

Centennial Reflections

*Essays from the
Oakwood Historical Society*

The Old Barn Club and Runnymede Playhouse

By Harry G. Ebeling

There were two buildings in Oakwood that no longer exist and which always bring comments when I talk about them in various presentations about Oakwood history. The one no one remembers because it has been gone so long, and the other brings back memories and wistful regrets that it's no longer here. I write of The Old Barn Club and Runnymede Playhouse.



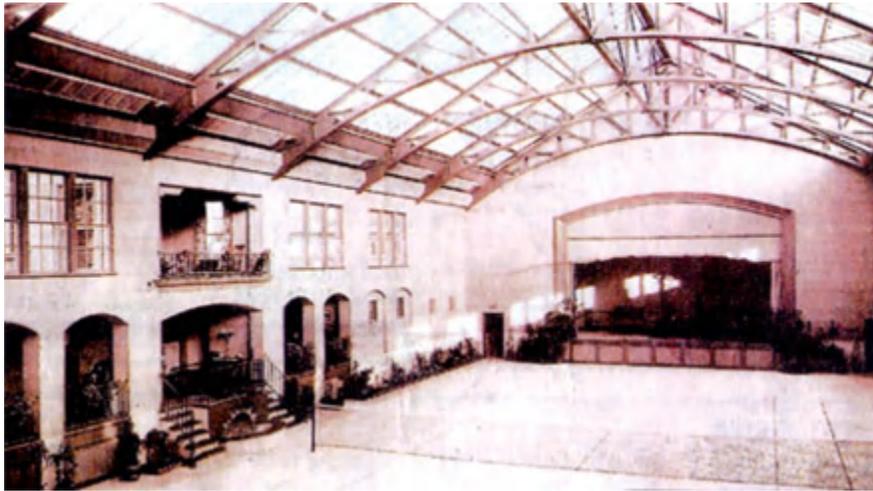
The Old Barn Club

The Old Barn Club stood at the intersection of Patterson Boulevard and Oak Knoll. It was a manifestation of John H. Patterson's philosophy of making the privileges of belonging to a club with many amenities available to the working people of his factory and the community. He had it built in 1907 on 16 acres he leased to the company for the purpose of an officers' club and agents' school. He recently had bought the Coleman and O'Neil farms in the Dorothy Lane area. It was designed by his favorite architect, Louis Lott, in the Swiss chalet style of his home, The Far Hills, with brown stained clapboard siding, wide eaves and porches on several sides.

Local retired accountant and former teacher at Oakwood High School, Bob Pool, has reason to remember it because his grandmother was the manager and cook. He recalls that it was entered by a series of steps to a large sitting room two stories high, around which ran a balcony serving several bedrooms. The sitting room was lit by skylights, and furnished with wicker rockers and high back chairs. There was an alcove with a large fireplace and a player piano. After about five years, membership was opened to the public and a nominal fee for club membership entitled one to golf, tennis, club dances or overnight lodging.

The public was invited to use the reading room, playground, wading pool, sandbox, nursery, volleyball and open fireplaces. There was a natural amphitheater for Sunday afternoon concerts by local artists and a wooden dance pavilion with lights. Sunday meals were open to all and were quite popular. They were cooked by Mrs. Pool using a Model T Huckster Wagon to shop at the downtown street market. Naturally, John H. provided a stable with a water trough for horsemen of the area. The club was open from May to October and was truly a wonderful place to relax.

It became a part of the overall scheme for Hills & Dales Park which Patterson gave to the City of Dayton in 1919 and was referred to in sales brochures for early Oakwood developments as another reason to move to Oakwood. Patterson left it in trust in his Will to his son and daughter "to be used for the sole use and benefit of the Hills & Dales Club or a club with similar objectives." When it no longer served its purpose they could sell it. It burned down in the 20's. A lonely fireplace can still be seen if you look to the south on the entrance road from Oak Knoll which is blocked off.



Interior of Runnymede Playhouse

Runnymede Playhouse lives in the memories of many long time Oakwood residents. It earned its reputation as a social/recreation center as well as the site of important research in the development of the atomic bomb. We have written about George Houk and his acquisition of 160 acres of west Oakwood starting in 1856. He started small but, as his wealth grew at the same time his family grew, he added to his house and grounds until it became a focal point of the community. When he went to Congress in 1892, it was given to his daughter, Katharine, and her husband, the very successful civil engineer, Harry E. Talbott. Talbott was the first mayor of the village and Katharine, championing many causes for many years, was a leading citizen.

In 1927, she built the structure at the corner of Runnymede Road and West Dixon Avenue, which will never be equaled and is hard to describe. Centered around an indoor tennis court under a corrugated glass roof, it also featured a stage with a curtain, dressing rooms with Italian marble, two tiers of balconies, a kitchen, a squash court, a greenhouse and a spacious lounge with a large stone fireplace. Entrance was from a cobblestone court yard with large stone gateposts. Outbuildings for maintenance with a carpentry shop and garden support completed the complex. It was directly behind the principal house which is now Katharine Terrace. Mrs. Talbott died in 1935 and her house burned in 1943.

Runnymede Playhouse was for everyone's use, not just the family, and sizeable Christmas dinners and reunions were held there. Mrs. Talbott hosted weekend tennis and squash parties featuring a buffet. It was offered for charity benefits, recitals, dramatic performances and card parties with up to 300 tables. There are pictures of Virginia Hollinger playing an exhibition match with Bill Tilden there. Most memorable to many of us were the Christmas Carol programs presented by Harman School in the 30's and 40's. All the school children, wearing colorful troubadour costumes, paraded in from the squash court.

The playhouse was requisitioned by the Emergency Powers Act in 1944 after it was suggested as a secure site for the development of a component of the atomic bomb by Dr. Charles Allen Thomas. Thomas was a son-in-law of the Talbott's and a Vice President of Monsanto. The challenge was to develop polonium 210 and a triggering mechanism. The project took place at four sites in the area with Runnymede being the key to development of useful polonium.

The Dayton-designed triggering mechanism was for the "Fat Man" A-bomb which was dropped on Nagasaki. After the war, the Dayton units were merged into what we know as The Mound facility. There was a lot of controversy over getting the playhouse vacated, but it was ultimately done in 1949 and 1950. After paying the Talbotts \$138,000 for the building and leveling the playhouse to seven feet below the surface it was hauled to Oak Ridge, Tennessee, in trucks. After treatment by the government, the land was given back to the Talbott estate, who offered it to the city for a park with the restriction that it not be used as a playground for children. After due consideration of the upkeep burden, the city refused, and it was ultimately developed into Katharine Terrace and a lot on Runnymede Rd.

There have been periodic fusses over the possibility of contamination at the site, but the government has dutifully examined it in 1983, 1998 and 2005 and each time come up with the conclusion that there is no contamination worth concern. Polonium has a half life of 138 days which means that every 138 day period it reduces its radioactivity by one half. A half life measures how long it takes half of the atoms in radioactive material to dissipate.