Remarks for the Improvement Association, delivered on September 15, 2015

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Remarks for the Improvement Association  
September 15, 2015

At our annual dinner, we remember those who were lost to us in the past year. This year was Chuck Roger’s time. Chuck lived to be 90 years of age. When we reflect on his life and Stella’s, we are drawn to their commitment to our community and their support of it with their philanthropy. For the past half century, Grand Rapids and West Michigan are the beneficiaries of men and women who are giants in generosity. Chuck and Stella are among them. When the history of our time here is written, philanthropy will be a prominent chapter and their home and deeds should be recorded. While there is a spotlight found on the non-profits and the significant, positive difference the Rogers’ gifts made, we should remember also that together, they inherited and ran a highly successful business, employing many, that earned them the money they gave away.

We have also then this occasion to recognize our members who reach 90, 95, and 100 years of age. Though no one hit one of those marks exactly, we should congratulate Ralph Hauenstein who is now 103 and George Gope who celebrated his 97th birthday recently. Usually we attribute such long life to clean and _______ living. In the case of my own colleagues, I would not involve that attribution. Instead, I surmise their long life is due to good genes, a useful life, good relationships, and a sense of humor. Whatever the cause of their longevity, they should know we, their friends, are grateful for it. I believe the longevity has prompted a new rule from the Secret Committee. If you die before you are 90, you receive a reprimand and a demerit. The Committee is still seeking a way for you to expunge the demerit from your record should some fall short of the minimum age.

We must properly recognize our newer members. ______ Hoffins, Marty Allen, and Larry Robson. You have ______, I am sure, that our new members do not have the truly contemporary Christian names that we seek, and so far, are unsuccessful. A few years ago, I began to analyze the first names of our ________, and was surprised how unpopular most have become. Only a few are used today and these for traditional reasons or such as paying deference to grandpa or great-grandpa as mine was in its day. Modernism is far removed from our objective. We even disdain some of its tenants because wisdom will a non-modernist boast is more descriptive of our membership. We do like to keep up. We are aware of the contemporary world and it would be just if it listened to us on occasion. For in our constant search to remain relevant and contemporary, I thought more popular names might give the right impression. Yet we seek in vain. I will devote next year to the analysis of our newcomers’ names, ______, Marty, and Larry. They are not particularly distinguished except by those who hold them, and my work may yield unexpected revelations. We cannot find Noah’s, Jacob’s, Joshua’s, or Trip’s. I am amazed at the number of Old Testament names bestowed on infant boys. When I look at their parents, I am not convinced that they are aware of the historic or ________ significance of the name they will use at his christening. That has its encouraging side. These names may be a fad that will pass, and Ralph and Richard, ______ and Don, Bob and Larry, Martin and Bert may yet return to the contemporary list. The members who do have acceptable Christian names are John Charles, John, and George. George, as I stated before, is used mostly by Asians. I understand there is now a character for it in Chinese. I’m afraid Earl may pass into history. There are not many earls in England giving their bastard sons that name anymore. And if any of them have...
It is time, I believe, to reveal to our newcomers the history and purpose of this Secret Committee. In the 1940s, shortly after the Improvement Association was founded by  , there was a need to deal with some matters of desertion and discipline. thought it best to deal with these matters privately, so he appointed a committee to deliberate. He informed the membership that he recused himself from being on the Committee. Thus the Secret Committee came into existence. Though it does not select new members of the Association, all members are approved and placed on probation, unsecured in their places, until the Secret Committee removes them from probationary status and grants them all the rights and privileges of full membership. The process often takes years. For instance, Chuck Royce was still on probation when he left us, and has just now been granted full membership posthumously.

For years, I thought Harold Hadly was chair of the Secret Committee, and that hunch was substantiated when in his last days, he confessed to one of his Porter Hills confidants that indeed he was. In fact, for years he was the only member of the Secret Committee, a fact that played on his conscious and led him, I’m sure, to the confession. He was like a one man grand jury. He was not bothered by this and felt he was capable of handling the complexities and decisions the Committee is required to consider. He was worried that he might fail to make the proper appointments before he could no longer do so. His appointees were confided to his confidant to make sure they were made, and so the confidant informed those who had Harold’s blessing.

Through a circuitous route, I was told that I was removed from probation a few years ago, but not informed. George, of course, has been a full member for some time, and Ralph, because of his distinction and age, was put on a fast track to full membership. Dick is an anomaly. He was taken off probation with conditions. The condition related to his contributions of humor to the group. There are two factors that the committee is watching closely. Are his stories funny enough and do they possess the prescribed amount of _______? If he falters, I doubt if he will receive anything worse than a reprimand. Earl will be ready for full membership after the Secret Committee completes an investigation of his lineage to be sure he is eligible to be in this group. I don’t know why Bert and Don are still in limbo. They came in together. I think Bert has to improve his attendance, and if he does, the _______ of ______ will easily make it. I learned from my sources that Bob, John, and J.C. are moving without obstacles toward the goal. Although, J.C.’s youth may require him to remain on probation for an extra year.

Our most recent recruits are just beginning their journey toward their fulfillment. Dick has the advantage since his father _____ was a statement of this group and hinted to me that he served a term of the Secret Committee. Larry and Marty have to take their ______. I’m sure they have to moral fiber, yet the Secret Committee never has permitted all seated around the table to be without probation. Poor Peter Cook, one of the most upstanding and generous, to be member at anything in the Improvement Association’s history, had his probation lifted only two years before he passed on. The only reason for what some might consider a travesty in that too many were probationless.
The Secret Committee, many years ago, indorsed Susan’s attendance at meetings. Her participation resulted in the only written history of the Improvement Association, along with much good fun and picture taking. Susan has become the conscience of our Association. That is a good thing because her judgment is sound and she is more friendly than threatening and __________ us. I’m not sure any of us feel the need for a conscience, but we all need Susan’s participation. The club would not be the same without her. I learned that the Secret Committee is considering a special honorary status to which Susan would be assigned. Attached to it will be considerable privileges which will accrue to her. I was not told what they would be. Maybe we will know in a year.

You may wonder why the Secret Committee has shared so much information about its processes and decisions. So do I. Most of it came (from?) the person who I call the Porter Hills confidant. He isn’t even a member, only a confidant of Harold Hadley’s and some present member. You know who you are. The only other member whom I have known to have some direct contact is Dick Young who becomes uncharacteristically quiet for a time after he receives the word. Within a few days, however, he becomes an active email communicator of the Secret Committee direction. I have never known him to _________ or edit its directives in any way.

If the Committee continues to channel information to me, I will pass it onto you. Each year, it affirms the mission of the Improvement Association and each year, it enthusiastically endorses the purpose so eloquently expressed by the departed and beloved Jack ________:

Words of great wisdom
And ___________ humor
Fairly describes our meetings.
Our objectives are vague,
Our accomplishments frail;
Since we aim at nothing
We can hardly fail.