

THE TRADITION OF NON-TRADITION: THE DILL PICKLE CLUB AS CATALYST FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

T rue to its hobo roots, the history of the Dill Pickle Club is muddled in myth, exaggeration and confusion. There are at least a dozen stories circulating about the club's inception, most of which were likely invented by its owner, John A. "Jack" Jones. And while the exact origins of the Dill Pickle are obscure, we can be sure of several things.

In 1914, Jones, a former union organizer of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), started a series of weekly forums at the Radical Book Shop, located at 817½ North Clark Street to talk about labor issues and other social concerns of the day.¹ A few months later, in 1915, gatherings exceeded the shop's capacity and operations were relocated to the best place Jones could find: a dilapidated barn on Tooker Alley, just off Dearborn Street, on the near north side of downtown Chicago. After the move, fellow labor organizer Jim Larkin soon joined him, as did hobo king, prostitute doctor and social agitator Ben Reitman, who

masterfully helped the club receive regular news coverage in *The Chicago Daily News* and *Chicago Tribune*.²

By 1917, Jones officially incorporated the Dill Pickle Artisans as a non-profit by the State of Illinois for the promotion of arts, crafts, literature and science. Long predating today's professionalized arts sector, it is doubtful the Pickle received any federal, state or private grant funding; however, it may have been eligible for tax write-offs and charitable donations.

"The Dill Pickles was founded by several groups of people who were convinced that they, nor for that matter no other person or group knew all there was to be known about art, literature, drama, music, science, social or political economy or any other problems confronting or bothering the human race." wrote Jones of the club's original intent, "The various groups responsible for the formation had one idea in mind: the thought that there should be some center where any idea or work

would be given a respectful hearing and brought before the public, which in the last analysis are the best judges of what they want.”³

Getting to the place proved to be something of an obstacle course — if one were nimble enough to fit through the “hole in the wall” between two adjacent buildings, they would be greeted by a dimly lit door with “DANGER” scrawled above and an arrow pointing to the entrance. A notice warned, “Step High, Stoop Low and Leave Your Dignity Outside,” while inside another read “Elevate Your Mind to a Lower Level of Thinking.” A tearoom, art exhibitions, stage, standing capacity for a reported 700, and without fail, the eccentric Jones, met visitors with the greeting, “Are you a nut about anything? Then you have to talk to the Picklers!”⁴

The club soon expanded programming to include one-act plays, poetry readings, dance performances, jazz dances, opera and almost anything else under the sun. Theatre grew to be a staple of the club’s identity, as the newly formed Dill Pickle Players performed original works by local authors, as well as contemporary playwrights Henrik Ibsen, H. L. Mencken, Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Schnitzler and George Bernard Shaw. The Pickle was

instrumental as one the first “little theatres” in the country, and Jones did everything from build the stage and wire the lighting system, to write, direct and act in productions.⁵

Modernist, cubist and other revolutionary art decorated the club’s walls. Drawing classes were held weekly, where one could sit in on a session with nude models (highly touted in marketing materials). Occasionally dancers would perform on the Dill stage, and dances with jazz bands were held Friday and Saturday nights. In addition, the center sold a small assortment of crafts and literature.

During these early years, Jones started the Dill Pickle Press, which did odd jobs for hire and produced promotional materials, like *The Dill Pickler* newsletter, the short-lived bulletin *The Creative World* and Jones’ technocratic book *Tech-Up*. The press published a number of small artist books, including Arthur Desmond’s *Lion’s Paw* (published under the alias of Richard Thurland) and works by Sol Omar and J. Edgar Miller. Jones was also rumored to have made counterfeit editions of out-of-print books, printed on yellowed stock, to make a quick buck.

The irreverent, and what would today be recognized as a Do-It-Yourself

(DIY) spirit, of the Dill Pickle is reflected in its print materials, which were letter pressed or featured woodcuts by Jones or J. Edgar Miller. These handbills, posters and cards were raw, crudely designed and quickly and inexpensively reproduced. Many have a sense of immediacy, urgency and a playful sense of humor. Typos and made up words abound, either intentional or unintended. And lecture titles, often regardless of the program's seriousness, were often given off-the-wall, sex themed and Dadaist titles.

Without question, the Pickle is best remembered for its regular schedule of lectures, debates and forums. Sundays proved to be infamous, as many soapboxers, reporters, students and hoboes made the club their destination after Bughouse Square, an outdoor soapbox forum located but a block away. As the venue's reputation grew, it attracted scholars, movers and shakers, including doctors from the most prestigious universities around the country.

Literary luminaries Sherwood Anderson, Maxwell Bondenheim, Theodore Dreiser, Ben Hecht, Alfred Kreymborg, Marry MacLane, Kenneth Rexroth, Carl Sandburg,

Upton Sinclair and Vincent Starrett were all regular Dill Picklers. Many activists and political speakers attended the club's forums as well. These included Clarence Darrow, Emma Goldman, Big Bill Haywood, Hippolyte Havel, Lucy Parsons, Dr. Ben Reitman and Nina Spies.⁶

Still, the most extraordinary thing about the Dill Pickle was the incredible mix the club seemed to attract. Where else could one hear from both a scientist and a panhandler on the same evening? Many who have written about the era reminisce about the club's wild conglomeration of academics, social workers, hoboes, prostitutes, socialists, anarchists, con men, single tax advocates, religious zealots and most any other perspective therein. Equally important were the many characters who would dutifully harangue and heckle speakers, such as Statistical Slim Brundage, "Red" Martha Biegler, Elizabeth Davis (queen of the soapboxers), Little Birdie Weber, Harry "Kill Christ" Wilson, "Sirfessor" F. M. Wilkesbarr, "Whispering" Sullivan and "Triphammer" Johnson.⁷

Admissions and food sales kept the club afloat financially. The club

served salads, sandwiches, sodas, chocolates and bootleg gin, which Jones was cited for innumerable times during prohibition. To get through slow times the club also held masquerade balls several times a year and hosted parties for college sororities and fraternities.

It is important to realize that while The Dill Pickle was a unique institution, it did not function alone. The club was part of a broad bohemian social movement that combined art, intellectualism and activism. Named after the Chicago water tower, the Towertown district grew to house numerous salons, forums and clubs of a similar nature. Many of these organizations closed as quickly as they opened. A partial, but by no means definitive, list of clubs in Chicago at the time consisted of:

Art Colony
 Blue Fish
 Blue Goose Club
 Cheese Box
 The Cloister
 Coal Scuttle
 Copper Kettle
 Cuckoo Clam Club
 Fabian Club
 Great Dane
 Green Mask
 Grey Cottage
 House of Blazes
 House of Correction
 Intellectual Inferno
 Knowledge Box (Hobo College)
 Lower Depths
 The Oasis
 Phalanstery
 The Pindarians
 Seven Arts Club
 Social Science Institute
 Suicide Inn
 Temple of Wisdom
 & Wind Blew Inn.⁸

Vital statistics and documentation of nearly all of these ventures are but a distant memory. Operating in an era of Comstock laws and government repression, many may have purposefully disposed of evidence of radical involvement.

Chicago bohemianism also reflected artistic and intellectual shifts that were taking place throughout America leading up to World War I, and, most specifically, those developing in Greenwich Village. It is unclear what communication existed between Chicago and New York, but The Pickle drew generously from the model set by Floyd Dell's Liberal Club, a space that featured an eclectic mix of lectures, one-act plays, art and discussions. Feminism, sex, radicalism, labor and American involvement in the war were among the topics regularly discussed at the Liberal Club. Other New York institutions that played a significant role in early Greenwich Village were Polly's restaurant, Guido Bruno's garret and publishing house, and the publications *The Masses*, *Mother Earth*, *Pearson's* and *The Little Review*.⁹

Chicago emulated its New York counterparts, but also adopted a more working class and openly revolutionary approach. The artists, writers, intellectuals and political dissidents in Chicago embraced the outcast, the hobo and the tramp – and hence *hobohemia* came to define the merger of intellectualism and the spirit of the migratory worker.

West Madison Street became a “main stem” littered with flophouses (single room occupancy hotels), burlesque theatres, cheap diners, haircutting schools, used bookshops and underclass saloons. Restaurants such as Schlogl's and Hinky Dinks served up cheap grub to “the great unwashed,” while magazines like *The Anvil*, *Chicago Literary Times*, *Earth*, *Kapustkan*, *Poetry* and *The Rebel Poet* provided a forum to discuss the new, liberated society.¹⁰ In addition, hoboes invented an entire culture based on their shared values, with dress, song, language, art and even cuisine that flourished in the tramp districts, train yards and hobo jungles in and around Chicago.

As the Great Depression set in, the Dill Pickle's fortunes declined. By the early 1930s, Chicago mobsters made the Pickle their hangout, often intimidating customers and creating a nuisance. Regulars complained the club was becoming too commercial and catered to a tourist crowd eager to discover a bohemia that was quickly fading. To exacerbate things, rents began to skyrocket as the near north side became increasingly gentrified. In 1933, when the club faced tax difficulties, it signaled the beginning of the end.¹¹

Jones made a few last-ditch efforts to save the club, the strangest of which was the production a wooden duck sold as a fund-raiser. Named the Du Dil Duck, the toy supposedly brought the bearer good fortune. It did not save Jones' club, and after several failed attempts to reopen in other locations, the Dill Pickle Club closed its doors for good in 1934. Jones fell onto serious hard times, lived off welfare, worked briefly for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and died penniless in 1940.¹²

Much is to be learned from the Dill Pickle and Chicago hoboemia. Several historians have labeled the bohemian era the first "lost generation" and a precursor to contemporary counterculture.¹³ Hoboemia undoubtedly had a large influence on the beatnik generation because of its interest in poetry, literature and radicalism, as evidenced in the wanderlust travels of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. The makeshift, participatory nature of yesteryear's public forums also bares many resemblances to today's movement of DIY, decentralized art spaces. However, there are significant differences.

In the 1910s and 20s, bohemian culture was constituted by the working class, and included people from many walks of life. Young, old, rich, poor, conservative, liberal, religious and agnostic all spoke of their visions and ideas of changing society through public forums. As counterculture evolved it moved from an inclusive desire to change society to establishing a new subcultural utopia, clearly delineating itself from the mainstream. By the 1960s, Abbie Hoffman declared, "Don't trust anyone over 30" while Timothy Leary encouraged hippies to "turn on, tune in, drop out." This tendency is still prevalent in today's myriad of subcultures largely defined by music and fashion preferences.

Similarly, the art of speaking one's mind in public has by and large disappeared. Soapboxing – speaking openly on the street – is carried on by only the few and brave, most often missionaries largely unaware of the history of their practice. Coupled with the hustle and bustle of today's hyper-paced world, humanity has distanced itself from such public forms of civic participation.

Yet, there are signs of a contemporary resurgence in public discourse. While the Liberal Club promoted itself as “a meeting place for those interested in new ideas,” today’s exchange of ideas is taking place primarily through electronic communication, namely the Internet. Social media writers Douglas Rushkoff, Henry Jenkins and Lawrence Lessig have authored compelling arguments for this new open-source based civic engagement that is ultimately changing the way in which we access information and communicate ideas.

Still, with every technology something is lost. And with the disappearance of public forums like the Dill Pickle Club, we have lost an important facet of our culture: face-to-face conversation and airing one’s ideas before a general public. The importance of physical space and the human interaction that it enables cannot be overlooked in light of the age of the Internet.

We stand at a historic juncture, equal if not more politically turbulent, than the times of the Dill Pickle. While humanity learns to adjust to this new technology, we continue to face an ever-growing number of crises: economic recession, a shrinking

middle class, any number of environmental problems and threat of nuclear militarism, to name but a few. It would only be appropriate during our own trying times to look towards the models set by previous generations in periods of economic and political distress.

The Dill Pickle Club stands as one model that can help guide contemporary culture workers. The club presented a sustaining model that survived 18 years – a remarkable feat for a venture of its type. It also presented a confrontive and irreverent critique of life as we know it, and as such, an essential part of democratic society – one in which artists, activists and regular people came together to learn, dream, laugh, discuss, entertain, agitate, argue, organize ... and ultimately *persevere* in creating a more vibrant, informed and freer society.

Marc Moscato, 2009

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Fagin, Sophia, *Public Forums in Chicago* (Chicago: Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Illinois, 1940) 38-39.
- ² Reitman, Ben, "Highlights in Dill Pickle History" unpublished, Ben Reitman papers, Richard J. Daley Library, University of Illinois.
- ³ Jones, John A. *The Creative World*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (Chicago: Dill Pickles Press, 1931)
- ⁴ Rosemont, Franklin, ed., *The Rise and Fall of the Dil Pickle: Jazz-Age Chicago's Wildest & Most Outrageously Creative Hobohemian Nightspot* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishers, 2003) 48, 174-175.
- ⁵ Reitman, "Highlights in Dill Pickle History"
- ⁶ Rosemont, *The Rise and Fall of the Dil Pickle*, 31-35
- ⁷ *ibid*, 24-28
- ⁸ Fagin, *Public Forums in Chicago*, 40.
- ⁹ Richwine, Keith Norton, *The Liberal Club: Bohemia and the Resurgence in Greenwich Village, 1912-1918* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc., 1969) 37-89.
- ¹⁰ Bruns, Roger, *Knights of the Road: A Hobo History*, (New York: Methuen, 1980) 164.
- ¹¹ "Inventory of the Dill Pickle Club Records, 1906-1941, bulk 1915-1935" <<http://www.newberry.org/collections/FindingAids/dillpickle/dillpickle.html>>.
- ¹² Rosemont, *The Rise and Fall of the Dil Pickle*, 35-37
- ¹³ Stansell, Christine, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Book, 2000) 73-119.

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