



**Portland Chess and Checker Club  
1914 – Circle Theater**

## **HISTORY OF THE PORTLAND CHESS CLUB**

by Casey Bush

I joined the Portland Chess Club (PCC) in the late 1970s when it was located on the mezzanine of the Park-Haviland Hotel, at SW Salmon and Park. It was there that I met the local chess gurus, a wide range of characters, almost all men, who played the game of chess like a blood sport but often with an artist's flourish. At that time, the Club, like any bar or restaurant, was often filled with a cloud of tobacco smoke. It was simply furnished with aluminum folding chairs seated at a mix of old wooden chess tables along with a collection of backyard banquet tables. The walls were bare except for several old photographs and an ancient black chalk board that featured the names of all the active members and their current ratings. It was a great honor when my name was included on that board near the bottom of the list.

Shortly thereafter the PCC moved across the street to the mezzanine of the Heathman Hotel. At that time the two hotels were connected by a skybridge, so the move was relatively easy. The Heathman provided quiet and spacious quarters that had once been the home of KOIN radio. The hotel was decorated in an Italian style, with dark wood paneling and plaster Acanthus leaves adorning Roman columns. The rooms were well lit, had high ceilings allowing the thick atmosphere to circulate, and large windows that looked out over Broadway. For me, it was chess heaven.

But in 1983 the PCC was evicted from the Heathman as the hotel was remodeled and returned to its previous elegance. Bounced out of downtown, the PCC moved to a

building across from Cleveland High School on SE Powell, a small house turned storefront. Although I thought the PCC was on a downhill spiral most of the same players followed it over to the eastside. Despite such displacement, I was amazed by the resiliency of the institution and it was then I became interested in the history of the Club.

My first source of information was Cal Burnham. Dressed like a bank teller, he was the perennial Secretary-Treasurer and had been one of the Club's top five players for forty years.<sup>1</sup> Cal was also a life long member of St. Mark's Lutheran and insisted on a churchlike level of polite etiquette at the PCC, often composing a list of does and don't on the chalkboard. His father, Cal Sr., had been a member and his sister, Cinthia McBride, had first joined the PCC in the 1930s and was many times Oregon women's state champion.<sup>2</sup>

Cal soon put me in touch with E.G. Short, who was even a generation older, and at that time was in his mid-90s. Glenn Short and his father were in attendance in 1911 at the first meeting of the Portland Chess Club which was held in a dentist's office on an upper floor of the Dekum Building. Although he never finished the third grade, Short invented a mathematically based rating scheme that anticipated the current international Elo system by thirty years. Employed automating telephone switchboards, his job took him to Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles. While briefly living in those cities, Short spread the use of his system up and down the Coast and used it to prove that he was among the best chess players in the West.

Standing barely five feet tall, still sharp in his ninth decade, Glenn told me stories of the golden age of the Portland Chess Club and his personal chess exploits in the 1920s and 30s. By inspecting microfilm of Portland's daily newspapers, I was able to confirm Short's recollections of those times. From 1914 until the late 20s the Oregonian featured a column about chess and checkers written by E.H. Bryant that contained local, national and international chess news.

Cal next sent me to the Oregon Historical Society (OHS) to inspect Manuscript #1784 which was actually a collection of four hardbound ledger books. Three of the volumes contained weekly ratings lists, laboriously tabulated by last name, documenting the flux and flow of competition from the 1920s into the 1950s. The fourth folio was filled with meeting minutes, tournament results, game scores and a few poems.

---

<sup>1</sup> **Oregonian** - December 26, 2001; Sunrise Edition, D10. Obituary John Calvin Burnham (1912-2001). Born in Portland, he graduated from Jefferson High School and joined the PCC in the 1930s, and was among Portland's top players for the next 40 years. During World War II Burnham served with Navy Seabees on Guam and after the war worked until the mid-1970s as a painting contractor.

<sup>2</sup> **Northwest Chess (Seattle, WA) Home Page, Selected Chess News 2010.** Hyacinth (Cinthia) Christina Burnham McBride (11/11/1916-6/2/2010). Grew up in Portland and graduated from Jefferson High School in 1934. She married Paul McBride in 1937 and worked as a secretary to put Paul through medical school. Afterwards they followed his work as an obstetrician, moving from Montana to Washington DC and then to Kanagawa Bunko, Japan, and Rota, Spain. They divorced in 1959 and three years later she moved back to Portland where she worked as a legal secretary.

From those sources, recollections, microfilm and manuscript, I wrote several columns for the PCC newsletter and in 1987 combined those sketches in an article for the Seattle based Northwest Chess Magazine. Now, twenty-five years later, the PCC is still thriving, and its longevity has provided me another opportunity to go back and again tell its story but this time using more modern tools.

Recently former NW Chess editor, Russell Miller, introduced me to the on-line Oregonian microfilm collection, digitized back to 1861. That site's powerful search engine provided Russell with references that challenged my assertion as to the date that the PCC was formed which varied from 1910 or 1912 all the way back to 1860. Intrigued, I decided to take another trip back in time.

That electronic resource reveals that the word "chess" appeared in the Oregonian a thousand times prior to 1900. By 1860 chess had become an American game, as the first world champion was Paul Morphy from New Orleans. At that time there was enough local fascination with chess that a short column appeared on the front page of the Oregonian in February 1861 entitled "Morphy's power of Calculation": "There is said to be no calculation in Morphy's mind to guide his moves, but that he makes them by intuition. If he calculates, he does it after his move is made, and if he pauses between his moves it is to deceive his adversary."

A month later, in March 1861, a short column announced "At the annual meeting Saturday of the Portland Chess Club the following officers were duly elected for the ensuing year: President – Hon. M.P. Deady; Vice President – T.B. Trevvett; Secretary – I.E. Jagger; Treasurer – A.C. Ripley." This remarkable find provides evidence of the prominent place that the game of chess played in the early history of Portland. Not only did the PCC exist prior to 1861 but its membership was composed of prominent citizens, including its president, Federal Judge Matthew Deady, known as "Oregon's Justinian".<sup>3</sup>

Despite boasting such a prominent citizen as Judge Deady as the initial president of the PCC, over the course of the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Portland chess players could rarely afford their own home and instead had to seek shelter with practitioners of Whist and Checkers. For instance, the Oregonian archives indicate, that although there was a lot of enthusiasm for a chess club in the 1890s, when it got down to specifics of renting rooms and paying dues things didn't always work out.<sup>4</sup> Such organizational difficulties at one point led to affiliating the PCC with the Oregon Road Club which was primarily dedicated to bicycle riding and racing.

---

<sup>3</sup> **Oregonencyclopedia.org.** Born in Maryland in 1824, he followed the Oregon Trail to Portland in 1849. Deady served as US District Judge from 1859 until his death in 1893. Civic minded and energetic, Deady is credited with founding the Mercantile Library Association in 1864 which eventually became the Multnomah County Library and helped to establish the University of Oregon's law school in 1884.

<sup>4</sup> **Oregonian** – April 18, 1894, p. 5; "Checker, Chess and Whist Club"- "The Portland Checker, Chess and Whist Club will hold a meeting in room 22, Hamilton Building...Only a small proportion of those who had signed the original membership list have paid their dues, and the secretary urges them to come forward and settle up the accounts, in order that the club may be put on a solid basis."

Perhaps whist was a more popular game, but chess remained in the public eye as an elegant pursuit, was evidenced by the report of a display of “Living Chess” that was prominently featured in 1891 at the Portland Industrial Exposition. That fair lasted several weeks and included musical performances and a baby beauty contest but the Exposition was capped with a form of entertainment that dated back to the courts of Medieval Europe. Prominent Portlanders dressed up in royal costumes and spent an evening on a gigantic chess board. Two members of the Portland Chess Club directed the movement of the individuals who depicted knights, rooks, bishops and pawns in front of an audience of well over a thousand. The production was such a hit that it was repeated the next weekend.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the game’s popularity, the search for an independent chess club continued into the early Twentieth Century until that meeting in the Dekum Building, when the Portland Chess & Checker Club became a going concern. By the summer of 1913 the Club hosted a simultaneous exhibition conducted by the American Champion Frank Marshall. In November of that year, the Oregonian featured a long article about the Club focused on a famous baseball manager who played there every day.<sup>6</sup> The PCC soon moved from the Dekum Building to the Commercial Building and then finally to rooms above the Circle Theater a facility owned by Graham Thornton Woodlaw, a patron who would provide the Club with quarters over the next forty years.

According to Short, G.T. Woodlaw (originally Holtzclaw) was missing a hand and kept the stub of the arm carefully wrapped in the sleeve of his coat. When asked about his amputation he rhetorically explained that it had been bitten off in a fight. The circumstances which brought Woodlaw to Oregon were unknown, but it is suggested that he was a gambler and may have been fleeing from a wager he couldn’t cover. Reportedly arriving on the West Coast with only \$280, he soon owned a number of Portland movie houses. He was known to play chess in the Circle Theater’s box office and also conducted his business affairs from the PCC. Known as “The Judge” at the Club, he was publicly referred to as “Colonel” Woodlaw in deference to this southern

---

<sup>5</sup> **Oregonian** – October 14, 1891, p. 8. Three games were played between Rigler, of the Harrison school and Sholes, the court reporter, each winning a game and drawing one by perpetual check. “Evidently, to judge from the frequency of the applause, a number of experts in the game were in the galleries...it was by far the greatest novelty yet seen during the exposition, and eclipses everything that preceded it. It was reminder in miniature of the romantic days when the knight broke a lance for his lady and went forth to fight with his sweethearts glove next to his heart.”

<sup>6</sup> **Oregonian** – November 30, 1913, p.4. “Ask Fielder Jones what the greatest game on earth is. He will tell you that baseball heads everything by far. That, of course, can be expected. Ask the former Chicago Sox manager what the next best game is and you will be surprised. He says “Checkers”. Just as regularly as he practiced and played baseball a few years ago, he now pursues the game of the squared board and the round pieces of wood. A part of every afternoon is spent in the Commonwealth Building, where the Portland Chess and Checker Club holds sway. It is a curious and mixed assembly, which meets there every afternoon. At least 50 members of the club appear there to match wits. Some sit all afternoon playing all comers, while others play one game and are satisfied. Some of the assemblage are boys, but the majority are bearded men. They, for the most part, content themselves with chess, the game which lasts all afternoon and the greater part of the night.” Fielder Jones was a player/manager for the victorious “hitless wonders” Chicago White Sox in the 1906 World Series. He had moved to Oregon in 1910 to serve as head coach for the Oregon State Beavers.

roots. For over a quarter century the Portland Chess Club was housed in buildings owned by Woodlaw.<sup>7</sup>

The enthusiasm for chess continued to rise when the PCC hosted another visit by Frank Marshall that was to make national news. In 1915 both Marshall and Jose Capablanca were attempting to set the record for the largest simultaneous exhibition. Just two weeks earlier, Capablanca had conducted an exhibition in New York where he faced 65 players. In response the PCC went all out advertising the local event and were able to turn out 92 players in an event which lasted for more than six hours.<sup>8</sup> Only four Portland players defeated the champion, including Short and his chief rival, lawyer and business man, A.G. Johnson.<sup>9</sup>

The next year Capablanca himself spent three days in Portland battling PCC players. Johnson organized the event and personally hosted the Cuban grandmaster escorting him on a sight seeing drive up the recently completed Columbia Highway.<sup>10</sup> Like Marshall, the Cuban grandmaster left Portland with great respect for the local talent.

In 1919 the PCC moved to the second floor of the six story Worcester Building, at 3<sup>rd</sup> and Oak, into quarters again provided by Woodlaw that would serve as a home for the club for twenty years. Woodlaw also purchased a set of imported Italian crafted wood tables with inlaid boards that are used to this day. Woodlaw loved to smoke cigars, but because he only had one hand was in the habit of setting the burning tobacco onto the edge of those tables so that he could move the pieces. In addition to the tables, he constructed a

---

<sup>7</sup> **Oregonian** – March 13, 1950, p.11. “Death Claims Theater Man” – “Graham Thornton, (Colonel) Woodlaw, 84, owner of the McGuire building, Circle Theater and Fourth Avenue Hotel died Sunday...Born at Perry, Georgia, he came to Portland in 1908 after practicing law nine years at Chatanooga, TN. He built in turn a theater in the Burkhardt Building, then the Cineograph Theater on Grand avenue and the Pictureland on Alberta St. In 1913 he obtained the Circle theater, then bought the Irvington, Kenton and Downtown theaters. He operated the Bagdad, Egyptian, and Bob White, but later disposed of these interests except the Circle, which he operated until 1945.”

<sup>8</sup> **Oregonian** – February 25, 1915, p. 13. Game of Chess Gets Big Impeptus by Marshall’s Visit – Ninety-two players were seated before Mr. Marshall when play started at 8:45 o’clock, and when the last board had been played out a little after 3 o’clock yesterday morning...More than 200 enthusiasts followed Mr. Marshall from board to board watching his cunningness and ability to get his adversary in a difficult predicament...Portlanders participated including H.L. Pittock, Commissioner of Public Works Robert Dieck, County Commissioner Rufus Holman and Postmaster F.S. Myers.”

<sup>9</sup> **Oregonian** – April 6, 1944, p.9. Johnson was born in Worcester, Massachusetts on February 7, 1886 and moved to Oregon in May 1907, initially employed as a city engineer, but in 1910 he returned to Harvard to complete his law degree. In 1917 he was selected as assistant to the commissioner of public works and in the mid-20s was secretary for the Strong & McNaughton Trust and then for several years he was a partner in the property development firm of Eckelman & Johnson. He returned to public service at the end of that decade working during the Depression as the Executive Secretary of the National Re-employment Service.

<sup>10</sup> **Oregonian** – April 8, 1916, p. 5. “Portlanders Defeat Capablanca” – “Jose Capablanca made his debut to Portland chess enthusiasts Thursday night at the Chamber of Commerce. About 100 devotees of the game of which 10 were women witnessed the Pan-American champion play 39 at last night’s sitting. He won 37 and lost two. This marks the first time that the champion has been defeated since leaving Kansas City on a tour of the United States a little over two months ago. The honor of beating the champion goes to R.T. Leonard and H. Kurth, both members of the Portland Chess and Checker Club.... At the start of the exhibition, Miss Vivian Johnson, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. A.G. Johnson, 4 years of age, gave a chess exhibition with Professor Capablanca which delighted the gathering.”

rating display that was essentially a chalk board that had slates where each player's last name was written accompanied by their current rating as defined by Short's rating system.



John VanZante – 1930s

**Woodlaw's Chess Table in front of PCC Rating Board**

Soon the PCC began to challenge other clubs in Portland, around Oregon and up and down the West Coast. In 1919, A.G. Johnson captained a team that participated in a series of telegraph matches with Seattle and San Francisco that resulted in a Pacific Coast title covered by the Oregonian like a sporting event.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> **Oregonian** – May 31, 1919, p. 16. "Portland Club Tops in Chess Contest – "In a hard fought game the Portland Chess Club yesterday defeated the San Francisco Chess club winning seven games, drawing four and losing but three. The Portland Club played at 216 Worcester block and San Francisco at the Mechanics Institute on Post Street...On the top boards the attacks of California's finest players could make no dent on the defense of A.G. Johnson, E.G. Short and W.G. Ringler...Then disaster struck San Francisco when F.S. Myers, Portland's postmaster, annihilated his opponent and was followed by an avalanche of wins for the local club. The match started at 9AM and ended at 6PM allowing nine hours of excitement as the fortunes of war varied...Since Portland had already beaten Seattle and San Francisco had already trimmed Los Angeles, this win for Portland gives her unquestioned supremacy on the Pacific Coast."

In June 1921 nine year old chess prodigy Samuel Reshevsky came to Portland and drew a crowd of over a thousand to one of his simultaneous exhibitions.<sup>12</sup> The local press fell in love with Sammy and followed his every move on and off the board. Reshevsky had lost only a handful of games out of over 800 played in his tour of America. One of them was against Glenn Short who proudly recalled: “Every time he came around, the little boy was indignant that my position hadn’t collapsed.” The PCC hosted the events and victories by its players resulted in local celebrity.<sup>13</sup>

But Short was not the only Portlander to defeat visiting talents. In the spring of 1924 the Russian grandmaster Alexander Alekhine faced 40 opponents at the Chamber of Commerce, losing only a single game to A.G. Johnson. Two years later in March 1926, former world champion, Emanuel Lasker visited Portland and faced 30 opponents. Again Johnson organized the event, hosted the celebrated visitor<sup>14</sup>, and was the only player to earn a victory. Johnson made front page headlines in the Portland Telegraph & Telegram, “Local Expert Defeats Berlin Wizard”. The American Chess Bulletin, which sponsored Lasker’s West Coast tour, awarded Johnson a prize for his 26 move victory.

Down at the club the local competition between Short and Johnson continued throughout the Twenties without a clear winner until one of Short’s students decided the matter. Just after his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, Arthur Dake learned to play chess and soon came under Short’s tutelage. Within months the instructor was overtaken by his student, so Short recognized an opportunity to wound his main rival and arranged a match between Dake and Johnson which was won by the teenager.

During the fall of that year, Capablanca and Alekhine competed for the world championship in Argentina, and the Russian won the crown in an amazing fashion. In early 1928 he celebrated that victory touring the United States, but unfortunately did not schedule a return to Portland. At first the PCC was going to have Johnson travel to California to face the new champion but decided to send the youngster Dake and a hat was passed around to gather traveling expenses. A few weeks later Arthur came back to

---

<sup>12</sup> **Oregonian** – June 11, 1921, p. 6. “Boy Marvel at Chess” – “Scriptural precedent of the lad who appeared among the elders in the temple and confounded them...A big gallery followed the play and all marveled at the boy’s wonderful uncanny skill...Moving from board to board he plunged into the problems of each game and sometimes his brows wrinkled as he thought out the best moves, but often in the twinkling of an eye he arrived at the desired solution and passed on to the next contestant. All his movements were alert and even jerky. He fidgeted with his fingers all the time and chewed gum, but his thinking apparatus was working...when the games ended in Sammy’s favor he had a playful habit of reaching out and overturning all the men remaining on the board with a sweep of his hands.”

<sup>13</sup> **Oregonian** – June 26, 1921, p. 5. “Mr. Short has become one of the best on the Coast, recently he visited Salem and cleaned up the Commercial Club players only losing one game out of several played. He was by far the star performer of this exhibition...Sammy paid a complement to the team by stating that our Rose city was as strong a chess center as any he had visited.”

<sup>14</sup> **Oregon Journal** - March 21, 1926, p. 15. Lasker was also considered to be a mathematician and a philosopher and always a good interview: “That chess is not a slow game is shown by its revival in this alleged “Jazz Age”...so many persons think it is a deep game that requires great mental effort. This is not so, for after the player has mastered the fundamentals it is as easy as talking. It is a form of expression.”

Portland with a celebrated loss and a hard won draw, providing the PCC with a handsome return on their investment.<sup>15</sup>

But Dake didn't recognize where the game of chess could lead him until he traveled around the world. He quit high school before graduating and shipped out as a merchant marine, coming back to chess on shore leave in New York City, where he found he could hustle quarters at Coney Island, dollar a game in Times Square and measured up against the best at the local clubs. He soon won the national junior championship and the Marshall Chess Club Championship and was welcomed back to Portland as a conquering hero.<sup>16</sup>

With that meteoric rise Arthur was recruited by Frank Marshall to play on three consecutive Olympiads, Prague '31, Folkestone '33 and Warsaw '35, each of which was won by the American team. For a few years Dake played with the best in the world, letting Capablanca off the hook in New York (1931), and soundly defeating Alekhine in Pasadena (1932). He became one of the best players in the United States but was never able to defeat Sammy Reshevsky. He returned to Portland to raise a family in 1937, where he remained for the rest of his life, occasionally returning to the international scene while holding down a job at the Oregon Dept. of Motor Vehicles. Dake was unique among grandmasters for having learned the game so late in life, and for being able to play at a high level even into his eighties.

---

<sup>15</sup> **American Chess Bulletin** – November 1931, p. “When Alexander Alekhine was touring the United States in 1928 after his triumph at Buenos Aires, it became known at the Mechanics Institute Chess Club of San Francisco that a boy from Portland was to travel the 1,500 miles to Los Angeles to play the World's Champion in the latter's simultaneous display there. Alekhine was scheduled to play at the Institute two days later, and just before play started a young man approached the secretary and announced his name as Arthur Dake of Portland, stated he held Alekhine (or Alekhine had held him!) to a 54-move draw in Los Angeles, and could he take a board? It developed that the Railword Octopus had taken about all his money. However, he was given a board. Shortly after play started (on Alekhine's second round) all eyes were focused on Dake's board, where the two were moving the pieces at less than one second per move! Dake lasted thirteen seconds, when he blew a piece and the game. That was our introduction to the young man who, by supreme confidence in his own ability (a quality that made him seem quite conceited at that first meeting), has become a recognized world's chess master.”

<sup>16</sup> **Oregonian** – February 22, 1931, p. 6. “Chess Wizard Plays 43: Boy Who Studied Moves Instead of Multiplication Junior National Champ Now” – “William Dake, a Portland chef, residing at 410 Fifth Street, burst into the silent confines of the Portland Chess and Checker Club one night three years ago and angrily demanded his son Arthur. “That boy is wasting his time here at this game,” he declared. “when he should be home studying his lessons.” But Arthur had leaped up at his father's approach and run out. Since that incident strange developments have taken place. Last night, with his father and mother proudly watching, young Arthur, only 20 years old now, played 43 of the crack chess players of the city and adjacent towns simultaneously in the Spanish room at the Multnomah Hotel. It was a picturesque and dramatic homecoming for the phenomenal Portland youth.”





**Araiza, Dake, Fine, Reshevsky (standing); Alekhine, Kashdan (seated)  
Pasadena - 1932**

It was a hard but necessary decision for Arthur to return to Portland. He was not welcomed by the work world, in a country still in the throes of the Depression, but he was welcomed back to the Portland Chess Club. Although he had been gone most of a decade many of the same players were still pushing pawns at the PCC with the exception of A.G. Johnson, who had quit the Club shortly being defeated by the young upstart. In effect, Short had cleared the playing field.

With Dake's return Short's rating system had to be expanded on the upper end. Up to that point the best players of the PCC were rated in the high 800s, but once Dake's record against other members of the club was factored in his name appeared at the top of the board with a rating over 1500. Meanwhile the PCC was thriving, with over 100 affiliated players and 30 active members whose ratings in the perpetual tournament were posted on the board.

A rare outsider's look into the PCC was provided in 1934 by Oregonian writer Stewart Holbrook in his column "Down Portland By-Paths". Holbrook was a lumberjack turned writer with a national reputation, who was a self-proclaimed "low brow historian".

*I had one more illusion shattered the other day when I made a call to the Portland Chess and Checker Club – none of the players nor spectators had beards on their faces or cobwebs between their fingers. And this, as any non-player would agree with me, came as quite a shock.*

*Although there has been a chess club in Portland on and off again since 1860, the present group dates from only 1912. The club room is in the Worcester building and there is usually one or more games going from noon to late at night. When I called two*

*tables were in use, while some half dozen members watched. It was quite a while before I could pry one of the spectators loose to tell me something about the place. He told me that the club has what is termed a perpetual tournament. At present 36 players are listed, and they play games at any old time. Membership fluctuates. Dues are \$1 a month. Results of all games are kept in large books...There are 12 tables in the room. On blackboards are listed the names of players along with a lot of figures which I didn't bother to ask about. On the walls are photographs of notable games being played, chess problems in frames, and autographs of world famous players.*

Just as Short remembered the golden age of the PCC, he also recounted its decline and by the mid-1940s the game and the club were marginalized. Similarly, the glory days of American chess was also in the past, and the game soon became the sole possession of the Soviet Union. As the troops came home, the PCC found itself already on an odyssey towards obscurity and by 1950, with the death of Colonel Woodlaw, the PCC was really on its own.



**Herman Steiner vs. E.G. Short  
Portland Chamber of Commerce – early 1950s**

It was during that period the PCC reinvented itself and began to host formal tournaments, which were played over the course of a weekend as opposed to the “perpetual tournament”. A club championship was established as well as various forms of a state championship. Initially those tournaments were attended by just a dozen players but slowly grew in size. In the late 1940s a Portland youngster named Jim Schmitt began to win some of those tournaments and was soon joined at the top by two players from the Soviet Union, Ukrainian Alex Suhobek <sup>17</sup> and Latvian born Ivars Dahlberg. By 1952 both Schmitt and Suhobek moved to Northern California, but Dahlberg, the youngest of the three, stayed in Portland for another twenty years, becoming one of the mainstays of the PCC. In turn, Dahlberg was joined by locally raised chess master, Clark Harmon, who soon became his only challenger. Harmon was not only one of the best Oregon players, he also contributed to the organization of the game.<sup>18</sup> Along with other players, including Don Turner, he established a state chess organization (Oregon Chess Federation), junior tournaments and a women’s championship.<sup>19</sup> In 1970 Dahlberg moved to Los Angeles leaving Harmon to dominate the Club and the state, as he eventually won 10 Oregon championships.

But it was the ascendancy of Bobby Fischer and his defeat of Spassky at Reykjavik in 1972 that brought the game of chess to the attention of the average American and doubling the size of the PCC and the number of players in the Oregon Open. Fischer not only brought American interest back to chess but brought Arthur Dake back to the attention of Portland. Dake wrote articles for the Oregonian about the match and several

---

<sup>17</sup> **Washington Chess Letter** – October 1950, p. 8. Don Turner wrote: “Probably the most consistently brilliant player in Oregon is relative newcomer Alex Suchobeck. This Ukrainian misplaced person arrived in Portland about a year and half ago and promptly tied with for the first prize with Jim in the Oregon Open. When he followed this up with a win in a match for the club championship he definitely put himself into the foreground of the Oregon picture. It is no small feat hereabouts to beat Jim Schmitt in a match which he wants to win! As we might have suspected Alex had a good record in Europe before he came here.”

<sup>18</sup> **Northwest Chess (Seattle)** – May 2007, p. 4-5, Clay Kelleher writes: “Clark Harmon was heavily involved in chess organization in the Northwest. In 1965, while living in Renton, he served as President of the Washington Chess Federation. By 1967 he had returned to Portland and helped organize the Oregon Chess Federation and served as its first President. That same year Clark worked with the Oregon Museum of Science & Industry to start a series of Oregon scholastic chess tournaments that have been an annual event ever since, currently administered by Chess for Success.” Born in Portland on Oct. 18, 1942, Harmon graduated from Clackamas High School, attended Portland State University, where he earned an accounting degree. He lived in Seattle for a short time, working for Boeing, then returned to Portland to work for Freightliner. He later established his own certified public accountant practice in Olympia. In 1989, he went into the business of manufacturing and selling backyard greenhouses and moved to McMinnville in 1991 and Amity in 1996.

<sup>19</sup> **Oregonian** - January 26, 1969, p. 85. “Feminine Chess Fans Play it Cool: Opening Gambit to be Tourney Just for ‘Girls’” by Yvonne Rothert. “Men don’t like to play chess with women,” Pat (Mrs. Wendell) Bates, one of the most enthusiastic feminine chess players in the Portland area, stated as a simple truth. Backing up her statement is the memory of the time that some years ago when Sammy Reshevsky, “grand master” of the chess world, took on 40 Portland players simultaneously. She was the only woman among his opponents. She didn’t win, but neither did the 39 men.” The article goes on to report that Sunny Espy, a math instructor at Judson Baptist College, became the Oregon woman’s chess champion, with second place taken by Pat Bates and Cinthia McBride placing third.

weeks after Fischer's victory, he held a simultaneous exhibition at Meier and Frank's downtown auditorium. Dake also participated in a match organized by Cinthia McBride that pitted him against Clark Harmon. The games were held on the second floor of the Civic Auditorium overlooking Ira's Fountain and the playing site included a display of historic chess sets from the Maryhill Museum. Although 30 years his junior, Harmon was only able to draw one game with Dake.

The Fischer boom also saw a local surge in master level chess players including Richard Wood, Mike Montchalin, John Hatala, and Bill Lapham. But that younger generation was more interested in playing chess than maintaining its traditions and so the job of organizing fell to other talented individuals such as Kornelijs Dale, Clay Kelleher, Milt Colpron, Janos Plesko, Otto Janecek, Laszlo Szalvey and John Howell.

Fischer never defended his title, essentially giving it back to the Soviets, and without a national hero American interest in chess quickly waned. In the 1980s Karpov played Kasparov for the world title every few years with no American in sight. It was during that time that I first joined the PCC, as it moved out of downtown into southeast Portland. Although I felt that it was on its last leg, the PCC was reinvigorated by a national tournament that galvanized the local chess community.

The 1987 U.S Open was held in the downtown Portland Hilton and hosted by the PCC. Organized by retired Oregon City school principal, Ralph Hall,<sup>20</sup> the tournament was held over two weeks in August and attracted 530 players from around the country. I was on the organizing committee and helped to coordinate daily coverage in the Oregonian. Arthur Dake played in the tournament and served as master of ceremonies. It was a pleasure for all to see the energetic grandmaster from Oregon, at age 77, play head to head with the best competition in the country. Dake finished 34<sup>th</sup> in that strong field but he was bested by a new generation as Lake Oswego raised Carl Haessler beat him in the last round. Finally, after half a century, a member of the PCC was finally able to defeat Dake. Haessler went on to become three time state champion.

Both the Oregon Chess Federation and the PCC benefited financially from Ralph Hall's organizational skills. The PCC had moved from Powell over to SE Ivon near 39<sup>th</sup> and had purchased a two story house in a residential neighborhood. The financing for the PCC included 20 lifetime memberships which provided the down payment and some rental agreements. In turn, Cinthia McBride bought the adjacent vacant lot in the hopes of creating a parking lot for the members, so they wouldn't crowd the street. It seemed like the PCC had found a permanent home and we raised two eight foot tall brick rooks, next to the sidewalk, to mark our spot. Those arrangements lasted for a few years but eventually conflicts arose with the neighbors that led to their eviction. At that point, a new member of the Club, lawyer Mike Morris, stepped forward to defend the PCC.

---

<sup>20</sup> **Oregonian** - Obituary, 2/6/11 - Ralph Hall (1930-2011) Born in Smithfield, Nebraska, he joined the US Chess Federation in 1957 and became a life member. Earned his doctorate of education in 1961. For 13 years he served as school principal and curriculum director in Dade County Florida. From 1975 to 1985 he was principal of Moss Junior High School in Oregon City. Dr. Hall established the Oregon City Chess Club in 1976 and was the chief organizer of the 1987 US Open.

Despite legal representation by an accomplished chess player, City planners revoked the club's conditional use permit. The PCC reluctantly sold its house and Cinthia's lot together but in the process created a "nest egg" that has allowed the club to insure tournament prizes.

After losing the eviction fight, Morris arranged for the club to be housed near Lincoln High School on SW Taylor, in a building occupied by his law firm. He later found another room for the Club in the Ticor Building, at SW 4<sup>th</sup> and Stark. Although back in the heart of downtown, the landlord did not provide easy access to the building and members often found themselves locked out as the key code was changed without warning. In 1997 Morris found the club a "permanent" home near the intersection of Barbur and Multnomah Blvd. (8205 SW 24<sup>th</sup>), where it has since remained.

While the PCC has achieved some stability, the game of chess continues to change. Fischer never returned and Kasparov was defeated by a computer. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the international organization of the world championship became fragmented, with more than one accrediting body. On the positive side, another change in the modern era is that chess is now viewed as the training ground for young minds. Rather than being seen as an idle occupation that squandered time and talent, chess is seen as a gymnasium for the brain. One of the best examples of such a program is Portland's Chess for Success which directly links participation in after school chess clubs with improved student achievement. Developed as an outgrowth of the Portland Chess Project, an after-school chess program organized in 1992 by Portland attorney Richard Roy, in 1998 Chess for Success took on the responsibility of running the state tournaments. In 2002, Chess for Success and the PCC hosted the National Elementary School Championships. Under the leadership of PCC president Bruce Peterson, that event included over 2000 children from 40 states, and was held at the Oregon Convention Center.

Just at the new millennium began, in April 2000, the Portland Chess Club held a 90<sup>th</sup> birthday party for its most famous member, Arthur Dake. That event at Henry Ford's a steak house on Barbur Blvd., drew 100 attendees from across the country to honor the grandmaster from Oregon. Twenty days later Dake passed away in Reno, Nevada, after a late night playing his second favorite game, blackjack.

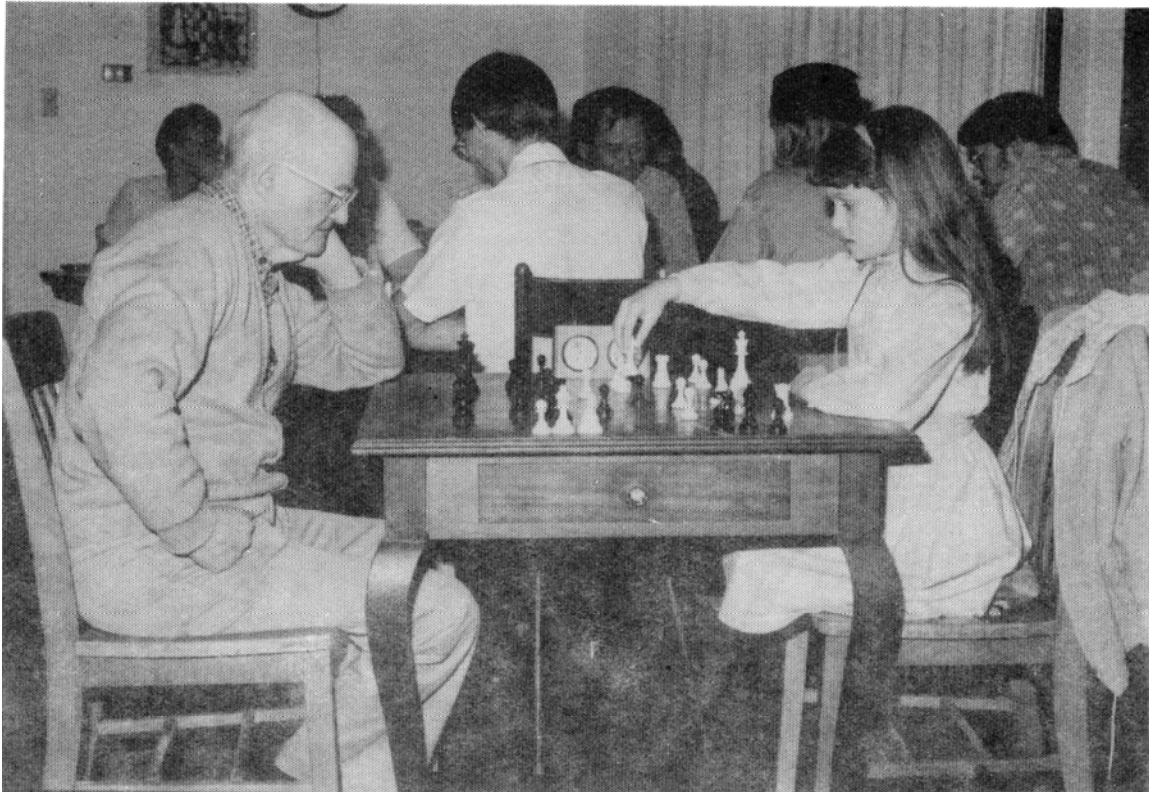
Today, no one is looking for another Arthur Dake to emerge from the PCC, but the Club remains a fertile training ground for the region's best players. Masters continue to populate the PCC whether locally grown like Nick Raptis or from international sources like Romanian player Radu Roua. At the same time, chess is no longer played just in cloistered clubs and elite tournaments but can be seen at coffeehouses and brewpubs across the city. A chess sculpture adorns the northwest corner of downtown's Pioneer Square as a tribute to the players who gather there.

This year the Portland Chess Club is celebrating an anniversary. Whether that festivity is a centennial or even a sesquicentennial is a matter of perspective. In any event, it is the

recognition of a local institution that has been a long standing expression of the cultural wealth of the Rose City, despite the Club's sometimes nomadic existence.

It was during one of those last moves in the 1990s, orchestrated by Mike Morris, that we were carrying the club rating board to the van when it fell apart in our hands. Originally constructed by Woodlaw, and utilizing Short's rating system, the chalkboard seemed like an essential component of our historical heritage. Destroyed through age and use, it was unceremoniously discarded into a trash bin.

Soon thereafter Milt Colpron built a new one, this time it was a white dry board. Undeterred we simply wrote down all of the names and numbers and transferred them to the new display, extending the life of Portland's perpetual chess tournament into this Twenty-First Century.



**Cal Burnham vs. Unknown Opponent  
Portland Chess Club – 1985**