

## **A timeline of block clubs in context of HPKCC (founded in 1949) and SECC (founded 1952) code enforcement and the impetus towards Urban Renewal**

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**Context** includes the court declaration that restrictive covenants are non-enforceable, continuing disagreement whether to welcome, "manage", or discourage movement of blacks throughout Hyde Park, concern about buildings perceived as deteriorating and cut up/overcrowded, perception of increasing crime and violence, and feeling that city services were underprovided and residents could better do some things better by themselves in block-sized territories.

From HPKCC and Urban Renewal: <http://www.hydepark.org/historicpres/urearlyHPKCC.htm>.

Larger context: <http://www.hydepark.org/historicpres/urbanrentimeline.htm>.

Preparer Gary Ossewaarde

1949. Spring of 1949, various parties --clerical, university faculty, commission on human relations, were talking to many colleagues. UC Professor Herbert A. Thelen, of the Education Department invited Thomas H. Wright of the Commission on Human Relations to address his seminar on race progress. This led to decision that the fall seminar's project would be **to apply group dynamics to a transition neighborhood** by seeing what they could do in Hyde Park-- just an academic exercise, one must understand... - this time saw the upswing of what would be called McCarthyism.

At the [November 8, 1949] meeting which preceded formation of the Conference, Rev. Pennington asked and Thomas Wright of the HR Commission, a black leader framed the objectives in terms that, with the Thelen team's leadership in the field, would lead to the creation of eventually about 60 block clubs in Hyde Park and South Kenwood. "How shall we meet the challenge of the changing population--through conflict or cooperation?" Wright said this involved: not extending the ghetto, raising/meeting community standards and services, integrating new arrivals, dealing with the general housing need. Pennington: What do we intend to do? Audience: If we "go to work," can we succeed, has anyone?--Has anyone really tried--we blacks are not "the menace"- we have just as much stake and want the same standards you do. But we have all these problems, from alleys to taverns, crime, absentee landlords and blockbusters. Put our preachments into practice, at least we will have tried. Is there any existing organization that can or will do it? No; bypass the "shakers"; we must organize until we are strong enough to buck the opposition. Pennington and Wright were delegated to form a steering committee and have a larger meeting the next month.

[At the December 12, 1949 meeting where it was decided to form the Conference: ] Then students acted out "socio-dramas" centered around a Negro moving onto a block. At the start, people of both races were in shock at what they saw-- by the last scene some were wiping tears. Next there was breakout into small discussion groups to develop in effect a set of goals and "to dos"--ranging from after school and jobs for teens programs to housing code and police enforcement to fixing infrastructure and services to mentoring and integrating individuals into their blocks. **The suggestion of forming block clubs** was perhaps the breakout idea--in part to handle rumor-mongering. People realized the city had to be recruited and problems solved

citywide. A statement was approved saying that the problem is fear and action was needed to be directed to reversing urban decay. This was to be addressed 5 ways: (See Policy Statement in Early HPKCC UR Records)

- 1) dispel fear with education,
- 2) occupancy standards and planning,
- 3) programs for youth
- 4) commitment to integration
- 5) work with city agencies

### **1950- The Key year**

In 1950. **HPKCC starts establishing or allying with block clubs; there would be 60+ by 1956** when the first executive director, Julia Abrahamson, left. U of C Prof. Herbert Thelen held **clinics on block club group dynamics**. Equally important were **well-attended public meetings and strong volunteer committees**. One gets the impression by noting the committee and project leaders to start with that without the University of Chicago faculty "how to," even the strong involvement of religious leaders and professionals might not have been enough to get the ball rolling and galvanize a community in fear and apathy.

Looking back from 1975 in the Herald, Herb Thelen, a leader on block clubs along with Irv Horwitz and others, said "**[The Conference] started because people were upset. The original basis of thought was self-help.**" [i.e., could the block approach--used in the past to keep blacks and others out be used again, this time for inclusion and stabilization?] "It would be much harder. Before, people would worry about what would happen if blacks moved in, but they kept this worry to themselves because they thought other people weren't worried. And there was a real loneliness. When blocks first got together it hardly mattered a lot whether they talked about their kids, played poker, or seriously discussed putting in a tot lot, it didn't matter because people just needed each other." Also, as quoted in the March 5, 1955 *Nation*, "**It is only through working together that people acquire meaning for one another, and the meaning people have for one another make the neighborhood their home.**"-that's the meaning of the block club movement to its creators.

**The Conference chose early to be an organization of individuals**--how to have one of thousands that could reach intelligent, realizable decisions? Leadership was in the **steering committee (composed of reps selected by the committees) and 4 main committees** : **Block organization (Herb Thelen and Russell Babcock)**, Planning-Zoning-Reconversion (Harvey Perloff) subdivided into Planning (Martin Myerson-UC) and code Enforcement, Community Survey (St. Clair Drake of Black Metropolis fame and fellow sociologist Everrett Hughes), and Community Organizations (really entities from schools and religious to restaurants. Lucy P. Carner-Welfare Council, Jerome E. Morgan of Midway TV, and William Bradbury).

[At the meeting of February 1, 1950, working strategy sessions were held:] ...

-Blocks: drew up **20 equal-population areas**; training and communication mechanisms. **Thelen's was the first, their exemplar direction was visitation**--going directly to new neighbors or problem owners/tenants, concentrating on improvement projects, and researching/getting out the facts on rumors.

1952. Block clubs were becoming more sophisticated and things they cannot handle are tackled by sets of blocks, the Conference and other groups or by government. Among government, in these years the city and wards finally systematized street cleaning and timing and set up the sidewalk repair and replacement program with surveys and cost-sharing formulas. Street recreation programs were set up jointly.

Late 1952 the city conducted the house-by-house inspection. [Despite overlooking much, it] sent a message and provided the structure-by-structure information the Conference, SECC, and the block clubs needed.

1954. June 16, the 5500 Blackstone block became 45th HPKCC-affiliated block club. Conference staff would grow to eight. The Kenwood Open House Committee was busily stabilizing and promoting Kenwood. SECC and the Conference fought successful lawsuits to enforce single-family requirements there.

1956. HPKCC membership is at a peak at c. 4,000 and with over 60 affiliated block clubs.

1958. The HPKCC Block committee planned reorganization of block club structure. Number of clubs averaged 50 in 330 block strips. The clubs worked most on Urban Renewal (all), a much smaller proportion of clubs worked on such issues as building and zoning, youth recreation, crime, cleanup, traffic/parking and infrastructure. Only 11 held parties, the main things clubs were known for more recently!

1961. April 12, Kenwood Open House Committee holds fundraising ball in a home for 200 neighbors!

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1976 and beyond. [In its annual report the Conference still listed the Block Club Task Force as a major initiative along with housing code enforcement and open housing- preference surveys were done. WhistleStop, burglar-free homes, condos and co-ops, and home energy conservation were among initiatives.]

[Block clubs were in decline and those remaining had generally withdrawn from HPKCC membership and activity. One factor in decline conceivably was that a large number of buildings were being converted to condo, so the focus may now have shifted to building-level rather than block level organization and issue management in significant parts of the neighborhood. At the macro level, historic districts were established. Re integration, the majority of blocks in the 1980 census remained either black or white—this would show evidence of breaking down in the 2000 census.