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The Lambs, Yesterday And Today Knickerbocker

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New Yorkers may not know that America's first professional theatrical club - the Lambs - meets regularly near Rockefeller Center. But they do. And they're well aware of their "rise and fall and rise again," as author Lewis Hardee Jr. describes in his book "The Lambs Theatre Club"(McFarland & Company).

Mr. Hardee, who is former chairman of the musical theater department at Wagner College, spoke to the group last week. He told the story of the origin of the club: The Lambs began in 1874 as a dining club for actors. By the first decades of the 20th century, it boasted luminaries from Irving Berlin to Will Rogers. The club declined into bankruptcy in 1975 but was relocated to 3 West 51 Street where it is today.

The group's name comes from an English critic and essayist, Charles Lamb, who worked as a clerk at East India House. He saw his friends becoming successful at writing plays and tried his hand at a farce called "Mr. H." The audience was filled with his friends. The curtain rose, the prologue went all right, but the only drama seemed to be what the real name of Mr. H was. (It was Hogsflesh.) After that, there was little to interest the audience. "From then on, it went downhill," Mr. Hardee said. The audience at Lamb's play began to hiss, jeer, and shout. "It is said that Lamb stood up and booed louder than any."

Lamb and his sister Mary were famous for Wednesday soirees, around which a glittering group of talented writers assembled, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Mary Shelley, and John Keats.

Mr. Hardee told about actor Henry Montague, who became America's first true matinee idol. Men copied his "Montague curl" hairstyle, and women swooned when he was onstage. Montague, who belonged to the London Lambs club, proposed the American Lambs club, while at Delmonico's on Broadway and 14th Street.

Throughout the years, the growing group had many "gambols," evenings of entertainment consisting of plays and skits. Some of these productions went on to Broadway or film such as "Stalag 17" and "Mark Twain Tonight," with Hal Holbrook.

Mr. Hardee pointed to one gambol in August 1925 that was a high water mark. The audience included Fred Astaire, W.C. Fields, and John Philip Souza, among others.

Mr. Hardee's talk was interspersed with accounts of entertaining figures who had been members over the years, none more colorful than Wilton Lackaye, whose portrait is in the club. Mr. Hardee told how once Lackaye complained that nobody would produce his dramatization of "Les Miserables" based on Victor Hugo. "Can't you find somebody who can produce it?" asked John Drew. "Produce it?" replied Lackaye,

"I can't find a manager who can pronounce it."

Mr. Hardee gave other examples of Lackaye's wit. A younger member of the club approached him and said, "How are you, Mr. Lackaye. I met you last week. Do you remember my name?" "No," Lackaye shot back, "but I remember your manners."

Actors Lionel and John Barrymore became Lambs club members in 1900 and 1905, following their father, who had been a member. Mr. Hardee told of some stories that have been passed on about John Barrymore's wit. About a play, Barrymore commented, "The curtain rose at 8:30 and the audience at 8:36." He said about one untalented actress: "She is the most trustworthy performer in show business. Yes. She'll never steal a scene from anyone." About Algonquin Round Table member Edna Ferber's work, he quipped, "Well, once you put down one of her books, you just can't pick it up."

Mr. Hardee ended the talk with this anecdote about Barrymore:

When a Hollywood restaurant served him a lobster with one of the claws missing, he summoned the headwaiter. "Could you explain to me why this lobster has only one claw?" he complained. "Well, you see, Sir, they are kept in a tank, and they fight each other." "Next time," snorted Barrymore, "serve me the winner."

Earlier this spring, the club held a lunch for actor Cliff Robertson; its current members include Broadway conductor Don Pippin, as well as Joyce Randolph, who played Trixie in "The Honeymooners," and who was present for the talk.

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