

IMAGES

...THEN AND NOW

From the Indian Hill Historical Society



**Buckingham Lodge
1861**

Remembering O. DeGray Vanderbilt

One of the groundbreakers on Indian Hill in the 20th century, Oliver DeGray Vanderbilt was a self-made man. His success in business paralleled his athletic prowess, social attributes, and charitable and religious service.

DeGray was born near East Orange, NJ in 1884. Named for his father, he was educated at local public schools, and went to Princeton University for four years, where he was a very popular member of the Class of 1906. Though he did not possess wealth, he was elected to the elite Ivy Club at college. After graduation, Vanderbilt sold French sparkling water in New York. He married Madelon Weir in 1912, shortly after her father's death. The couple moved to Cincinnati where DeGray took over the management of the bankrupt family company, Weir Kilby Frog and Switch. The company manufactured the hardware used on railroad tracks.

In several years, Mr. Vanderbilt, the CEO, got the company out of debt and managed to buy out smaller local competitors. Weir Kilby Frog and Switch's products were used throughout Cincinnati Union Terminal during its construction. It was a very profitable contract at the time. Vanderbilt then purchased Taylor-Wharton Iron and Steel Company, which made steel and glass cylinders, and did track work. It had two plants in Pennsylvania, and one in Hamilton, Ohio. DeGray ran that company with his son until it was sold in 1953.

O. DeGray Vanderbilt was one of about twenty Cincinnatians who decided to move to Indian Hill in the 1920s. The group was instrumental in creating the Camargo Club. Many of these newcomers built estates on substantial acreage. The Vanderbilts purchased an 80 acre farm on then Drake Road; enlarged and remodeled the farmhouse, and installed an 8 stall stable there. They named their property "Twin Fires". With their friends, they engaged in sporting events and social activities. DeGray Vanderbilt commissioned the artist Frank Myers to create a *Map of Camargo* in 1928, which showed the locations of the estate properties owned by those who moved to the area in the Roaring Twenties. It depicted 80 parcels of real estate with a symbol for each estate. It



"Twin Fires"

remains a record of those families who helped shape the history of the Village.



Mr. Vanderbilt was active in the community affairs of both Indian Hill and Cincinnati. He was chairman of the Children's Home of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, chairman of the 1940 Community Chest Drive, and the 1943 War Chest Drive. He was a director of the First National Bank of Norwood and a president of Camargo Bank of Madeira. On the hill, he was a prime mover in the founding of the Indian Hill Church and served as steward there. He was instrumental in the realization of a golf course at Camargo Club, and he served on the financial committee of the fledgling Cincinnati Country Day School. He was chairman of the Bridle Trails Committee which created 125 miles of trails in the village. His many club affiliations included the Racquet and Tennis Club of New York, Racquet Club of Philadelphia, Commercial Club, Commonwealth Club, Queen City Club, Camargo Club, and the University and Metropolitan Clubs of New York.

An avid sportsman, Vanderbilt was described by the Cincinnati Post as typifying "the mental image of the huntin', - shootin', - fishin' English country gentleman". He played tennis, squash, and golf (the latter until the last days of his life), and he was described on his 70th birthday at "the world's most ardent foxhunter". He was a director of the Ohio Valley Thoroughbred Club and the American Foxhound Club, and a longtime member and 16 year joint Master of Foxhounds (MFH) of the Camargo Hunt. During one hunt, an angry local farmer threatened DeGray with a rifle, stating, "I'll blow your damned head off," because riders were trampling on his crops. The dispute was settled, but the incident has become part of Camargo Hunt's lore.

Oliver DeGray Vanderbilt died at Twin Fires in 1960 and was survived by his wife, two daughters, a son, and nine grandchildren. One granddaughter remembered him as a "truly remarkable, cheerful, optimistic, kindly, and efficient man." Successful in commerce, civic-minded by nature, respected by family and friends, this well-rounded man was a community leader worthy of remembrance.