

## Time and Change will Surely Show

For talk on May 17, 2011, on the History of the Kit Kat Club of Columbus

Any human institution that has lasted 100 years may seem too complex to summarize in a talk, particularly to an audience that has been well fed, well lubricated, and which one month ago heard scholarship, poetry, and wit from Professor Al Kuhn. But at each session of Kit Kat an essay is read, and surely one is appropriate for tonight, for this, our centennial ceremony. Following the reading of the essay there is a tradition of comment, sometimes there are even a few robust complaints after the presentation. I will be sure to talk long enough to reduce undue chance for that. Unfortunately, perhaps, I will not be as brief as the time a guest speaker, the ambassador from Argentina, just stood up, said “thank you,” and sat right back down. Nor will I imitate the time the speaker was legendarily so tipsy that he could barely hold himself upright on the podium, the very same podium bought by Kit Kat for the Columbus Club 60 years ago. I will recall our predecessors in Merrie Old England. I will discuss our origins, and in the process mention some of our traditions or rules. Traditions we have in abundance, I am not sure we do so well by rules.

In 1700, or 1710, London still reverberated with conflicts between the conservative Tories and the more liberal Whigs. Barely a decade earlier William III and his wife, Queen Mary, had replaced James II, who was forced to abdicate because he was fond of the French. Even worse, he was a catholic. When his son was born that was absolutely the last straw, there was fear the Protestant establishment would be overturned. The parliamentarians, men who had questioned the accepted concept of the divine right of kings, had been successful, but the issue still seethed while clusters of citizens came together to gossip, drink, and escape the rigors and the legendary stench of London Town. One group, mostly Whigs, who were actually the liberals for the day, firmly rejected the divine right of the king. The men met at a mutton shop marked by the sign of the fiddle, called a kit. The same sign also displayed a cat, called a cat. The poet Pope

labeled the new club as deathless and wrote of the origin of the name:

Whence deathless Kit Kat took its name,  
 Few critics can unriddle;  
 Some say from pastrycook it came,  
 And some from cat and fiddle.

The early Katters competed in drinking and politics but also presented poems to the women of the time—the beauties of the court and other young unattached lassies.

Here is a snippet from one poem to a 15 year old Duchess:

Offspring of a Tuneful Sire,  
 Blest with more than mortal fire,  
 Likeness of a Mother's face,  
 Blest with more than mortal Grace,

and so it goes, on and on.

In addition to the pleasures of talk and versifying, the pub boasted of delicious mutton pies---at least they claimed they were delicious. The chef was named Christopher Katt. So, at that mutton shop marked by the sign of the cat the original Kit Kat Club was born, and it was limited to 39 members, as are we. Members included the essayists Addison and Steele, playwrights including Congreve, earls and lords, and at least eight dukes. The most renowned of the dukes was John Churchill, later the Duke of Marlborough. He was classed variously as both the hero and the opportunistic turncoat of the age. When just a lad, a page in the Court of Charles II, John was of particular service to the king's mistress, and one night had to jump quickly out of her window. ....The lady was grateful, however, and endowed him with an annuity at 5000 pounds for his, ah, attentions. That same Churchill,

the ancestor of Winston Churchill, was a military leader of the royal forces until he switched sides in time to help the parliamentarians. In fact he was the man who expedited the abdication of King James II. As the outstanding general of his time he was awarded Blenheim Castle for his efforts, his efforts on the battle field. During a tempestuous career with changing fortunes, while sometimes he was a Whig and sometimes seemed to be a Tory, he spent time in the tower of London, and was briefly banished to France. Yet he was twice wildly acclaimed as the savior of England. The Duke of Marlborough joined the other remarkable men of the Kit Kat Club to drink, discuss politics and art, and toast the beauties of the age. He was surprisingly loyal to Sarah, his fiery and greatly cherished wife, and she clearly reciprocated his affection. After his death, when the exceptionally wealthy Duke of Somerset proposed marriage, Sarah, the widow of Marlborough, wrote back: "If I was young and handsome as I once was, instead of old and faded as I am, and you should lay the empire of the world at my feet, you should never have a chance to share the heart and head that once belonged to John, Duke of Marlborough."

I'd love it, but you wouldn't, if I could regale you with gossip about the other 38 members of London Kit Kat, but as you'd probably guess they got old. Even old soldiers just fade away, but we are still here. That English club did quietly die, though it is remembered yet in encyclopedias and biographies.

And for us, what about us and our club? For one thing we carry on many of the earlier traditions. Traditions we have in abundance, I'm not sure we do so well by rules.

When we began at our first meeting in 1911 the president, Osmond Hooper, read a poem of seven stanzas which invoked the blessings of the earlier Christopher Katt, long dead but either looking down from above or warmly peering up through the flames from below. The last two stanzas are:

If not as great as they who first-hand bore

The name of Kit-Kat, ate and drank and swore,

We still are better off, it must be said  
For we're alive and they, alas, are dead;  
And standing here, two centuries up the age,  
We view their antics on the musty page  
And smile—and pity too—that mortals should  
Sift life so hard and get so little good.  
Chris, what's that you mutter? You liked them best?  
That simply shows you're dead just like the rest.  
But pray do let your spirit now and then  
Come and charm us modern men.  
Sit at our board, a reminder of the Past,  
And whisper when you find your club outclassed,  
That though our drinks are short and worse our rhymes,  
This is a better world in better times.  
And just how did these better times, our own times, begin?

Delta Sapp, and he is never called Mr. Sapp or just plain Sapp, was an antiquarian bookworm who loved the 18<sup>th</sup> century, cherished puns, and recorded brief anecdotes. He established a magazine called the Honey Jar, Receptacle for Literary Preserves, and as that journal went upstream, and then failed, it spawned a new publication, the Kit Kat Magazine. The name reflected discovery by the founders of our club of that earlier original English progenitor, the Kit Kat Club. After a brief series of meetings in private homes, the contributors to the Kit Kat Magazine, soon calling themselves the new Kit Kat Club, met for a time at the Chittenden Hotel, then for a decade at the Athletic Club, and since 1938 the club has met right here at the Columbus Club. From the beginning an essay was presented at each meeting, and most were presented in printed form. So if there were 100 years, and there have been, and eight or

so papers were given each year, and there have been, then perhaps 800 should be reviewed tonight. They won't be. But I can tell you, as a teaser or taster that the topics have ranged from religion, through politics and into art, music, and philosophy. The guidelines for the club and instructions to the presenters suggested courtesy, avoidance of undue controversy, with a plea to talk about something outside the usual area of the speaker. Even the speaker was expected to learn, and they really had to.

It soon became the custom that the title for the essay could pique curiosity, but it was expected to obscure the real topic. A few times music was on the program, one memorable evening early in our history the members all sang their favorite ballads..... I did not take a vote to see if we should do that this night. One night member Richard Wolfe, who joined us from California last month, brought a series of wines for tasting, and the members were described as "tidly," whatever that may be. George Meiling, when he spoke of roses, gave a rose for each member. One member supplied various Ohio cheeses for every member with each meal, probably not as easy on the noses as were those roses. For over 25 years the group had an annual meeting in the Hocking Hills at the Pritchett cabin, and Clark Pritchett, Jr., and Dr. Ed Pritchett, sons of the member who owned that country place called Jacobs Ladder are here tonight. Monthly we have met in the Columbus Club, but some annual meetings have been at the Rocky Fork Country Club.

If great food and wine were there at the Columbus Club--and they were and are --there was also the essay that offered a divine banquet for the brain. In a survey we held some members listed the talks as the high point of each meeting--others commented wistfully about the food, but almost all that we contacted mentioned the fellowship, using one label or another. One said he liked to go to a meeting where sports were never the main topic. Several claimed they enjoyed the discussion more than the talks, but one wonders if they had just awakened to join the after essay comments. A rare talk makes day dreaming a certainty, but almost all essays have been very well done and are of general interest to all. That was not automatic, we are not all as skilled at oration as Al Kuhn, but I have

never heard a talk that was not well prepared, and then carefully delivered. Each clearly taught me something. Or it could have, unless Frank has filled my wine glass too often.

I won't review many particular talks, but as an example of what we do let's consider the range of the talks we heard just this year. In the October essay Jim Ginter began with an indictment of over fishing, and we all were saddened for the little finned creatures. A plus, I no longer feel guilty about never eating fish oil. Don Shackelford, and there is always a crowd to hear his mixture of wit and wisdom, in November disturbed our digestion with talk of the national debt and ominous Chinese nationalism. The club saved the evening with wonderful salmon, Ginter and overfishing be damned. Rick Herrmann, in the talk for December, reminded us that despite E Pluribus Unum we are more complex than just one people, and must struggle anew to achieve common goals. Dick Burnett, our resident theologian, was missed by me in January, but I gather he discussed the dance of life and the virtues of dance, but without a personal example offered to start the New Year. I also missed Artie Isaac, who suggested it is the predictable essence of Kit Kat that makes the pleasure of each meeting similar and certain. Artie is far from stereotypical himself, but if the sameness of Kit Kat meetings is real and predictable perhaps I should not have grieved so when I missed his talk when senile neurons did get me to the meeting, but got me there exactly one week too late. Mike Young, who in view of the Japanese radiation concerns was almost too topical, reviewed the amazing scientific wonder of atomic energy. Finally Al, our resident scholar in English literature, explained to us all what a true essay should be, but for some of us it may be too late to learn.

The Club has had mild trials and tribulations. For the ones who liked a postprandial cigar the elimination of smoking was a disappointment, but I once sat near that cigar table and can testify not all of us miss those stogies. In 1992 there was a vote whether to invite women into the Club. Oh what a terrible heresy to have that come up at all. You know the result. Indeed it even came up again in 2002, and by that time there was less sound and fury, but the vote was the same. Kit Kat remains securely male. Some of us suspect

the ladies are just as glad to have us out of the house anyway. Even though everything changed in America during the 60's, and most club members are glad they did, our own select knitting circle, or quilting bee, or kaffee klatsch remains devoid of the gentler sex. I'll not call them the weaker sex, I'm too old to think that for a minute. And I am married after all.

What sort of man does the membership seek to have as a fellow member? There has not been too much concern about his profession or business, but at least a dozen college presidents have been members. There have been businessmen including Charles Lazarus, judges, as Tom Moyer, and a sprinkling of members of the cloth, as well as artists and musicians. But there is effort to choose members who will participate with enthusiasm, relish the chance to stand at the podium, and who have multiple interests including in books, politics, and community activities. The variety of reasons to be a member is rich and if you asked the members near you why they come to meetings, you would hear of food, education, talk, and friendship. And where better to converse and get to know one another than at the dinner table.

Ours is not the only literary club in Columbus that has been in existence for decades. The Crichton Club has been going strong for over 90 years and is always led by a woman, recently by Melinda Sadar who is here tonight. That group brings in outside speakers several times a year. The Metropolitan Club was founded by women in 1976. Our universities and institutes, and there are over a dozen in our area, all have multiple groups that meet regularly. Torch Club, 87 years old, meets monthly for a lecture and a meal, and the Columbus Chapter is the largest of the 70 national chapters. But our group, our Kit Kat Club, is unique nationally, and locally, and tonight we claim an origin from over 310 years ago. None of us expects to attend our next centennial, the one in 2111, but we can breathe the fond hope that similar, I am sure not better, men will celebrate that year—just as we do tonight.

Any talk should have a summary. In fact I can't resist a second entire summary of what you just heard me tell about our history. So, even if you have dozed a bit, and I can personally certify that was

not the first time that happened at Kit Kat, I'll now retell our old story once again. I'll not do it as well as would have been done by our first president, Osmond Hooper, the poet and founder of the Ohio Journalism Hall of Fame.

Around 1700, or 1710, 'twas time for a club with a few good men,

No place for a lady, not now, and not then

In fact, let's be exact, it was for Whig gentlemen

They met for wine, or beer in a stein, and toasted all the women

Politics and verse, bad and worse, was a staple on the menu

A pipe was ok, so they say, but better the wine they knew

For wine was the oil, to ease the toil, and loosen the lip

Toasts were the rule, for any damn fool, to offer a quip

And who were those men, some royal kin, who dallied with  
Christopher Katt?

Whose food made them snoozy, wine made them woozy, and Chris  
loved despite all that

They were warriors and politicians, heroes and stinkos, and at least  
one rat

In one single male, hearty and hale, the worst and the best were  
combined

His name was Churchill, soldier or shill, and for his sword all ladies  
had pined

The king's mistress, prepared to undress, and opened her chambers  
one night

John Churchill, forgetting his brief thrill, leaped out the window in  
fright

The mistress, however, responsible never, gave money for her  
appetite



London Kit Katters, Whig when it mattered, had that Tory in its midst

And John the cad, forever so bad, was not the one to desist

Sir Winston avers, and history concurs,

John won every battle or war

Wife Sarah loved him, and Castle Blenheim, and would gladly have taken yet more

Other members, as best I remember, were sirs, knights and earls

They raised their toast, to praise or to roast, all the wee lassies and girls

But the real fun was wine, red, white, and fine

And conversation, generous libation, and mutton pie divine

But the fire slowly faded, members were jaded, some frail and more became dead

They confirmed Parliamentary might, stopped divine right, but allowed the king his head

That club faded from view, needed something new, so began in Ohio instead

Our food is superior, by our criteria, thanks to our Christopher Katt

We drink a bit, share our wit, and hear our brethren chat

With papers prepared, opinions aired, from even our one democrat

Some members eclectic, one may be charismatic, but we don't know where he's at

There are topics obscure, which we all endure, but some are clearly superb

A few closed eyes, snores and soft sighs, but the speaker will never disturb

Now comes our centennial, with friendships perennial, and how did it all commence?

With literary allusions, academic inclusions, and more than a little pretence

With success unforeseen, and a small magazine, launched by a man named Sapp

Delta his first name, truly a real shame, but quite a literate chap

Professors and preachers, judges and teachers, all began to meet,

Serious papers, a few light capers, wine and good food to eat

We still continue, with Christopher's menu, to stick to the ancient format

Perhaps a large topic, a few microscopic, and what's not to like about that?

We've had churchmen, teachers and statesmen, and more than one president

The topics are hidden, exposure forbidden, and then comes enlightenment

Fortunate for all, is that marble stall, those ancient and honored receptacles

Old men we may be, urgent to pee, with sphincter release for our vesicles

We praise the essay, but also say, for the end of the talk we may pray

Ginter, in September, we do remember, led our march to May

Jim told of us of fish, more than we wished, while Christopher offered us salmon

Overfishing seems bad, for haddock or shad, and a policy we must examine

Hermann said e pluribus, we must discuss, since our country is sure  
to change

Adaptation will be swift, while mottos shift, and results may well  
seem strange

Dick Burnett, both preacher and teacher, reviewed the virtue of  
dance

Just right for Shakers, Quakers or Bakers, but Dick overlooked his  
chance

He did not shake a leg, none tried to beg, and our minister chose  
not to prance

Our own dear Artie, the life of the party, borrowed from Sean a bell  
For show and tell, his talk was swell, but did not our future foretell

Mike Young, with his silver tongue, introduced the power atomic

As physicist Fermi, did well foresee, destruction could be  
astronomic

Professor Al Kuhn, who with poets commune, regaled us with the  
past

But even he, more clever than we, did not our survival forecast

I've used up my time, in prose and in rhyme, and I vote that our club  
must go on

With wine from the vine, from France or the Rhine, plus fish or filet  
mignon

Good men and true, it's up to you, to keep this old club alive

And someday again, but only men, will see 200 years arrive

They'll feel guilty too, but what can you do, with only one X  
chromosome

Men are blind, and ignore womankind, but that's the male syndrome

I should conclude, with much gratitude, but say agin and agin

Looking back 100 years, the past clears, this club had to begin  
But can Kit Kat go on, after we're gone, and truly expect to survive?  
If the old allow, plus more youngsters now, tradition continue to  
thrive  
Friendship and thought, so we were taught, can hold us all together  
Glasses we raise, and Kit Kat praise, no matter what the weather  
Summers heat or winters cold, young and old, we hear the essayist  
Time and change will surely show, that we know, but Kit Kat **can**  
persist  
It's up to us, as we discuss, for Kit Kat to still exist  
Reluctant on my part, relief in your heart, my time is now complete  
I must beseech, forgive the speech, Drive carefully I entreat  
Good night, and with all my might, I thank you for your time  
Next time I'll compose, but only in prose, I do that better than  
rhyme

**Thank you all and Good Night**