

This Noble Hall



When The Kenilworth Club and Assembly Hall was built in 1906, it symbolized a better way of living in the century to come. Today, more than 100 years later, a second generation of community leaders is preserving and protecting the vision that gave birth to Kenilworth, and the club that made it legendary.

By Sherry Thomas

Historic photos provided by the Kenilworth Historical Society

*While spring's soft breezes fill the air with breath of early flowers,
we gather here with happy hearts 'neath this new roof of ours.
We dedicate this noble hall to all that makes life dear,
dance, music, mirth and friendly talk beside our hearth stones cheer.*

*May each New Year within these walls bring blessings without end.
Good fellowship reign in our hearts as friend clasps hand with friend.
As as above the sheltering eaves our elm spreads toward the sky,
so may the hopes and aims we hold far reaching be, and high.*

June 6, 1907: A poem written by Kenilworthian, Anne Higginson Spicer, and read as part of the original dedication of the Kenilworth Club and Assembly Hall.



If you know your Kenilworth history, you know that Joseph Sears had a clear vision for the Utopian village he set out to create in the late 19th century. His “isolated retreat” from the dirty, crowded city would be tidy, for one. Utility lines would be hidden away from sight. There would be no alleys or fences. And every street would be platted to maximize the availability of sunlight.

In 1894, some five years after he purchased the 224-acre tract of farmland on the shores of Lake Michigan for the sum of \$150,300, Sears had another revelation.

Kenilworth should have its own club. Not one of those exclusive, private clubs. Not at all. This one would be public — a lively forum to foster civic and social activities for the residents who had signed on to join him in the pursuit of the suburban dream.

He enlisted a Mr. James A. Culbertson (who would become the first village president) to raise capital and plan out what the club would do, perhaps knowing that it would also make a fine marketing feature for the sales brochures he would be putting out for his Kenilworth Company — a real estate venture like none the North Shore had seen.



PHOTO: MR STACEY PHOTOGRAPHY

In 1906, more than 70 residents of the burgeoning village signed an agreement to fund and build the Kenilworth Assembly Hall. Sears donated a plat of land on Kenilworth Avenue — strategically placed at the very center of the village — and asked his friend and fellow resident, the architect George W. Maher, to design a building worthy of Kenilworth and its noble ideals.

The result was what is now known as The Kenilworth Club, a National Historic Landmark and considered to be Maher’s motif rhythm theory masterpiece. But just as the 21st century turned, Sears’ vision, and Maher’s greatest architectural opus, were in peril. An assembly hall that was built for the civic and social enjoyment of Kenilworth residents in the early 20th century was becoming the 21st century’s most endangered, and misunderstood, institution.

Everyone used it. Boy Scouts, Girls Scouts, the Kenilworth Historical Society, The Town Club, Cotillion, The United Fund, Kenilworth Caucus, Joseph Sears school, Webelos, Indian Princesses, garden clubs, even the village board ... it was hard to live in Kenilworth and not step foot in this building.

But with not enough financial support from the community, the Prairie School landmark at 410 Kenilworth Ave. was leaking, sagging and in disrepair. Membership dues had dwindled.

Maher’s once noble hall was falling down. And it showed.

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“Every child is and always will be affected by years spent among beautiful and pleasant environments and ennobling influences.”

— from the 1901 Kenilworth Company brochure

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THEN CAME SUCH KENILWORTHIANS AS Christine Poggianti, Paul Boneham, Jill Delaney and Valerie Foradas. Like Sears, they had a civic and societal vision. But the transformation of the historic Kenilworth Assembly Hall would take nothing short of a fundraising miracle.

“At one point, six years ago, the place was falling down,” explains Frank Cavalier, a Kenilworth Club board member who supervised the restoration, renovation and expansion project. “The question was, ‘Do we need to close it down?’”

It was unthinkable.

Boneham, a past board president, volunteered to spearhead the Second Century Capital Campaign, a strategic fundraising outreach like the club hadn’t seen in 100 years.

“Understand that dues is not what paid to fix this place up,” Cavalier adds. “It was fundraising.”

The goal was \$3.2 million, an ambitious figure in any economy, much less a recession. They barely raised half of that amount.

But thanks to Poggianti’s initiative to assemble a 44-page Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan, a group of generous community donors, and support from The Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, enough money was raised to replace the roof, chimney, soffits and fascia of the building in 2004 and in 2005, to retain an architect to create specifications for an expansion that would fulfill Maher’s original plan. “Frank made it go as far as it needs to go,” says Boneham. Still, with only \$1.4 million to work with, completing the project would take a little creativity — and a lot of volunteer hours.

Foradas, board liaison with the Kenilworth Council of Garden Clubs, says people took turns working on the restoration of the original Jens Jensen-designed gardens and landscapes, often pulling up their cars and hopping out for short “shifts” to plant or mulch — sleeves rolled up — in the midst of the oppressive summer heat. As Cavalier jokes, they were all there “when the rain was coming in” and they were all there when there was work to be done. But that’s exactly why Delaney, past board president and long-time advocate, is serious when she says, “I don’t think we should forget those times.”

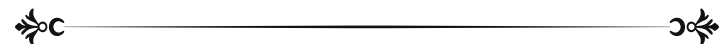


PHOTO: HEATHER PARKER



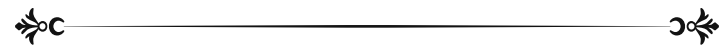


PHOTO: ELLIE GRAYES GRACEFUL EYE PHOTOGRAPHY



“Among people who have pride in their community there is a democratic spirit of camaraderie.”

— Early supporters of Kenilworth Community Spirit, which later became known as the Kenilworth Improvement Association.



THE RESTORATION WAS ONLY PART OF THE VISION.

Now that the landmark has been preserved, the real challenge is figuring out how to maintain a more than 100-year-old national and community treasure with no support from property taxes and a dues-based membership structure that even some long-time Kenilworth residents don't quite understand.

Non-profit status has been considered — as has a non-profit Friends of The Kenilworth Club foundation — but with a healthy facility rental business, it is a hard to pass up that revenue.

A natural answer would be to put out a community-wide rally for new members. Problem is, the grassroots values that may have been crystal clear in Sears' day have become murky in today's society.

Those families who move to Kenilworth might question why they, already saddled with high property taxes and mortgages, should pay an extra \$375 a year (\$275 for individuals) to join the The Kenilworth Club? After all, what do they get? There isn't exactly a golf course, or a health club. And because the The Kenilworth Club isn't a not-for-profit, dues are not even tax-deductible.

“It used to be a rite of passage,” explains Lisa Lauren, director of The Kenilworth Club. “You moved to Kenilworth and you just joined the club.”

However, as Delaney says, “what we grew up with and what the new generation is doing when they move into a community is different. Our society has become more transient. There are a lot more people coming in and out and not getting invested in the community.”

Donna Calk is not one of those people. This Kenilworth mom not only joined The Kenilworth Club when her family moved to town, she recently joined the board with a vision to restore and re-energize the community spirit that this assembly hall was founded on more than a century ago.

“We're not competing, and we can't compete, with country clubs,” says Calk, a West Point graduate who started a members-only “North Shore Boot Camp” workout program at the assembly hall last summer that's become so successful, the classes have gone from “four girls” in the neighborhood to nearly 60.

“But people can walk here and have fun. The way I see it, you move into the neighborhood and you pay the (membership) fee because you want to support the Boy Scouts, and all the other organizations that use the space. The community has no idea, in my opinion, that this place is starving for funds.”

In a community of 852 families, The Kenilworth Club and Assembly Hall has only 177 members, according to Lauren's most recent figures. That's less than 25 percent of the community supporting an institution that serves every single resident.

Calk is leading the charge to bring in new assembly hall programs and to create new traditions that bind the community together, such as this year's addition of an old-fashioned Christmas tree lighting at the club. “But we also need to get the word out,” she says. After all, what would village life be without the traditional Easter Egg hunt at the assembly hall, or a trick-or-treat party for the kids, or a Memorial Day parade?

Kenilworth Club Membership

For just a little more than \$1 a day, any New Trier Township family can join The Kenilworth Club & Assembly Hall Association and participate in this beautifully restored hall's growing list of activities and events.

For more information go to www.kenilworthclub.org or call 847/251-1227.

Foradas says it could be a matter of educating (or re-educating) the community. Not just about the importance of joining and supporting the club, but about the proud legacy it represents.

“In 1894, Joseph Sears had the idea that we needed a community house. Seventy families passed the hat and raised the money to build this,” says Boneham. “One hundred years later, the same thing happened all over again.”


For the sake of this noble hall and this noble community, we hope that proud tradition carries on. 



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