

## **Great Times at Guild Hall** **– by Frank C. Richards**

Bowling anyone? Or pool, basketball, swimming, archery, dramatics or dancing? And all of this under one roof! The year was 1909 and the place, the Guild Hall, a building on High Street connected to St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Marquette. The Hall was built exclusively for the young people of Marquette and envisioned as a community recreational center.

Guild Hall and the outreach program were the vision of the rector of St. Paul's, the Reverend Bates G. Burt, who served the church from 1905 to 1922, when he accepted the post of rector of All Saints Church in Pontiac, Michigan. In rallying support for his bold venture, Rev. Burt said, "There is presently no institutional program for keeping young boys off the street and surrounding them with uplifting influences. We need a fine hall, a hall which will help offset the many evil influences which now surround them ... a place where people can work in a social way, a center for the parish where it can do efficient work in the community."

The building was governed by the Guild Hall Association, but subject to the control and direction of the church vestry (the governing body of individual Episcopal churches). It was the intention of the rector and vestry that all athletic and recreational facilities be offered to the people of Marquette on equal terms and without regard to religious beliefs and that no exercise of a religious character be held in connection with the use of the building.

This ambitious project was completed in 1909 with contributions from the people and businesses of Marquette. Peter White gave \$5,000; the Kaufman family, \$3,000; E.N. Breitung, \$1,000; J.M. Longyear, \$1,500 and F.H. Bogole, \$1,000. Lesser amounts were also donated by individual citizens and businesses of Marquette. It cost \$18,000 to complete the building which was ribbed by a steel frame and covered with clay tile. Stucco was then applied over the tile. This new type of construction set a precedent in the Upper Peninsula.

The *Weekly Mining Journal*, March 6, 1909, described the formal opening of the Guild Hall. Speakers were Rev. Burt, A.E. Miller and H.H. Burdette. Mr. Burdette was a retired major in the British army who had been recently decorated by the king of Sweden for his outstanding work in Swedish gymnastics. The major was also a former British army fencing champion. He was hired by the Guild Hall Association to manage the programs for the hall. At the close of Major Burdette's

remarks, a drill was held by 15 young ladies who performed a dumbbell routine which illustrated to the public what could be done with just a little training. "The drill was splendidly done," the *Mining Journal* announced. After the program, light refreshments were served, and those who wished made use of the billiards and pool tables and the bowling alleys. Music was furnished by the Peerless orchestra.

The Board of Managers for the Guild Hall were A.E. Miller, P.B. Spear, M.W. Jopling, H.R. Harris, F.C. Jenks, P.W. Phelps, A.T. Roberts and H.H. Williams. Memberships ranged from \$10 per year to \$5 for boys eight to sixteen years old. Limited membership for women 16 years and over covered the use of the gymnasium and the "Plunge" swimming pool. Boys eight to twelve had use of the gymnasium and the Plunge for \$3 a year. The younger children did not have access to the reading room, billiards room and bowling alleys unless accompanied by a parent or adult.

More than 200 members enrolled without any solicitation at the opening of the hall. The Guild Hall's telephone number was Bell Telephone #79.

And so this remarkable venture began. The indoor heated swimming pool (70 degrees) was one of the first in the Upper Peninsula. The pool was lined with white tile with a porcelain finish and filled with Lake Superior water. The architect Fred Charlton, however, made no provisions for showers and changing rooms for the pool and the gym. They were added after the building opened. It was reported that the first person in the pool was a young boy, Ernest Rankin. As an adult, Mr. Rankin was one of the first curators at the Marquette County History Museum.

Mrs. Kenyon Boyer, whose husband also worked for the History Museum, frequently used the pool and enjoyed watching expert diver Marie Harkin (Moore). Two other friends of Mrs. Boyer's often used the pool and then walked down to the Northland Hotel (Landmark Inn) to have a hot chocolate. If it happened to be winter, they walked home with frozen hair as there were no hair dryers in the pool area.

In 1929 the swimming pool developed a serious lead. It was estimated that up to 10,000 gallons of water were lost each day. The pool closed for the season in May 1929. It was still not operating in 1931.

In its heyday, the Guild Hall was the community center for much of Marquette. For example, the Commercial Club held a dinner there on September 30, 1920. In October that year, the hall was used for two high school dances. The school used the gym quite regularly. St. Luke's Hospital graduation exercises and a dance took place on June 21, 1926. Later the Rotary Club rented it for a dinner meeting. Many plays were presented on the stage in the assembly room on the west end of the building. After the hall officially closed, plays were still given there, many of them directed by Jim McCullough. The Bene Temporis fraternity party was held on April 19, 1926. Many Marquette service organizations met there regularly. A large kitchen area in the hall easily handled food services.

In October 1929 the New York stock market crashed and was the catalyst of the Great Depression of the 1930's. Millions of people were out of work for many years, and annual dues for the Guild Hall were probably difficult to come by. Ralph Barber, a local teacher and school administrator, wrote a history of St. Paul's Church, *The Years that Were, 1951 to 1966*. He wrote, "The upkeep and operational costs prompted the decision to close down the recreational facilities of the Guild Hall in 1932."

So the dream and vision of Bates Burt came to an end. Hard times and changes dealt the death blow to this unique venture. The hall, however, was still operational, and the lower rooms were converted into Sunday school rooms. The main hall was used for banquets, dances, and other functions. The pool area was covered over and converted into a lounge which held church meetings, wedding receptions, and after-church coffee hours.

### **Some Personal Memories**

In the mid-1930's, boys living in the neighborhood of St. Paul's frequently entered the guild Hall, went down into the boiler room, up the spiral staircase and into the gym. It was always pitch black going up the staircase, but it was an adventure for us. Once in the gym we would play basketball. I'm sure we made a lot of noise, but we were never asked to leave. In shooting at the basket from about 25 feet away, one had to arc the ball over a rafter to reach the basket. It was also very dusty up there and after we got home we would spit black for a few hours. The basement was converted into Sunday school rooms. There was, however, one large room at the bottom of the stairs. Mrs. A.L. Swinton held group piano lessons there with the four upright pianos in the room. Dancing lessons were also available. A group of my male friends took ballroom dancing lessons from Betty Devine. We were about 16 years old, and we learned the polka, schottische, waltz, and fox trot. In 1938 Marion Longyear (Soderegger) held a private party and

dance at Guild Hall. The invitations to the boys indicated which lady friend each boy would escort to the party. Bill Smail and his orchestra played for this gala event. It was my pleasure to attend this party.

In later years, Dawn Dott and Lynn Boliltho operated the Marquette Center for Dance in the hall. Just before Guild hall was demolished in August 1987, it was the home for the Marquette Women's Center, and A.M.C.A.B. also held meetings there. Structural weakness, high heating costs, and lack of use led to the decision to raze this 80-year-old landmark.

H.H. Burdette is an interesting puzzle. In looking through the Polk city Directories for the year years of the guild Hall, I could not find any address for Mr. Burdette. If he had a residence or lived in a boarding house, which was common in those days, he would have been listed. There was no record of him after 1909.

Bates Burt was called to All Saints Episcopal Church in Pontiac, Michigan in 1922. His vision and dream for a place for young people of Marquette to gather and play lasted for 23 years. The accomplishments of Rev. Burt were many, and among them was his love of music. He wrote several popular college songs while a student at Kenyon College and composed religious works as well as Christmas carols which he sent out as the family greeting card every Christmas. His son, Alfred Burt, took over this task from his father and wrote the Alfred Burt Christmas Carols, now known and loved world wide.