction to *The Players Book of One Act Plays* published in 1928):

These Founder Players at the very beginning made The Players not just another dramatic society with serious slogans—“The Play’s the Thing”—“The Show must go on,” but a group with a motto “Numquam *sic* Renig” on which we quote Player Al Weeks—“It has been pointed out that the motto of the club is not the best Latin. It is not intended to be even bad Latin. The Players does not pretend to teach or elevate anybody. Its sole object is to entertain. And so its motto is a combination of Latin and American slang, thereby removing any suspicion that it is a little group of serious thinkers.”

The Players was only one of many clubs and social activities that demanded a member’s attention. It was typical at the time to belong to several clubs that catered to various needs, whether they were social or business, so it was not unusual that many of the members were both supporters of the arts and members of the other organizations devoted to the arts in Detroit. In addition, membership in the more exclusive clubs (such as the Yondotega, the Detroit Athletic Club, and the Detroit Club) raised one’s social status and allowed one to meet the “right” people. The rapid development of the auto industry in Detroit had made several men millionaires and raised the profile of the city in general, but this created a situation in which new money wanted to be accepted by old money. Membership in the right clubs helped this transition, but so did supporting the pet cultural and charitable institutions of the old elite.

Supporting cultural and charitable institutions was particularly critical in Detroit in the early twentieth century. Except for the Detroit Museum of Art (established in 1888), all of the major cultural and civic institutions were formed between 1905, when the Detroit Orchestral Association was founded to bring orchestras to the city, and 1928, when the Detroit Historical Museum, the Henry Ford Museum, Greenfield Village, and the Detroit Zoo all opened. During the twenty-three-year interim, the Detroit Public Library and the Detroit Museum of Art both gained new homes, a cultural center was developed, and a symphony orchestra was established along with a hall in which it could perform. Donald Finlay Davis’s book on the auto industry and elites in Detroit, *Conspicuous Producer-*
tion: Automobiles and Elites in Detroit, 1899–1933, describes how new money could buy its way into the upper class by donating the capital necessary to build these cultural institutions (Horace Dodge literally bought his way in by supporting the new symphony). Supporting these institutions was an expected responsibility of the elite that “helped to legitimize the social privileges of the local upper class.” Early members of The Players participated in this process, as many of them played a significant role in the nascent stages of the auto industry and supported the new or expanded cultural institutions.

Names that only survive at present as car lines within the Big Three automakers were once freestanding companies. Both entrepreneurs and members of the moneyed elite in Detroit built these institutions before being bought out by larger automakers, usually at a significant profit. The money that was invested in the auto industry came from profits made in enterprises that ran the gamut from manufacturing parts to producing seeds. Player Lem W. Bowen was an officer and director (and later president) of the D. M. Ferry Seed Company, one of the largest businesses in Detroit at the turn of the twentieth century. He, along with Player Frank W. Eddy (his fortune was from chemical and rubber manufacturing) and Player William H. Murphy (his father made his millions in the lumber industry) were the three major backers for the Detroit Automobile Company, which was formed in 1900 and dissolved in 1901 to form the Henry Ford Company. (Eddy chose not to be part of the new company.) When Henry Ford left this company because he was not allowed to focus exclusively on race cars, he was allowed to take his name with him, and the company became Cadillac Automobile Company. Cadillac was sold to General Motors in 1909 for $4.75 million, $4 million of which was clear profit. Murphy was the largest stockholder, with Bowen not far behind. The Henry Ford Company started with only $60,000, Cadillac with $300,000.

Player Henry B. Joy followed much the same path. Joy’s father had made his money in railroads, making his son a millionaire and allowing him to invest $25,000 in 1901 in Packard when it was still called the Ohio Automobile Company. Joy invited ten friends to invest the same amount. Four of these were later members of The Players: Richard P. Joy, Truman H. Newberry (Henry Joy was married to his sister, Helen), Frederick Alger, and Joseph Boyer. The Detroit investors took over when the company was reincorporated
the next year as Packard Motor Company. After disagreements
between Henry Joy and James W. Packard, Packard resigned and
Joy’s friends forced him to take the presidency, which he held until
he resigned in 1916. Even after his resignation and the stock’s going
public in 1910, the families of the Joys, Newberrys, Algers, and a
fourth Detroit family, the McMillans, held two-thirds of the vot-
ing stock and prominent positions on the board of directors for the
company.\(^\text{37}\)

Player Roy D. Chapin, former sales manager for Oldsmobile,
formed the E. R. Thomas-Detroit Company in 1906 at the behest of
Howard E. Coffin, the former chief engineer for Oldsmobile, and
two other colleagues from the company to build a four-cylinder car
that Coffin had designed, but Oldsmobile did not want to build. In
1907, Chapin brought in Hugh Chalmers (who became a Player in
1915) to take over the presidency of the company, and by 1908, the
company name had been changed to the Chalmers-Detroit Motor
Company. Chalmers had recently been fired from National Cash
Register’s (NCR) vice-presidency but had learned a lot about sales
techniques while working for NCR. According to Davis, Chalmers
“devoted most of his energies to marketing, and under his personal
leadership Chalmers-Detroit became celebrated for such promotion
as its annual award to baseball’s leading batter and for the triumphs
of its ‘Blue Bird’ racing team.”\(^\text{38}\) By 1909, Chapin had left to form the
Hudson Motor Car Company, and Chalmers-Detroit soon fell under
the control of Maxwell Motor Company.\(^\text{39}\)

Chalmers had stock in Hudson Motor Car (named for depart-
ment store owner J. L. Hudson, a major investor), but he traded his
stock in Hudson for the stock Chapin and the other original inves-
tors still had in Chalmers-Detroit. In addition to the stock trade,
he paid them a further $788,000 to make up the difference in the
value of the stock. Although this gave Chalmers indisputable con-
trol over his company, the former investors made millions on Hud-
son, whereas Chalmers’s company eventually folded. Hudson Motor
Company merged with Nash Motors in 1954 to become American
Motors.\(^\text{40}\)

The seven Fisher brothers followed this same pattern. The
fourth Fisher brother, Lawrence P. Fisher, was the only one of the
seven to become a member of The Players. His two eldest brothers
were incorporators of Fisher Body Company. Lawrence started out
in the company as a mechanic. He was vice-president of the com-
pany by the time it was sold to General Motors (GM) in 1926. The original investment in the company was $142,000, and it was sold to GM for $208 million. Lawrence chose to remain with the new company as president of the Cadillac Motor Car Company division of GM; Cadillac doubled its business during Lawrence’s first two years as president.41

Player James Couzens outstripped them all for success in the auto industry. Couzens first arrived at Ford Motor Company when his boss, Alexander T. Malcolmson, a coal dealer and an original Ford investor,42 sent him to “manage the business end of the enterprise.”43 Although Couzens was not overly enthusiastic about the transfer, in 1903 he put up $1,000 of his own money along with a note for an additional $1,500 for twenty-five shares of stock. When he finally sold his stock back to Henry Ford in 1919, he received $29,308,857.44 Frank Donovan describes his work for Ford Motor in *Wheels for a Nation*: “The Ford Motor Company might not have survived its infancy without James Couzens. He managed, with an iron hand, every aspect of the business except design and production. He was sales manager, advertising manager, office manager, and purchasing agent and performed the actual duties of secretary and treasurer. He signed up dealers and made closely bargained contracts with suppliers.”45

In addition to his work in the auto industry, Couzens was appointed Detroit police commissioner in 1916 and elected mayor in 1918. In 1922, Governor Alex Groesbeck appointed him to fill Player Truman H. Newberry’s vacated United States Senate seat. Couzens remained in office until his death in 1936.

Other members of The Players held various positions in the car companies. Player James G. Heaslet designed a twenty-horsepower engine for the E-M-F Company.46 Player Sidney T. Miller was a major stockholder for the Reliance Motor Car Company.47 Players Arthur H. and Theodore D. Buhl’s family owned Buhl Sons (wholesale hardware), Buhl Aircraft, Buhl Stamping, and Buhl Malleable Companies and had invested in Maxwell Briscoe in 1903 and in Paige-Detroit in 1909.48 Both men were involved in various managerial and director positions with the companies. Player Harry W. Ford was president of Saxon Motor Car Company when it formed in 1913 and previously had been general manager for Chalmers-Detroit Motor Company. Within three years of its founding, Saxon was eighth in the industry, and Ford had bought out the other original
investors. Unfortunately, money problems plagued the company after 1917. Edsel B. Ford, Henry Ford’s son, held various positions at Ford Motor Company, including president, but is best known for the cultural contributions he made to Detroit.

Another Player had close ties to the auto industry but was better known for his political career. Player Edwin Denby was a major investor in Hupp Motor Car Company, but his family had made its name in politics (his grandfather had been a United States senator, and his father was the first United States ambassador to China). With this background, it is not surprising that Denby himself went into politics. He served in the Michigan House of Representatives (1903–5), was a United States representative from Michigan from 1905 to 1911, but gained infamy as the secretary of the navy who had to resign over the Teapot Dome scandal. The scandal involved improperly leasing naval oil reserves at Teapot Dome (Wyoming) to the Mammoth Oil Company and at Elk Hills (California) to Pan-American Petroleum and Transport for drastically below worth and involved bribes paid to various government officials. Denby was not personally involved in the scandal but was asked to resign because he had not overseen the reserves and the actions taken involving them by Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall, who was the main conspirator in the case.

The auto industry helped spur on the development of several advertising firms in Detroit. Eric Dregni and Karl Hagstrom Miller in their book Ads That Put American on Wheels go so far as to say that “the two industries rode each other’s coattails to prominence.” Early Players figured prominently in advertising from both within and without the auto industry. Player Lee Anderson began his career as a sportswriter for the Detroit News but moved on to become the advertising manager for Chalmers Motor Company and eventually began his own advertising companies, first Advertisers, Inc., and then Lee Anderson Advertising Company, Inc. Advertisers, Inc., had accounts with Dodge and Chrysler, and Anderson lured another Player, Frank G. Kane, away from a Chicago advertising firm to work on the car accounts. Three other Players, Al M. Corrigan, Albert L. “Al” Weeks, and Edward A. “Ned” Batchelor, also worked for the firm. Anderson, who created the slogan “Body by Fisher,” later became vice-president of MacManus, Inc., an advertising firm that remains nationally prominent to this day.

MacManus was the self-titled firm of another Player,
Theodore F. MacManus, who had worked “as director of publicity and advertising counsel at various times for Ford, General Motors, Peerless, Hupmobile, Graham Bros., Goodyear Tires, Fisher Bodies, Chrysler, Dodge Bros., Packard, etc.,” an impressive advertising resume by any standard. Player Kirkland Alexander was his treasurer for a time.

MacManus was not the only major advertiser in town. Campbell-Ewald, another nationally prominent firm, was founded in 1911 in part by Player Henry T. Ewald, who became its president in 1917. He also founded the Adcraft Club of Detroit in 1905. Adcraft, still in existence today, describes its current purpose as providing “support and direction for those involved and interested in the advertising industry in metro Detroit.” Players Joseph H. Neebe and Walter Boynton were both on the executive staff of the Campbell-Ewald Company. Player George Harrison Phelps was the president of his own firm, George Harrison Phelps, Inc., National Advertising Counselors, and another Player, Maxwell Irving Pitkin, worked as his director of copy. Not every Player in advertising specialized in the auto industry, however. Players founder Guy Brewster Cady specialized first in counter displays and then later in mailers, and Player James Strasburg was the advertising manager for Detroit Theatres, Inc., making his membership in The Players an obvious choice. Appendix C discusses Players’ professional lives in more detail.

Detroit put the money generated by the auto industry to good use. When the symphony was established in 1914, future Player William H. Murphy was one of three principal benefactors. Among the eight “prominent” but smaller donors listed by Davis who contributed to the construction of Orchestra Hall, five were members of The Players prior to their donation. One of these, Player Jerome H. Remick, was the president of J. H. Remick and Co., a large Detroit firm that specialized in sheet music, giving him an excellent reason to support a symphony. That same year, the club contributed to the Detroit Museum of Art (now the Detroit Institute of Arts) to help “defray the expense of the exhibit of the Hume Models of Stage Craft.” Sam Hume, along with other theatrical designer greats such as Lee Simonson and Robert Edmund Jones, had studied in Europe in the early teens and brought the “new stagecraft” to the United States. This new stagecraft reflected the influence of Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig on the theoretical purpose of stage design. Hume was later president of the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts.
Members of The Players had ties to both the Detroit Museum of Art and the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts. A very early gift from Player and pharmaceutical manufacturer Frederick K. Stearns (his son, Frederick S. Stearns, was a founding member of The Players) in 1890 provided the museum with “16,000 objects from China, Japan, Korea, India, and Persia; the institution’s first antiquities.” Later, when the institution moved from private hands to public ownership by the city of Detroit, the first Arts Commission was formed, and Player Ralph W. H. Booth was elected president, and Player Clyde H. Burroughs, secretary. Burroughs was also a curator for the museum. The commission saw to the transfer of title of the collections and land from the Museum of Art to the Detroit Institute of Arts and the planning and construction of its current building in the Cultural Center.

Player ties to the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts were just as close. The society was founded in 1906 but not formally incorporated until 1915. H. J. Maxwell Grylls, a founding member of The Players, became its president in 1911. Even before his election, the Arts and Crafts society had a strong link to the dramatic arts. In 1910 and 1911, the society sponsored masques (dramatic pageants; see chapter 1) and had a costume design department. When the Abbey Players of Dublin (a significant art theatre of the time) were touring America, the Detroit society brought one of the Dublin society’s founding members, Lady Augusta Gregory, to Detroit to speak. When the Arts and Crafts society constructed its own building in 1916 at 25 Watson Street (not far from Wayne State University’s current Bonstelle Theatre), it became the first Arts and Crafts society in the United States to include a theatre and also the first American society to design and build its own theatre. It was also the first “art organization in the world to publicly acknowledge the automobile as an art form.” Grylls designed the Arts and Crafts society building with his fellow Detroit architect and member of the society, William B. Stratton. During its first season, 1916–17, the Arts and Crafts Little Theatre produced nineteen shows, most of them one acts, and several members of The Players appear in the cast lists. The society’s involvement in theatre quickly attracted the attention of Sheldon Cheney, who became a member of the society and founded Theatre Arts Magazine, one of the first serious publications in America about theatre. He also wrote The Art Theatre (1917), one of the earliest American books on the topic. An appendix in the back of the
New Governors at Work

Tuesday, November 7, 1916, is a date that will go down into history. It was election day. The Players' annual meeting was held at the Hotel Statler and officers for the coming year were chosen.

Four members were retained from last year's Board of Governors and three new men were elected. Players Boynton, Cady and Larchen, having worked long and earnestly as directors, begged to be relieved of their duties. They were replaced on the board by Players Corbin, Pabst and Reed.

At a meeting of the new Governors which followed the general election, Player J. Theodore Reed was made president. Players Ely and Murphy were made vice-president and treasurer, respectively, while Player Standish was again the unanimous choice for secretary. President Reed immediately appointed committee chairman, and the season's work was started.

On November 20, Player Corbin announced his intention to move to Petrograd. This made it necessary to appoint a new member to fill the vacancy on the board; so Player A. Laurence Smith, who has always been an enthusiastic and hard-working member of the club, was selected to take Player Corbin's place.

Among Those Present

Sam Hume, than whom there is no greater luminary in the world of stagecraft, has been invited to our first meeting. Mr. Hume is responsible for the Arts and Crafts stage and all appearances thereto and also deserves great credit for the selection and direction of the initial productions given in that theater.
first edition of this book lists the plays and players from that first season at the Arts and Crafts society, in addition to pictures from the productions. Later editions replaced these lists with information from more nationally prominent theatres.

The Arts and Crafts Little Theatre at Watson Street was designed to accommodate the ideals of the Art Theatre movement; thus it was an intimate space with chairs that could be moved around instead of rows of attached seating. This was the perfect atmosphere for The Players, so they chose the Arts and Crafts theatre as their new home when it opened in 1916. That same year, The Players began publishing their newsletter, *The Player*.

To help make the entertainment after the frolics run more smoothly, the club initiated the position of “Toastmaster of the Afterglow.” The Afterglow was the party that followed the frolic in the tradition of the opening-night party. There were skits, glee clubs, bands, comedians, talks, minstrel shows (in the early decades), and all manner of other entertainers, both amateur and professional. Because every frolic but the May Show was technically an opening night, that meant a lot of parties. The Toastmaster helped arrange for entertainment and guest performers for The Players and generally helped maintain the convivial atmosphere. At some point this position was dubbed the “Glowworm,” a title that first shows up in *The Player* in 1919. The exact origins of this name have been lost to the mists of time, but the title allows an endless stream of Player critics to determine after the evening’s entertainment whether the much put-upon Player who occupied this position was more “glow” or worm.

The first mention of a possible permanent home (i.e., bought or built, not rented) shows up in the January 1916 minutes, but the board did not seriously consider the issue until March 1917. The pros and cons were discussed, including the possibility of combining with other theatrical clubs (the Fine Arts Society and the Theatre Arts Club), but this latter idea was not met favorably. Although there was great interest in a permanent space, most members did not think the club was in a position either to outlay the necessary money or to incur the debt. That same month, a discussion regarding a permanent home appeared in *The Player* under the heading “Our Own Playhouse?”: “We want a man’s playhouse. We want cloak rooms and space for storing our own scenery and the privilege of
choosing our own dates for rehearsals and performances. If it is the
Players’ pleasure to drop lighted things on the floor let’s have a place
with an iron floor and asbestos upholstered furniture. We want—
well, there are many things we want which we might be able to get if
we felt at home.” This quote broadly hints that The Players incurred
the displeasure of the Arts and Crafts society on several occasions by
breaking, damaging, or burning various pieces of property, which
they definitely did, and that they were frustrated at having to work
their frolics around the activities scheduled for the society.

The war in Europe in 1915 impacted the purely social nature
of The Players. Although the United States was not yet engaged in
the Great War, it was not unusual for Detroit residents to cross the
border into Canada to enlist. When Player Charles Stringer left for
Europe, the board of governors remitted his dues and gave him a
leave of absence from the club. This became standard policy during
the war years. The United States declared war on the Central Pow-
ers on 6 April 1917, and twelve days later the board of governors
decided that the May Show would be held as a benefit for the Red
Cross.

In November 1917, the war hit home for The Players as many
members were called into service. Although accommodations had
been made in the past, the board sent a letter to all members in the
service indicating that dues would be remitted upon request and
that any who had sent checks could have them returned. There
must have been some criticism of the club during that year as being
too frivolous in a time of war. In a November 1917 article, The Player
defended the club on the grounds that “there never was a time when
The Players were needed as they are this particular year.” A year
later, The Player again spoke out on the issue: “Many a busy man is
finding that he needs The Players as a sort of tonic.”

Players were involved in the war effort at home and abroad.
Player (and police commissioner) James Couzens had been
appointed chairman of the War Entertainment Board (an official
position, not a new club committee), and Player president Campbell
offered the services of The Players to the war effort. Along with the
Fine Arts Society, they donated money to buy a Victrola for the mili-
tary hospital at Camp Custer. Advertising executive Player Henry T.
Ewald was the publicity director of the Liberty Loan Drive for Detroit
that raised $5 million. The theatre world in general volunteered
time and money to the war effort. Some playwrights had The Players send royalty checks to the Stage Women’s War Relief Committee in lieu of personal payment.

Individual members participated in Drama League productions at Fort Wayne, but the impact of The Players was not confined to Michigan. Player Charles M. Steele was sent a makeup kit to use in shows he put on for his fellow soldiers in France. The 1918 May Show was held for the benefit of the Patriotic Fund, and the Saturday matinee of this show was free to anyone involved in military service. By the time the war ended in November 1918, fifty-four Players had served in the military, and Player Harry W. Ford had died in action.

The war was never far from the minds of The Players. An “honor roll” listing members in service appeared in every issue of The Player for the duration of the war (a typical practice for most clubs, from bowling leagues to the esteemed Detroit Athletic Club). The most interesting effect of the war on The Players was their choice of plays. For the most part, plays dealing with war were avoided, although some were set aside for production at a later date. “A general discussion as to material for the season followed, Player Weeks reading Wine O’ Dreams, an anonymous sketch. It was decided inadvisable to produce it this season because of the general feeling on the part of the board that war plays should be dispensed with.”

This attitude was remembered a few years later when another rejected play, Whispers, by Marian Eddy Standish (wife of Player W. Colburn Standish) was once again brought to the attention of the board:

Governor Phelps Newberry submitted an anonymous script called “Whispers,” and read it to the Board. It is an unusual dramatic piece dealing with the war in France. Governor Meadon recollected the same script being submitted to the Board, (and named whom he believed to be the author), in 1919 or ’20. At that time it was decided not to produce the sketch, although it had undoubted merit, because too many of the returned service men, and even those at home, had been “fed up” on war plays. It was the opinion of the Governors that such a play should be done on an evening when a good comedy can go on each side of it on the program.

This preference was not unusual. The Players have always produced more comedies, mysteries, and adventures than serious
pieces. An occasional melodrama or dramatic piece crops up, but the social nature of the club demands lighter material. No serious piece is performed without being accompanied by less dramatic fare and usually is sandwiched between more humorous pieces as described in the previous quotation. In addition, The Players has always encouraged plays by its own members (or members’ wives, as was the case here). This tradition is as old as the club itself, as evidenced by members’ coming up with their own skits for the vaudeville nights.

Although this time period brought some hardships to the club, it also brought some of its most admired members. One of the Players most revered by club members to this day, Sam I. Slade, was proposed for membership in January 1915. Sam Slade was one of the best dramatic actors to tread the boards at The Players. He was a voice teacher by trade, but he appeared on the Detroit stage from time to time as well as at The Players. A 1924 article in *The Player* notes some of his professional work: “For a fortnight at the Adams Theatre Player Sam Slade impersonated Lincoln. This week he is doing an imitation of Jackie Coogan at the Capital.” His portrait smiles down on the Founders Room at the Players’ Playhouse today.

The Players were fortunate to have resident playwrights who provided material that catered to the tastes and needs of the club (witness the early *Hairlooms*). One of the first great Player playwrights was Albert Loren Weeks. Al Weeks joined the club in January 1915 (not long after Slade was proposed) and quickly became a prolific producer of one acts. He had a varied career that emphasized writing. In his early years, he wrote advertising copy while writing plays on the side. He was the coauthor with Seymour Simons of *Her Family Tree*, a Broadway musical in 1920 that starred Nora Bayes and Frank Morgan. Professionally, Weeks was first a reporter for the *Detroit Free Press* and later the drama critic for the *Detroit News*. Following that, he was a writer and narrator for the Metropolitan Motion Picture Company.

During the 1919–20 season, Player C. Hayward Murphy appears as a stage manager/stage director. He had joined earlier in 1911, but he took over a role for The Players that was much akin to that of a technical director—someone who oversees the construction of the set and props plus the implementation of the lighting design. He was very influential in ensuring that Player productions had individually designed sets and a stage crew to run the shows.
This was a massive job, as there were a minimum of five frolics a year plus the May Show. The monthly frolics had an average of three one acts that often had complex sets. Union stagehands were hired to run the actual frolics, with Murphy acting as stage manager. Carpenters and scenic painters were also hired, although the sets were designed and sometimes built by Players. In addition to his responsibilities at The Players, Murphy was also the commissioner of the Detroit Fire Department.

Player Russell H. Legge joined the club that same season, and his caricatures first appeared in the March 1920 edition of The Player. Although sketches were a regular part of the magazine, Legge’s drawings were to become a standard in The Player until his death in 1941. He was a professional illustrator and worked for the Detroit Free Press, where he also sketched performers that passed through Detroit. In many instances, Legge’s drawings are the only visual record of Player performances. His original sketches of frolics and Player activities still grace the walls of the Players Playhouse.

In addition to the Great War, during its early decades The Players also had to deal with the effects of Prohibition. Prohibition was enacted in the club’s home state before it was established nationwide. Michigan voted on 7 November 1916 to become a dry state, with the law taking effect on 1 May 1918. Despite institution of the new regulations, liquor did not stop flowing in Detroit: the location of the Detroit River, which separates the United States and Canada, presented what Prohibition historian Larry Englemann describes as a “natural invitation to smuggling.” Englemann’s chronicle of the fight to enforce Prohibition in Michigan details the hopelessness of the task in stark detail. Not only did the river pose a keen temptation to smugglers, but also the province of Ontario, located across the river from Detroit, profited from its own liquor taxes and thus had no incentive to enforce America’s Prohibition laws. Apparently, officials on the U.S. side of the river also had little incentive. A reporter for the Grand Rapids Herald was shocked to discover that liquor was openly served to members of the Michigan legislature in the capital hotels. The lesser officials who were expected to enforce Prohibition on the streets were “ill trained and poorly equipped, disorganized and uncoordinated,” in addition to being underpaid and therefore highly susceptible to bribes.

Detroit was a natural entry point for smuggled Canadian alcohol not only because of the strategic location of the Detroit
River but also because the Hiram Walker plant is directly across the river. According to an article in *The Player* written by Player James Strasburg, the beer flowed freely during Prohibition, but it arrived over a rather circuitous route:

Under the regime of President George Harrison Phelps, the Governors would authorize the purchase of three barrels of beer for the next Frolic [these authorizations were never recorded in the minutes]. This authorization was delegated to Player Henry Koch, head beer buyer. Henry then passed it to his assistant beer buyer, another Player, who knew how to get the real stuff but had to keep his knowledge secret, which was in accordance with the ethics of those days. The assistant then passed the order to Harry, maitre d'hôtel of the Racquet club [also on Jefferson Avenue, not far from the present day location of the Renaissance Center]. Harry was the key man. He really knew personally the bootlegger who could deliver simon pure alley beer. The loaded barrels were eased surreptitiously into the Little Theatre [the Arts and Crafts theatre] on the Saturday afternoon of the Frolic and Player Olie Standish, then enjoying the first flush of success in his bartending career, would go to work on the barrels with his paraphernalia after which technical process he would don his accouterments for the evening.

This bootlegger would sneak out his empties early Sunday morning. That was the theory. He couldn’t always get into the place, which generally led to pretty embarrassing consequences. Before long the bootlegger would begin to think that he wanted his money. So he would dun Harry of the Racquet club. Harry would dun the assistant beer buyer of the Players. The assistant would dun Henry Koch. Henry would dun the Treasurer. The Treasurer would mail a check made out to Henry. Henry
would mail it to his assistant who would mail it to Harry of the Racquet club. Harry would nip off his bit, which he had ably earned, and would pay off the bootlegger.

That’s the way the Players got it. And that’s the way big business of all sorts was transacted in the rich and roaring ’20s. Those were the days!¹⁰⁹

Later stories, passed down through generations of Players, recount incidences of bootlegging at the Players Playhouse. These stories point out that the Playhouse faced the river and thus had a clear view of Canada: supposedly, Players could stand at the windows and watch the progress of the boat carrying their liquor to the dock, where two uniformed Detroit city cops would meet the delivery, escort it to the Playhouse, and hand it over to the police commissioner. (It is unclear whether there was ever a truly unobstructed view of the Detroit River, let alone being able to see a little boat in the dark on the river.) One of the present-day Players, John M. Butterfield, points out that the upstage loading dock at the Playhouse is designed to accommodate beer barrels, and other Players have insisted that the grooves worn into the back steps by the stage door are the result of beer kegs being bumped down them.¹⁰⁰

Although it is true that several major Detroit officials have been members of the Players, there is no documented evidence to prove that they were directly involved in the bootlegging or that any members of Detroit’s finest had any part in procuring for The Players. In fact, as The Player pointed out to members, it was Player Bob Toms’s job to prosecute bootleggers: “Graft, alleged vote-frauds, hold-ups, wholesale bootleggings, or Grand Jury investigations, are things of great moment to citizens of Wayne County. Player Prosecuting Attorney Robert M. Toms not only makes a one hundred per cent job of the foregoing, but also finds time, by working between 2:00 to 5:00 A.M. [to rehearse a play].”¹¹⁰ One hopes that he never had to prosecute the bootlegger that supplied the club. As these officials could not have missed the presence of alcohol at the frolics, they could not have been too set against the bootlegging. Beer is, after all, as ubiquitous as tuxes at the frolics.

Conversely, The Player published a warning to the membership to keep their less-than-legal activities under wraps around Detroit politicians who were also members of the club:

James Couzens, the Mayor; John Lodge, vice mayor and president of the Common Council; and Edward T. Fitzgerald, the Woolsey of the incom-
ing Government, are all members of The Players. Knowing all three gentlemen, the editor wishes to remind fellow Players that if they contemplate any dirty work in the way of licker *sic* lugging or starting a stuss game, it might be just as well to see one of this powerful trio before beginning operations. See them and say goodbye, for that will be the last meeting.102

Considering the general attitude of The Players and the knowledge that these politicians *must* have known about the alcohol, this may have been a subtle reminder to include them in the goings-on, or face their wrath.

Another interesting indication of Players’ position on the social climate of the twenties is the attitude toward the “New Girl.” The New Girl was personified by the flapper, a woman far more brazen than the older generation of women brought up under Victorian mores. An indication of this attitude appears in a review of the show *Fair Enough* by Richard Connell, a courtroom drama in which all characters but the defendant were female. “There is no need for Flo Ziegfield to come to Detroit again, ever. We who saw this up-to-date drama and gazed fearfully at its characters, realize that the American girl has been glorified too much—too much!”103

The play that is most indicative of their attitude toward both Prohibition and the New Girl is *In the Thousands of Years to Come* by Player Lee Anderson. Written in 1920, the play is set a hundred years into the future in a very different America in which constitutional amendments have “raised the world to the perfection of efficiency.”104 The list of amendments covering everything from what clothing can be worn to what kind of furniture can be used is so extensive that it takes a book the size of a large dictionary to list them all.

The play begins as a scientist and his friends discover a bottle of mysterious liquid that predates the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment, described as the first of the “great laws which, starting with abolition of then-described intoxicating beverages have purified the race of all deleterious habits.”105 During the course of their “scientific exploration” of this bottle, they are constantly interrupted by the women in their lives. One woman enters to request the hand of the scientist’s son. As provided by the “great laws,” she is an inch taller, two years older, and has sufficient income to support him once they are married.106 This reversal of traditional gender roles is the future consequence of the idea of the “New Girl,” as Anderson sees
it. The wives of the scientist and his friends are much worse than this young woman. When the men are caught sampling their find in the name of science (and enjoying its effects), the women order the friends home like small, disobedient children (the Seventy-Sixth Amendment says that husbands must obey their wives). When the men ignore them, their wives threaten to report them to the authorities. When that does not work, the women destroy the remaining alcohol in triumph.\textsuperscript{107}

This satire addresses the general dislike among club members of not only the government’s attempt to legislate morality but also the changing of social roles that was accelerating at the start of the twenties. As the “guardians of the home,” women were a major part of the Prohibition movement. They were, however, not alone in this: most people who voted for the law thought that it would help bring about “social order” and had assumed that wine and beer would still be legal for public consumption.\textsuperscript{108} As Lynn Dumenil’s chronicle of social life in the twenties records, it was popular to bash Prohibition; \textit{Life} magazine used Prohibition as the butt of their jokes in numerous articles and cartoons.\textsuperscript{109} With the attitude of club members and society in general against the government’s morality laws, it is hardly surprising that Prohibition failed miserably both in Detroit and across the nation.

Although the image of the Roaring Twenties may lead one to believe that a stag club, particularly a club with a lighthearted attitude, would relax the rules of conduct, quite the opposite was true of The Players. As mentioned in the introduction to this volume, tradition and a certain level of formality were integral to club activities. There was a strict policy that all members attending frolics were to wear tuxedos—although apparently they had to be reminded of this occasionally, as happened in an article that appeared in the March 1922 edition of \textit{The Player}, “Nunquam Renig Tuxedorum.”\textsuperscript{110} In addition, the minutes record several occasions on which the board of governors felt it necessary to admonish an individual Player’s conduct as unbefitting of a member. Although the exact nature of the conduct is seldom detailed, it is often recorded as having been “disruptive” to a frolic.\textsuperscript{111} This code of conduct extended to guest performers at the Afterglows. Walter Hiers, a silent film actor best known for his comic roles, participated in an Afterglow, but according to an article in \textit{The Player}, his performance was not up to Players’ standards:
Mr. Hiers was very funny and we appreciate his presence. However, he made us wonder. Why do men who should be audience-wise persist in telling smutty stories at stag gatherings? Perhaps there isn’t one of us who does not enjoy a deep-hued story in a Pullman smoker or off in a corner. But we all shrink several sizes smaller and look for some hole to crawl into when one is pulled from the stage. The funny part of it is that professional actors are the ones who do it, as witness Leon Errol and Mr. Hiers. Some day some of these folks will learn that such stuff isn’t necessary. Furthermore, it isn’t funny. Mr. Hiers ’s stories would have been uproarious to an audience of five.112

Another famous and much more appreciated performer brought to the Players’ stage was the comedian Bert Williams:

Through the efforts of Player Al Weeks, the inimitable Bert Williams had been prevailed upon to appear. With Player Holliday at the piano, the famous comedian appeared and sang “That’s a Plenty.” But as he started the second verse, out from the wings came the real Bert Williams, who quickly unmasked (or perhaps unwigged would be a happier word) the singer, and showed him up for the man he was—Al Weeks. The real Bert then told us all about “Martin,” and also made us laugh until we cried as we, in delightful imagination, dodged baseballs with him at Coney Island.113

Williams was a major comic performer of the day who started out in minstrel shows, worked the vaudeville circuit, and eventually was hired as one of the stars of the Ziegfield Follies. In his rise through the ranks, Williams, a black performer, broke several color lines, not the least of which was headlining the Follies.114 Although there is no indication that African Americans were members of The Players in the early twentieth century (there were African American members in the late twentieth century, however), or indeed would have been allowed to join in the early years, the club seems to have welcomed both black and white visiting performers to its Afterglows on an equal basis. The Playhouse also hosted a special event in 1927 when the Detroit Urban League wanted to hold a presentation for the African American poet and playwright Countee Cullen.115

The club did perform occasional minstrel shows (variety shows featuring white performers in blackface singing, dancing, and performing comic acts with stereotyped racial humor and caricatures) in its early years, as they were considered part of the vaudeville tradition, were seen on the public stage at the time, and were easily
produced by the club. There were occasional minstrel shows as part of the Afterglows in the twenties and thirties, and one rather late Afterglow performance in 1952.\textsuperscript{116} Blackface performances (including black performers in blackface—something Bert Williams did) were seen on Broadway into the thirties, and the movies \textit{White Christmas} (1954) and \textit{Holiday Inn} (1942), among others, make reference to minstrel shows, and these performances were therefore common for the time, although they have become distasteful to later generations.

Prior to 1923, the club had had some discussion of building a permanent home. By February of that year, The Players was seriously considering a permanent playhouse and as a first step created a Site Committee. To further the overall effort to build a space, the board established a General Committee “to direct the preliminary operations of various committees looking to the establishment of a Players’ home and playhouse, this committee to have power to create sub-committees to carry on any special phases of the work.”\textsuperscript{117} Player Joseph Meadon, a past president, was elected chairman of the New Playhouse General Committee. By April, the committee was already considering a piece of land near the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts.\textsuperscript{118} Despite this, at the general meeting in May, the membership decided that it would be better to postpone construction until a building fund could be established. The board of trustees, consisting of Players Henry G. Stevens, C. Hayward Murphy, and Lee Anderson, was elected to organize the building of the Playhouse.

At a general meeting in May, the members were shown stereopticon slides of the proposed playhouse and subsequently passed a motion to begin a subscription drive to raise money for it.\textsuperscript{119} By the annual meeting on 15 May 1923, $28,240 in subscriptions had been pledged. The members also decided at this meeting to increase the number of active members allowed from 125 to 150 and associate members from 200 to 250. This was done as a means both to generate revenue and to meet the growing demand for admittance to the club. The numbers of nonresident members had no limit, so they were unaffected by the changes.

In the meantime, the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts and The Players had managed to settle their differences. The 1922–23 season had been spent at the Harmonie Society, and The Players wanted to return to the Arts and Crafts theatre. The exact nature of the rift is not detailed, but it was likely related to admonitions that
had appeared periodically in *The Player* advising the members to stop leaving a mess and breaking things (unintentionally) at the Arts and Crafts theatre. The Players still protested their innocence almost twenty years later: “In the course of inhuman events, The Players were ejected, along about 1921 from their erstwhile habitat, the Arts and Crafts Little Theatre on Watson Street. This was through no fault of their own. It was due to those relentless circumstances over which one has no control. Thereupon The Players became a wandering tribe—the ‘Strolling Players’ they were known as, in those days; and they drifted rather helplessly for a time in what is now recorded as the Harmonie Society era.” Part of the new agreement with the Arts and Crafts society stipulated that The Players provide an hour of entertainment at the annual meeting of the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts and that a Christmas show be produced that would be open to children of the members of the society. The Society of Arts and Crafts probably resented being excluded from all of the productions occurring on its own stage. The society had stopped producing its own shows in 1919 when Sam Hume left to take an assistant professorship at the University of California. Even when Hume had been present, however, the board of the society had sometimes felt excluded from the productions in its theatre and thoroughly resented it. Members of Arts and Crafts probably still remembered this and wanted some involvement on their own stage.

This Christmas show was a joint venture in many ways, using members of both clubs and thus including women. *The Tinder Box* was coauthored by Mr. and Mrs. Weeks (Vera, although *The Player* refers to her as “Mrs. Al”) and was a great success. Inspired by a Hans Christian Anderson tale, the story was a “yarn about Peter, the brave young soldier of Narbeth, and how, with the aid of a self-lighting tinder box and three of the hottest of hot dogs, he wooed and won the pretty Princess Paulette, whose post office address was also Narbeth.”

“THE BALLAD OF THE PLAYER’S DAUGHTER”

“What is a Player, Papa?
Little Mary said.

“A Player, child,” her papa smiled,
Scratching his hairless head.
“A Player, dear—well now, I fear—
“Whatever under the sun
Caused you to ask?” He filled his flask,
A beautiful flask and a pleasant task.
“Whatever under the sun!”

“’Cause Ma just told me—pa, don’t scold me—
“Never to marry one.”

In addition to Al Weeks and Lee Anderson, Player William F. Holliday was another major Player playwright. Like Weeks and Anderson, Holliday dealt with themes that hit close to home with The Players. One of his productions dealt with people near and dear to the hearts of Detroiter. *If a Little Ford Should Lead ’Em* is a satire on Detroit politicians and industrialists and on a potential presidential run for Henry Ford—an actual possibility Ford considered in 1924. This possible explanation of the play’s plot is merely an assumption, however, because the script was lost, and *The Player* that reviewed the show recounts nothing of the storyline. Despite this, the cast of characters includes such political and economic figures as Norval Hawkins (postmaster general in this piece, but he actually worked first for Ford Motor Company and then General Motors), William Livingston (secretary of the treasury), and Henry and Edsel Ford (Edsel did not play himself, and it is unclear if he was in the audience that night). The review for the show joked that Jake Hirschfield’s makeup was considered so close to the actual figures being represented that pictures were taken and reproduced in *The Player*. The pictures were stock photographs of the illustrious men, not images taken at the frolic.

Hirschfield was another interesting Player fixture. He was a professional costumer and makeup artist by trade. It was his expertise that turned members of The Players into women and historical figures, but he was not made an honorary member until 1955. He was known as Detroit’s “Man of 10,000 Faces” and “kept a collection of character wigs and a scrapbook of pictures of famous people whom he might be asked to imitate.” In addition to his work at The Players, his business, Hirschfield’s Inc., “served amateur groups through the Detroit area.”

The humor on The Players’ stage did not always come from the material presented but occasionally from the mishaps that occurred
onstage. These were always taken in stride, but a particularly amusing incident occurred during the 1924 May Show. During the piece *His Majesty*,

Player Jeff Webb was to shoot Player Macklin. Well, the gun only clicked. Instantly Jeff began to club Charlie over the head with the butt of the revolver. He made a thorough job of it; so thorough, in fact, that Charlie, quietly, but very emphatically, cried to Jeff during the struggle—"For God’s sake, Jeff, quit, quit! I’ll die—I’ll die!"

After that, Jeff’s line was—“Your father’s friend committed suicide!” But not Jeff—he knew better; he didn’t say it. Inspiration under unlooked for and unwelcome circumstances made Jeff an author, as well as acrobat, that night.¹²⁶

Many such incidents crop up in the annals of *The Player*: flaming bass drums, misplaced sound cues, and personal injuries have added a bit of unexpected humor to the frolics, and they are as dutifully recorded as the shows themselves (if not more so).

By April 1924, The Players’ subscriptions were up to fifty thousand dollars. The club had also increased both dues and fees that year to help pay for the costs associated with building the Playhouse. In 1920, the initiation fee was raised to twenty-five dollars, with an increase in dues to fifteen dollars for actives and twenty-five dollars for associates.¹²⁷ The 1924 increase was far more significant. The initiation fee was doubled to fifty dollars, and by 1925, the initiation fee was increased to one hundred dollars, with dues increasing to fifty dollars for actives and seventy-five dollars for associates.¹²⁸

The club had narrowed their site selections to two locations. One site was on East Grand Boulevard near the Packard Motor Company, and the other was on Jefferson Avenue across from the Michigan Stove Works (the location near the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts had long since been discarded). The Jefferson Avenue site was actually a choice between two adjoining lots. Mr. Miller owned one of these and was willing to sell for five hundred dollars a square foot, and the other belonged to the Newberry Estate, which was selling for six hundred dollars a foot. Player Phelps Newberry was asked to negotiate with his father. If the Newberry Estate was willing to sell its land at the Miller rate, The Players would take it.¹²⁹ The negotiations are not discussed in the extant records, but a settlement was reached with the Newberry Estate for their parcel.
The records do say that the Jefferson Avenue location was preferable to the Grand Boulevard site, but they are unclear as to why the Newberry land was chosen over the Miller land. It may have been better situated, it may have allowed for expansion (the lack of parking space for the club was and continues to be an issue), or it may have been a matter of all things being equal, they wanted to give money to an organization that had Player ties. This was not an unusual practice with The Players. Not only was a Player a partner in the architectural firm that was building the Playhouse, but also The Players had moved its bank account from the First National Bank of Detroit to the National Bank of Commerce in November 1923 “as a courtesy to Player L. H. D. Baker.”

There is no indication that this transfer was in any way instigated by Player Baker.

To aid the Players in dealing with the financial and legal problems of building their home quarters, the board of governors decided to form a separate company that would “own and control the new playhouse.” This company would be “composed of members of The Players who have made subscription and may later subscribe for the building and financing of [the Playhouse].” The following Players were members of the board of The Players Holding Company: Edgar W. Bowen, Edsel B. Ford, C. H. Haberkorn Jr., William G. Lerchen, C. Hayward Murphy, W. H. Murphy, Phelps Newberry, George Harrison Phelps, Martin L. Pulcher, and Henry G. Stevens. Each of the ten signed the note that enabled The Players to borrow the money to proceed with their building. By signing, each agreed to be liable for ten thousand dollars apiece. Anyone who had paid on the subscription to the Playhouse was considered a stockholder. Thus most of the Players were also stockholders in The Players Holding Company.

H. J. Maxwell Grylls, one of the The Players’ founders, was a partner in the architectural firm of Smith, Hinchman, and Grylls (still a leading firm in Detroit, today known as the SmithGroup), which had been contracted to build the Players Playhouse. The only detailed description of Grylls’s contribution to building the Playhouse (other than cutting checks and showing slides) is an article in The Player by Player James Strasburg, written when Player William Kapp was elected president of The Players in 1940, fifteen years after the Playhouse was built. Along with Grylls, Kapp figured prominently in the building of the Playhouse, although he was not a Player at the time:
Max Grylls stepped forth into the quandary and quietly, modestly and generously proffered his talents and equipment as an architect to design and erect a suitable building for us at a minimum cost, his services as architect to be free, gratis, for nothing.

Shortly thereafter we became aware of a long-legged, lithe, likable, dark-haired enthusiastic young gentleman with the gleam of the zealot in his friendly eye, his hair and coat tails flying as he dashed about with a roll of blue prints under one arm and a sheaf of sketches under the other. He could always be stopped quite easily, whereupon he would show and explain carefully the blue prints and the attractive sketches which he had made of the proposed Playhouse. This was Max Grylls’s bright young man, Bill Kapp. Max supervised Bill. Bill supervised design, constructions, contractors, materials, work and workmen. And—mirabile dictu! When the place was done it looked just like the sketches, inside and outside, only better, and it had cost just what Max Grylls and Bill had said that it would, only more. And there it stands today.132

Due to his hard work on the design and construction of the Playhouse, the club invited Bill Kapp to join The Players in 1923. He would become one of their best set designers: Player minutes record 198 sets designed by him for the club.133 Kapp is also known for designing the Detroit Historical Museum in the Cultural Center and the Dossin Museum of Great Lakes History on Belle Isle.134

The New Playhouse General Committee had formed sub-committees that dealt with the kitchen and kitchen equipment; audience reception and decoration; and stage, stage equipment, and dressing rooms. In the search for new equipment to furnish their future home, President Phelps Newberry’s most important contribution is probably the Nunquam Renig steins.135 From the description in the minutes, they probably bore The Players’ crest and motto. A later permutation of this mug, a stein on which was emblazoned the member’s name and the year he joined, became a Player tradition. These steins are kept at the Playhouse in specially made cases in the Founders Room. When a Player dies, a black ribbon is placed across his mug, and it is placed on a ledge with those of other Players who have taken their last bow.

Player Phelps Newberry was able to report at the annual meeting on 19 May 1925 that the architects and contractors had promised that the new Playhouse would be ready by the opening of the 1925–26 season. It had been a good season for The Players. The Playhouse was fast becoming a reality, and a new high of 103 mem-
bers of active status had participated in the frolics. With such successes in mind, Player Bill Holliday put forth a motion, supported by Players Jefferson B. Webb (of pistol-whipping Player Macklin fame) and William G. Lerchen (one of the board members of The Players Holding Company), that the board of governors be reelected as a whole. Because they “had been successful in accomplishing the initial stages for the securing of a new Playhouse for Players, . . . it would be advisable to keep the same Board in Harness so as to finish up the work they had begun.” This motion carried unanimously.136

The Players decided that they would open their first season in the new Playhouse with Doing Stratford, a “musical sketch” written by Players Al Weeks and Bill Holliday: “The germ of the notion was to frame some sort of entertainment (we hoped it would be entertainment) that would permit several Players to impersonate characters from the plays of Shakespeare. . . . Through June, July and August the team of collaborators labored in their collaboratory, pounding out the tunes that frequently could not be recognized and lyrics that occasionally scanned.”137 In October, Weeks shared what they had with the board: “Player Weeks read the lyrics and book, and gave explanations of this very amusing sketch. He croaked the music and described how good it was when Bill played it. Members of the Board had previously heard the music played by Bill, himself, so that Player Weeks’ efforts were not prejudicial.”138 Weeks and Holliday described the rehearsal process: “The play was put into rehearsal the middle of November, and by the first week in December most of the cast of twenty-three Players (the largest that had ever been assembled in the Club), had met the author and composer and learned the title of the show.”139

The Playhouse would open 10 December 1925 with a performance for members only, and performances for family and friends to show off their new home were scheduled for 11 and 12 December. Everyone pitched in. The Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts donated materials from their own stage,140 and wives of the board of governors presented the curtain and the valance for the new theatre.141

Doing Stratford was so popular that copies of the music were sold at the following May Show. Player C. Hayward Murphy underwrote the cost of printing, and Weeks and Holliday agreed to donate any profits back to The Players. One of the songs from the score, “When the Day Is Done,” with lyrics by Weeks and music by Hol-
liday, later became the official Players’ Song in January 1952 (see chorus that follows). Bill Holliday passed away in June 1926 of “intestinal influenza,” barely six months after the Playhouse opened, but his song is sung at the start of every frolic, so he lives on at The Players.

“When the Day Is Done”

by Players Al Weeks and Bill Holliday

When the Day is done, with the setting sun,
For a friendly pipe then we long.
All of us gather here and we make good cheer,
With a mug of beer and a rousing song.

Though, the cold winds blow over drifting snow,
All our troubles disappear.
Sorrows make an end when you toast a friend,
In a mug of foaming beer.

The Players Playhouse is located at 3321 East Jefferson Avenue in Detroit. The structure, as it turns out, was built on a historical site. Before it was stolen, a plaque on the exterior of the Playhouse recorded the location of Parents Creek and the “Battle of Bloody Run,” in which the British were ambushed by Chief Pontiac and his men. According to an article in the Bulletin of the Detroit Historical Society, when excavations began for the Players Playhouse, “bulldozers kept turning up Indian arrowheads, shining buttons that long years prior to this had adorned the scarlet coats of his Majesty’s soldiers, metal parts of muskets and other memorabilia of battle.”

Jefferson Avenue parallels the Detroit River, and the Playroom in the Playhouse may once have had a view of the river (and supposedly the kegs of beer being brought in from Canada), though this is unlikely, as the location is too far from the river, and the Detroit Stoveworks probably blocked the view in any case. The Playhouse is built in the style of the sixteenth-century English Renaissance as indicated by the Michigan historical marker on the exterior of the building. According to the program for the Fiftieth Anniversary Frolic, the building “is the world’s first major structure to be built of cinder block.” The stone sculptor Corrado Parducci created the
ten gargoyles that line the front of the building below the roofline and may have created the Players’ crest above the entrance.

Even to this day, the structure has been altered very little, and much of the stage machinery is still the same as it was in 1925. Although the lighting equipment has been updated and sound equipment has been added, the stage still has a wooden grid (the structure at the top of the stage house that holds all the curtains and hanging scenery) forty-nine feet above the stage and a pinrail with hemp ropes. (The pinrail is a wooden rail with pegs to which the ropes that control the curtains and any flying scenery are tied—much like the rigging on a wooden sailing ship.) The pinrail is operated from the fly deck, roughly twenty feet above the stage floor to allow for storage of flats below the deck and to keep some of the stagehands out of the way in the limited wing space. The stage house
is eighty-seven feet high.\textsuperscript{146}

The stage is thirty-five feet deep and forty-one feet wide. The original travelers (the curtains that open and close during the performance, not the formal act drop) were donated by Phelps Newberry and were called “The Newberrys” for years afterward. Originally, the stage was flanked by two tall art deco statues, but C. C. Winningham quickly replaced these with large papier-maché urns, also sculpted by Parducci. These are still known as the “Winningham jugs” (or vases). When the mortgage was burned on 22 May 1945, the ashes were placed in the stage right vase. There have also been at least two Players, John Owen and Bill Rohloff, whose ashes were both interred in this vase.\textsuperscript{147} Above the stage’s proscenium arch is a mural of Shakespeare’s “Seven Stages of Man” painted by Thomas Di

\textbf{Interior of the Playhouse (Stage):} This picture is from the souvenir booklet for the opening of the Playhouse. This is the interior of the Playhouse looking toward the stage with DiLorenzo’s “Seven Stages of Man” clearly visible above the proscenium arch.
Lorenzo, who also painted the decorations on the ceiling timbers of the auditorium and the lobby. J. L. Hudson Company vice-president and general manager Oscar Webber provided furniture for the playroom and lobby.

The auditorium is tiered to allow for tables and chairs instead of rows of seats so that Players may socialize during the frolics (something undoubtedly learned from the Arts and Crafts society). C. Hayward Murphy purchased iron grillwork and lamps in London, and the railings, chandeliers, and some of the decorative elements were salvaged from the old Ritz Hotel in New York, “which fortu-
nately was razed while the Playhouse was being built.” The six tapestries that line the walls were donated by Players Henry T. Ewald, Clark, Charles W. Matheson, and Walter C. Piper and were painted by Paul Honoré. Honoré was a painter and a member of the Scarab Club, where he painted a “fireplace mural depicting different levels of club membership.” According to Player Bill Rohloff, there were supposed to be two more tapestries, but Honoré passed away before they could be completed. Player Kapp painted the banners that hang from the eight gargoyles in the auditorium that represent the different professions of those who work in theatre. Interestingly, there is one that represents the box office, or more accurately, the producers who provide the money for the productions. For a club that had more theatre supporters than theatre professionals, the inclusion of this banner in effect incorporated all members into the theatrical process. The Player described the all-nighter during which Kapp produced these:

It appears that Player William had worked for about thirty-six hours straight at the Playhouse and had done everything that should or could be done. He sat himself down to rest a few minutes, cast his critical eye around the auditorium—and then rushed for his car. He bought dyes, brushes, silks, spear heads and frames, and then made a zig-zag line for home; swallowed his supper (or breakfast) and then commandeered Mrs. Kapp to help him.

After twelve hours’ work, the associated Kapps gave us the symbolism of a Playhouse—starting with the Box Office, then the Artist, followed by the Author; then develops Comedy, represented by a laughing mask and about twenty-five smiling lips; but Tragedy stalks closely and takes the place of Laughter. Then follows the Costumier, and Music, and finally Light—or electricity and power.

The Playhouse and its contents are as much a tradition at The Players as tuxedos and frolics. The Players today refer with pride to the structure as the “Great Lady,” a term coined by Player Willard A. Rohloff during the club’s seventy-fifth year, and they believe it is one of the organization’s most unique elements.

With a successful season in their new home under their belts, the Players set about dealing with their debt. The first thing the board did was to verify that the bank considered the note good so that the ten signers would not be called upon to pay for it while The Players raised the necessary funds. Player Harry Sanger worked for the bank that issued the loan, and he assured vice-president New-
One of six Paul Honoré murals that depict a troupe of players
Detail of the auditorium: This shot of the auditorium shows it set up with tables for a frolic and also gives a clear view of Kapp’s banners and one of the Honoré murals.
berry “that the bank considered it one of its best pieces of paper and that The Players need have no apprehension regarding it while ways and means were being devised to liquidate The Players’ obligation.”

By December, the Finance Committee had come up with a possible solution. Its first plan was to collect $14,000 due from unpaid pledges. Then it would borrow $18,000 from the National Bank of Commerce. Those sums would allow The Players to pay off its land contract. Once they had the deed, it could be mortgaged for $65,000, which could then be used to repay the note. During the next season, they continued to collect on subscriptions and outfit their theatre. Because both the Fine Arts Society and the Theatre Arts Club used the space, these groups also contributed. When the Theatre Arts Club donated electric chimes for the theatre, the board was so touched by the gesture that they insisted that the Theatre

Lobby of the Playhouse: This is a modern photograph of the lobby, but little of the original architecture has changed. A corner of the most recent Coppin nude is visible above the bar.
Arts Club be the first group to use the chimes and that The Players would put on a performance for their benefit at that time. The chimes were formally presented on 16 January 1928.

Members of The Players did their part also. Player Joseph B. Mills, who worked for the J. L. Hudson Company, donated an original drawing by Ferriss of the interior of the Playhouse. This drawing is hung above the fireplace in the Playroom. Several Players donated books to flesh out their theatre library, which soon numbered more than four hundred volumes.

By May 1928, The Players had 422 members with assets totaling $188,995.49, with a mortgage of $74,100.00. As they were doing quite well, they felt secure enough to engage in some philanthropy. The first action taken by the board was to discount the rental of the Playhouse by charitable organizations. The Theatre Arts Club and the Fine Arts Society received (and still do to this day) a standard discount for their use of the Playhouse. In addition, The Players continued to do a children’s Christmas show, and they soon added a morning performance for the residents of the Protestant Children’s Home next door to the Playhouse. Because some of the Christmas entertainment consisted of hired performers, individual Players would donate the additional cost of having them perform for the orphans.

That same year The Players had a collection of the best one acts written by their members published by Walter V. McKee, Incorporated. Walter McKee was a Player who had moved to New York to start a publishing firm that specialized in rare and limited edition books. McKee negotiated with Samuel French, Incorporated, to “take care of the acting rights” for the plays in The Players Book of One Act Plays.

The Players established most of its significant traditions between its founding in 1910 and the end of 1929. This was also the time period during which many of its most beloved and esteemed members joined. During this era, the organization thrived enough to contribute to charities, build itself a permanent home, and inspire present-day members. By 1929, The Players was in its prime. Membership was close to four hundred, and there was a waiting list to join. Unfortunately, that would all change as the Great Depression settled over the country.