

The MacDowell Club of Baker

by
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Ever heard of the MacDowell Club or Edward MacDowell? Well, I hadn't until last October 2003, when Ron Brinton, on behalf of *The Record-Courier*, donated to Baker County Library three volumes of activity records of MacDowell Club of Baker. In the early twentieth century the Baker club presented to the community live musical performances, much the same as our Community Concert Association does today.

The club was named for Edward MacDowell, America's most popular pianist and composer around the turn of the last century. MacDowell Clubs were formed all over the U.S. to honor a musical genius, who tragically succumbed to dementia in 1908 at age 47. MacDowell Colony, a retreat for creative minds, which he founded on his farm in New Hampshire in 1895, is still in existence. Among works created there were Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, and Dubose and Dorothy Heyward's *Porgy and Bess*.

MacDowell Club Membership

Three volumes of records of Baker's MacDowell Club indicate it was in existence in Baker as far back as 1903. But mostly the volumes cover the club's activities from 1916 to 1938, including minutes of meetings, lists of club officers and membership, receipts and expenses, news clippings, and performance programs attached with straight pins.

Recently I sat down with Phyllis Badgley, whose memory goes back a generation farther than mine, to get her assistance in identifying some of the people who were active in the club. Not surprisingly many members were music teachers, either in the schools or privately, and many of Baker's most prominent citizens.

Members Birdie Bushnell, Dorothy West, Florence French, and Ava Steiger were piano teachers. Leroy Tibbels taught violin, H. R. Grant was the high school orchestra teacher (I took private violin lessons from him), and Jessie Hoskins and Bertha MacDougall taught voice. Louis Freitag, who was a jeweler at Palmer Bros. store, was a long-time band conductor. Many other club members were lawyers (Donald, Smith, Finch, Godwin, Hallock, Heilner, and Hubbard) and doctors (Dodson, Blakeley, Menzie McKim, Ming McKim, and Tom Higgins, father of the late Dr. John Higgins).

But mostly it was the wives of these men and others who made up the bulk of the membership and served as club officers, such as these women from the 1922 membership list, most identified only by their husband's name: Mrs. William Pollman, Mrs. Henry Wendt, Mrs. Roland T. Parker (Viola Parker was a photographer, a charter member, and daughter of famous photographer Martin

Hazeltine), Mrs. Wesley Andrews, Miss Edna Bement (my first grade teacher at North Baker in 1945), and Mrs. Louis Levinger (mother of the late Henry Levinger and grandmother of Dr. Larry Levinger).

The MacDowell Club's Steinway Piano

Performances sponsored by the MacDowell Club took place at several venues around town, such as the Methodist Church, (old) Baker High School auditorium, Carnegie Library, Clarick Theatre (formerly Baker Opera House), and Baker Elks Club, all gone now except the old high school on Washington Street. But the majority of the programs were held in Nevius Hall, also gone today, which stood just south of (now a parking lot) and was owned by St. Stephens Episcopal Church.

The club paid the church \$5.00 (later raised to \$7.50) per use. Added expenses were newspaper ads, printing of programs and tickets, renting a piano from one of the local music stores, plus paying to have it transported to and from Nevius Hall (\$15 to \$20) and tuned (\$5 to \$8). Local talent came free, but the club had to pay up to \$150 for out-of-town professionals. Ticket prices ran from 25-75 cents. Sometimes ticket revenue didn't cover expenses. Seven programs of the 1923-24 season netted an average \$35, whereas the next season's programs were much more successful financially, netting an average \$89.

In November 1927 the hassle of procuring and transporting pianos prompted a "discussion of buying a piano." But it wasn't until a year later that the club put \$100 into a piano fund and appointed a nine-member committee chaired by Florence Donald to look seriously into purchasing a piano. At the club's November 1928 meeting, the committee reported it had located pianos at two Baker music stores and one in Weiser: a Chickering available at Adler's (Leo Adler's father's store) for \$975, a Kimball at Brott's for \$770, and a Steinway at Conant's of Weiser for \$800. "The Steinway Piano," said the report, "might be purchased upon any terms desired by the club—the other two were cash or with interest payments." Club members cast written ballots which "showed preference for the Steinway."

The club immediately allocated \$150 "to seal the deal" and directed the piano committee to see to the Steinway's transportation to Nevius Hall. With a balance of \$650 owing, the club launched a very successful fund-raising drive, which brought in almost \$200 in the first two months. Magnanimously the club voted to allow free use of the Steinway to community organizations "for concert and solo work only, 'Jaze' [jazz] & dance purposes barred." By December 1929 club minutes reported "the best of all expectations, the final payment of \$175 upon the Steinway."

Depression Years Hard on Club

On October 5, 1929, the club held a dinner meeting “in the grill of the new Baker Hotel.” Afterwards members “retired to the beautiful Spanish Room.” (Hotel Baker—its official name—had just opened in August of 1929.) Two weeks later the stock market collapsed. Not only did the depression which followed contribute to financial problems for Eastern Oregon’s tallest building, MacDowell Club records show a decline in club revenue and activity. In November 1930 the club tabled a planned concert, “as the club was unable financially to sponsor any more guaranteed, commercial programs.” Instead it gave a free concert featuring The Little Theatre, a Baker High School boys group, which the club rewarded with a five-pound box of chocolates. During the 1931-32 season, future meetings, which had been held monthly, were “at the call of the president,” a position that proved hard to fill that year.

In the spring of 1936, the club put the Steinway piano “in trust” of the “Bishop’s Committee of Nevius Hall,” and, “due to lack of sufficient attendance at past programs to pay expenses...voted to become inactive for a time.” Two years later on March 10, 1938, club secretary Lenore Wolfe (home ec teacher and wife of shop teacher Glenn Wolfe) recorded the minutes of the last meeting. Led by President Mabel Romig (Baker County school superintendent), the club’s business focused on making arrangements for the Steinway to be tuned, updating its insurance policy, and continuing the piano in the possession of St. Stephens Church. Although officers were elected for the coming 1938-39 season, the third volume of club records contains no further minutes.

In Search of the MacDowell Club’s Steinway

The remaining question is, Where is the club’s Steinway today? A deeply yellowed sheet of paper found with the three volumes of club records gives a partial answer. It indicates that a final meeting of the club was held on May 12 (year not given) at which members voted to disband and “to present the grand piano to the Senior High School and donate the balance of the bank account (\$100) to the local Jay Cee’s.”

Could the present concert grand Steinway at Baker High School be the old MacDowell Club piano, the same one that was there when I was in high school in the 1950’s? I called classmate Pat Kirklin (BHS ’57) in California, whose father, the late Harold Kirklin, was BHS music director for many years. Kirklin remembers that when the present high school opened in 1950, his father talked 5J Superintendent Jim Evans into buying a new concert grand Steinway for \$4,000.

So, what happened to the MacDowell Club’s Steinway? Thinking that it might still be in the possession of the school district, I called music teacher Jeff Sizer, who confirmed that BHS has two Steinways. He said that last year a Steinway representative looked at both. The representative said the concert grand Steinway, the one played at community concerts, would cost \$90,000 to replace.

He said the other Steinway, a baby grand located in the BHS choir room, was built around 1930 and would have a replacement value of \$35,000.

So, there you have it. The baby grand Steinway, now unfortunately painted white, is the MacDowell Club Steinway bought in 1928 for \$800, the same instrument I sat in the room with for two periods a day—band and orchestra—for my three high school years in the late 1950's. The former MacDowell Club baby Steinway has been used by BHS music students for over sixty years.

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