

November 2022 – Did You Know? Joseph Brewer, Founder of Blythefield CC

“People who say it can’t be done should not interrupt those who are doing it.”

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

Last month our clubhouse was closed for construction – a lot of construction! The result will be its most dramatic facelift in decades. The clubhouse has had several renovations in the past, but none as big as this. The last time there has been as much construction activity at Blythefield CC was over 90 years ago, when our founder renovated the former auto club facility to create a completely new club, naming it Blythefield. In honor of our founder, we now call our main dining room “J. Brewer’s”. So, who was J. Brewer?

His full name was Joseph Henry Brewer. He founded Blythefield in 1928 (or maybe it was 1929, but that’s another story). He was a very successful Grand Rapids businessman in first half of the 20th century. He made his first fortune in the utility business. He later went into banking, continuing his upward financial successes until the Great Depression, which severely impacted the fortunes of most businesses, Mr. Brewer’s included. According to one source, he had “prestige as one of the representative citizens and men of affairs in his native city of Grand Rapids.”



1903



1926



mid-1930's

His story begins long before he was one of the most prominent businesspeople in the Midwest. Here's a brief bio:

- Joseph Henry Brewer was born in 1875, a son of Lucian B. and Annie (Escott) Brewer. Lucian had been an early pioneer settler in Grand Rapids, moving here from New York in 1844. In addition to “Joe”, as Joseph Henry Brewer was called, Lucien and Annie Brewer had two other sons.
- Joe's formal education was grammar and high school in Grand Rapids. He never attended college and didn't even finish high school. He learned about business at a very young age, through his early work experiences. His initial foray into business was as a newsboy, a job he started when he was a lad of seven years.
- He developed shrewd working habits as a teenager, in various occupations that gave him not only financial rewards but also contributed to his business education. He studied stenography, and at the age of sixteen he was appointed court reporter for local trial courts, a position he held for the next 15 years.
- Meanwhile, in 1894 he married Mary Augusta Hillyer (1873-1967), who had moved to Grand Rapids when she was a child. They met at a young age. When they married, Joe was just 19 years old and she was a couple years older. Here is the wedding invitation:

Dr. Frances S. Hillyer
requests the honor of your presence
at the marriage of her daughter
Mary Augusta,
to

Mr. Joseph Henry Brewer,
on Thursday morning, October eleventh,
at eleven o'clock,
St. Mark's Church,
Grand Rapids, Michigan,
1894.

At Home
after November first,
10 East Avenue

- The Brewers had two children, Hillyer Brewer (1895-1898), who died as a small child in a tragic accident at home, and Joseph Hillyer Brewer (1898-1990). The younger son was known as Joseph to avoid confusion with his father. Joseph would go on to both Dartmouth College and Oxford

University, becoming a highly respected journalist and writer. He was also president of Olivet College for several years.

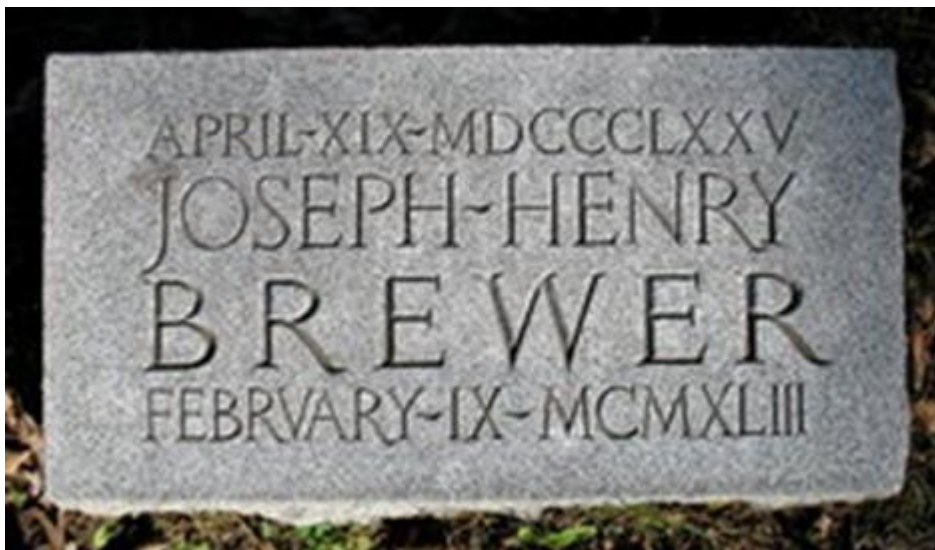
- The Brewer family lived in several different homes in the city during their almost 50 years of marriage. Augusta Brewer (she did not use Mary, her first name) was very involved in local society events, especially flower gardening. Joe Brewer took some time for recreation – he was a member of Kent CC – but he was more focused on business throughout his life.
- Joe Brewer was very industrious, starting various ventures and making good connections with important businessmen along the way. For example, during his years in stenography, he also became involved as manager of the Grand Rapids Sticky Flypaper Company, where he met John W. Blodgett. He was successful with some of these early businesses, but financially these paled in comparison to his later endeavors in the utility and banking industries.
- In the early part of the 20th Century, Joe got into the burgeoning utilities industry, eventually owning several companies. By 1912 he organized the American Public Utilities Company, acquiring and combining utility operations located in several Midwest states. Under his leadership, this company became “one of the strongest and most influential corporations of its kind in the United States”.
- In 1924 he sold his public utility interests at a considerable profit, using the proceeds to obtain controlling interest in several Grand Rapids banks. He also purchased both the Pantlind Hotel (now the Amway Grand Hotel) and the Morton House.
- Joe was philanthropic throughout his life, sharing both his wealth and business acumen in various ways. He was the president of the West Michigan State Fair before the Great War (later known as World War I). He was a member of the vestry of Mark’s Episcopal Church for several years. He advocated for building good roads as motorcars became more popular. He was an advocate for Grand Rapids, keeping his business interests headquartered here rather than in larger cities.
- The banks he owned expanded significantly throughout the “Roaring 20’s”. Like the rest of the entrepreneurs of the time, however, his holdings were

severely hurt during the Great Depression. (How this turn of events impacted Blythefield CC, which had its grand opening just a few months before the 1929 market crash, will be explored in a future DYK).

- Joe died in 1943 at age 67, after a lingering heart condition. His death was front page news in the Grand Rapids Press, which listed some of his many community interests. To see more, click on the link:

[GR Press - Death Takes J. H. Brewer.pdf](#)

He is buried in Oakhill Cemetery. Here is tombstone:



Of special interest to Blythefield members is when Mr. and Mrs. Brewer began farming in Plainfield Township. In 1912 they bought an existing dairy farm and built a grand home on the bluff of the Grand River just east of what is now Blythefield CC. They both had an interest in farming. He raised prize dairy cows, and she pursued her interest in gardening. A future DYK will explore their farm interests, which eventually resulted in the creation of Blythefield CC.

Brent Rector

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p.s. I'm still in search of artifacts of Blythefield history. There will be a place to display some of these in our new clubhouse. If anyone has a piece of BCC

memorabilia, or a BCC photo you'd like to share or even an old scorecard, please let me know.

p.p.s. Does anyone have information about a long-ago Belmont resident named Cindy Milligan? There was an early 1970's newspaper story about her caddying at Blythefield when she was a teenager. I would appreciate any lead to help me locate her.