

November 2021 - Did you know? Origin of Our Clubhouse

Let's go back to when our clubhouse was built. This is a timely topic, since this old building will soon be replaced now that the membership has approved construction financing. There is an interesting history of our clubhouse.

We all know that Joseph Brewer founded Blythefield CC and that it opened in 1929. With great expectations, he envisioned and then created a private golf and country club during the prosperity of the "roaring 20's". Did you know that he did not build our clubhouse? The original clubhouse building goes back even further, since Blythefield was not the first club on the bluff just above the northwest corner of Northland Drive and West River Road. Our clubhouse was built as an auto club, when horseless carriages were becoming popular. When that original auto club didn't work, some locals thought the building could be repurposed as a prison farm, or for treatment of people afflicted with tuberculosis or for those addicted to "the drink". Only later did Mr. Brewer become involved.

Here's the story: Our clubhouse was built in 1913, just before "the Great War" (now known as World War I). It was called Plainfield Country Club, a destination for Grand Rapidians who could afford an automobile during the early stages of the motorcar revolution. Those fortunate enough to own a car wanted a place to take a drive into the country. They built a grand clubhouse on the high bluff just above a bend in the Grand River. Here's a photo of what our clubhouse used to look like when it was an auto club:



Shortly before Plainfield Country Club opened, the Grand Rapids Herald had a full-page article about the clubhouse construction, with many details on how it was built. I've reproduced this article at the end of this DYK.

The formal opening of Plainfield Country Club was announced in the July 15, 1913, Grand Rapids News, stating that the new club was planning a grand party for that night with dinner and dancing:

“The club is situated on a hill at the foot of which is the village of Plainfield, and is just far enough from the busy city – nine miles – to make the trip by automobile an enjoyable one. The building was erected at a cost of \$70,000, and is considered one of the model club houses of the country.”

The next day's Grand Rapids Herald reported on the opening festivities with this headline: “Plainfield Club Formally Opened”. The article started this way:

“Scaling the heights of Austerlitz^[1] last night, a host of automobiles carried over 200 members to the site of the new Plainfield Country club to attend the celebration of the formal opening. It was a gathering of distinction comprising as it did the business and professional citizens of Grand Rapids, and the gay display of beautifully dressed women.

“The procession of enthusiasts headed toward the club as early as 6 o'clock and the line of machines northward ended only at midnight. Fully 170 were at the banquet. The gayety and pleasure of the feast was a tribute to the will of J. E. Bureau, steward of the new club.”^[2]

^[1] The name Austerlitz requires some explanation. Back then there was a small community called Plainfield village, just down the hill from the new auto club. The village's post office had been renamed Austerlitz because Plainfield was also the name of another post office elsewhere in Michigan. Some local folks also referred to the village itself as Austerlitz.

^[2] The Herald article also reported that the opening event included a guest speaker, Philip T. Colgrove of Hastings, a former state senator who became the president of the Michigan State Good Road Association. He spoke “on good roads and the great need of active work along these lines in Michigan”, emphasizing the necessity of raising the standard in Michigan “as a good road center” so it would be compared favorably to “other states that have long lauded their superiority in roads to the state of Michigan.”

Although the new auto club got off to a rousing start, finances were soon an issue. In August 1913, the Grand Rapids Press reported that the club's owner, Grand Rapids Auto Realty Company, intended to correct this by increasing membership from 240 to 500 and raising the membership fee. As it turned out, this lofty goal was never met. The club was planned to remain open during the winter months, but by February 1914 it was shuttered until spring.

During 1914 the club had several events to increase usage and membership, and also appealed to members for more funds needed to pay off the debt. Attempts were made to

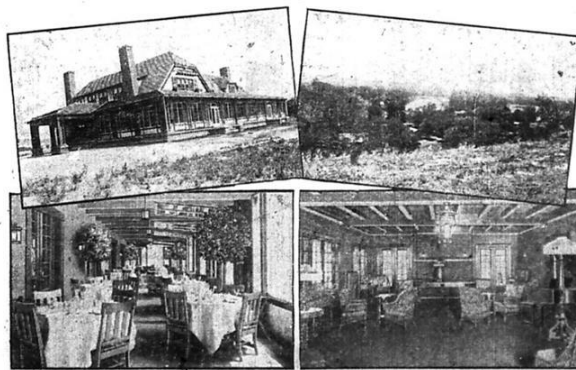
reorganize ownership and refinance the debt. Creditors from the original construction had still not been paid. As originally envisioned, Plainfield Country Club was to have a golf course but it was never built due to lack of funds. Around this time it came to be known as the Plainfield Auto Club.

The auto club again opened for the 1915 season, but only after a reorganization in which the Grand Rapid Automobile Owners' Association took over the operation. Over the winter the auto owners' association had raised enough funds to purchase the property. According to the June 14, 1915, Grand Rapids Press, "About 150 members of the Grand Rapids Automobile Owners' club attended the formal opening of the organization at the old Plainfield Country club clubhouse Saturday night."

The Automobile Owners' Association was not able to operate beyond the 1915 season. The January 2, 1916, edition of the Grand Rapids Herald had an advertisement for sale of the property was by closed bids. (See below.) The offer was for more than the clubhouse. It also included 128 acres of land and "two modern farm houses on the property, with barns, windmills, etc. with two apple orchards". The notice of sale said this:

"The total money spent on this property was \$105,000.00. However, on account of financial difficulties into which the Club fell, and because there does not seem to be sufficient demand among the citizens of Grand Rapids for a Club House situated at this distance from the city, the Executive Committee has determined to put the entire property up for sale."

THE BEAUTIFUL PLAINFIELD CLUB PROPERTY FOR SALE



This property consists of 128 acres of good farm land, with 80 acres ready for cultivation. It is situated on a bluff overlooking a curve of Grand River at Plainfield, Michigan, about ten miles from Grand Rapids, on one of the best stretches of roads out of the city. The beauty of the view up and down the river must be seen to be appreciated. There are two modern farm houses on the property, with barns, windmills, etc., together with two apple orchards and two or three acres that are wooded.

The Club House itself is one of the most completely equipped and best built of the Country Clubs of Michigan. No expense was spared in the building, equipment, or furniture. The main building is cement with a tile roof, and has a complete steam heating plant, gasoline-electric lighting system, electric motor driven water pump with complete plumbing throughout.

The barns and sheds are all in perfect condition, as is also the house covering the power plant.

As the first floor consists of a kitchen, pantry, dining room, living room, smoking room and large porches; and as the second story consists of bedrooms and a complete bathroom, the main building could be made into a wonderfully attractive country house for a private family at a nominal cost.

The total money spent on this property was \$105,000.00. However on account of financial difficulties into which the Club fell, and because there does not seem to be sufficient demand among the citizens of Grand Rapids for a Club House situated at this distance from the city, the Executive Committee has determined to put the entire property up for sale.

The Chairman of the Committee will receive sealed bids for the purchase of the property up to and including Saturday, January 15th, 1916; the Committee reserving the right to reject any or all bids.

This is a most unusual opportunity for a Club Proprietor to secure a Club Property, or a private individual to secure a country estate at considerably LESS THAN ONE-HALF its original cost.

Those desiring to inspect the property will please see one of the members of the Committee.

WM. H. GAY, Chairman, H. C. CORNELIUS, VICTOR M. TUTHILL, ADOLPH H. BRANDT, FRANK E. LEONARD,
Berkey & Gay Furniture Co. Wolverine Brass Co. Baldwin, Tutbill & Botton. Grand Rapids Savings Bank. H. Leonard & Sons.

Those interested in purchasing included Kent County, which wanted the clubhouse and property for local needs. One county idea, reported in the June 28, 1916, Grand Rapids Press, was for the county to convert the clubhouse into a home for “treatment and cure of those suffering from the drink habit”. About the same time, the county also considered using the clubhouse for a tuberculosis sanatorium. Even earlier, the county sheriff wanted the property for a “prison farm”, with the clubhouse housing prisoners who would work the adjacent land. None of the county’s ideas for repurposing the clubhouse ever worked out. With no buyer, the club just closed.

Title to the club’s property went to Joseph Brewer’s wife Augusta in 1917. Sometime later, Mr. and Mrs. Brewer began using the clubhouse for private functions and for a time also operated it as Grandview Auto Club. By 1927 Mr. Brewer made plans to create a new club with a golf course, and this is how Blythefield Country Club was created.

In retrospect, it is clear that the timing for the original club was not good. The second decade of the 19th Century became a period of worldwide chaos from which neither the United States nor Michigan was insulated. War had started in 1914, with the U.S. entering it in the spring of 1917. The 1918 armistice ended the Great War, but by then a world-wide flu pandemic had reached West Michigan.

So here we are now – over a century later – about to begin a new era. Blythefield will have a new clubhouse, replacing a building that has had an interesting history over the past 100 plus years. May there be many more decades of good times and fellowship as we move out of the old and into the new.

Brent Rector

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Below is a full page from the June 15, 1913, GR Herald about the original construction of the clubhouse. The photo was taken in 1913, from the southwest. The Herald article also had an extensive description of what went into our grand old clubhouse. If you can’t read the article, let me know and I’ll send you the text.

THE HEATING PLANT
 In this Building Was Installed by the
Knee Heating Co.
 708 Wealthy, S. E.
 Phones: CItz. 2870; Bell, M. 546

THE PLUMBING
 In this Building Was Installed by
C. G. KUENNEN
 115 Crescent, N. W.

SHANK CHANDELIER SHOP
 Designing Manufacturing Repairing
 High-Grade Lighting Fixtures
 Special Work Our Specialty
NOTE—We furnished All the Lighting Fixtures for the Auto Club.
 37 Fountain St. CItz. Phone 7564

GASOLINE ENGINE GENERATOR
 For the Electric Lighting System at the Plainfield Country Club.
GRAND RAPIDS ELECTRIC CO.
 Electrical Contractors
 9 South Division Avenue

The Painting on this Building Was Done by
FRED J. BLYMEIR
 Wall Paper and Painters' Supplies
 Painting, Paper Hanging and Calomising
 426 Stocking Ave., West Side
 Grand Rapids, Mich. Telephone 1740; Ed. R. 2063
 All Orders Will Receive Prompt Attention
 Hardwood Finishing a Specialty

BUILDING PROGRESS
 This Week's News in Building and Realty

PRIDE OF GRAND RAPIDS' MOTORISTS
 Plainfield Country Club Building is Receiving Finishing Touches.
 A Credit to the City and Its Artisans and Its Business Men.



PLAINFIELD COUNTRY CLUBS BELENDING BUILDING WITH VERANDAS ENCLOSED.

The handsome club house is being finished in a most beautiful way by the Plainfield Country Club, it will be the pride of the Grand Rapids motorists in a building that commands a wide area of beautiful scenery of Grand Rapids.

Setting the first stone in the west to a handsome and useful building, the Plainfield Country Club, it will be the pride of the Grand Rapids motorists in a building that commands a wide area of beautiful scenery of Grand Rapids.

The handsome building was planned by "Carter" of the "Carter" firm of architects.

The architectural design of all the rooms of the club house make a complete and beautiful picture of a large motorist or club house building. The design of the great dining and reception room is particularly noteworthy. The dining room is a large hall with a high ceiling and a large chandelier. The reception room is a large hall with a high ceiling and a large chandelier.

The main entrance to the building is a handsome and useful building. The main entrance is a large hall with a high ceiling and a large chandelier.

The main entrance is a large hall with a high ceiling and a large chandelier.

ing feature combined with the greatest of art.

The dining room is a large hall with a high ceiling and a large chandelier.

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ARTISTIC BUILDERS' HARDWARE

The hardware trim of your home helps to give it character. A painstaking trim put on without haste and careful selection is a source of perpetual satisfaction. We have trained experts whose whole duty is to advise and furnish estimates on plans.

FOSTER, STEVENS & CO.
 137-139 Monroe Avenue, N. W.

The Roofing and Cornice Work

For this Building Was Put on by
GLENDON A. RICHARDS COMPANY
 JAS. VANDERWAALS, Pres. and Mgr.
 325 and 327 Scribner Ave.

THE SCREENS

In this Building Were MANUFACTURED and INSTALLED By the
GRAND RAPIDS SCREEN CO.
 GEO. E. STICKNEY, Sec. and Treas.
 103 Campau Avenue, N. W.

We Furnished the
FACE BRICK

On this Building'
S. A. MORMAN & CO.
 Fuel and Builders' Supplies
 Main Office and Brick Display
 70 Ionia Avenue, N. W.

BURT PORTLAND CEMENT

Used Exclusively in the Construction of this Club House.

A. B. KNOWLSON CO.
 DISTRIBUTORS
 156 Monroe Avenue, - Grand Rapids, Mich.

We Installed the Fireplace and Fixtures in this Building

Androns, Grates and Screens. Largest Stock and Assortment in the City.
GRAND RAPIDS MARBLE & FIREPLACE CO.
 KEELER BUILDING, ARCADE