

For 125 Years, BX Annual Meetings Have Reflected the State of the Industry

BX of Central Ohio Celebrates 125th Anniversary

Part 1 of 2: 1892 through 1950

Truly the most “time-honored tradition” of the Builders Exchange of Central Ohio is the association’s annual meeting – which last year drew a crowd of more than 800 to its new location at the Greater Columbus Convention Center.

As the Exchange prepares to celebrate its 125th anniversary at next month’s annual meeting, here’s a look back at the event where award winners are recognized, board members are elected and professional relationships are built.

The BX annual meeting has a colorful history: over the past century it has featured boxing matches, dance demonstrations, “motion pictures,” orchestras, magicians, professional models, comedians and sports figures along with its business reports.

Originally mandated to be held the first Monday in January, the affair was a lively way to start each new year. For decades, it was a marathon party, with polls opening at 11 a.m. to allow for board selection and remaining open until a customary chicken dinner was served and the business meeting kicked off at 8 or 8:30 p.m.

Current BX members know the annual meeting as a pre-holiday gathering held each November. It was in 1959 that two long-time

Exchange programs were combined to create this tradition: the January election and the November “Thanksgiving Party,” at which attendees were served a full turkey dinner – and participated in a raffle to win turkeys for their own family feasts.

Turkey and trimmings were on the menu for BX members from 1944 to 2004, after which the annual meeting dinner was replaced by an extended social time to facilitate networking. But the raffle continues, and the remaining turkeys that are not claimed are donated to charity.



Downtown Columbus circa 1915.

Wide range of performers enlivened early meetings

It's interesting to note that the price of one ticket to this year's event would more than cover the entire cost of the Builders' and Traders' Exchange annual meeting a century ago. The January 1918 board minutes listed expenses as \$25 for the buffet supper for all guests, \$6.30 for stationery and postage to announce the meeting, \$10 for musical entertainment and \$3 for "hauling down piano" (from where, it was not reported).

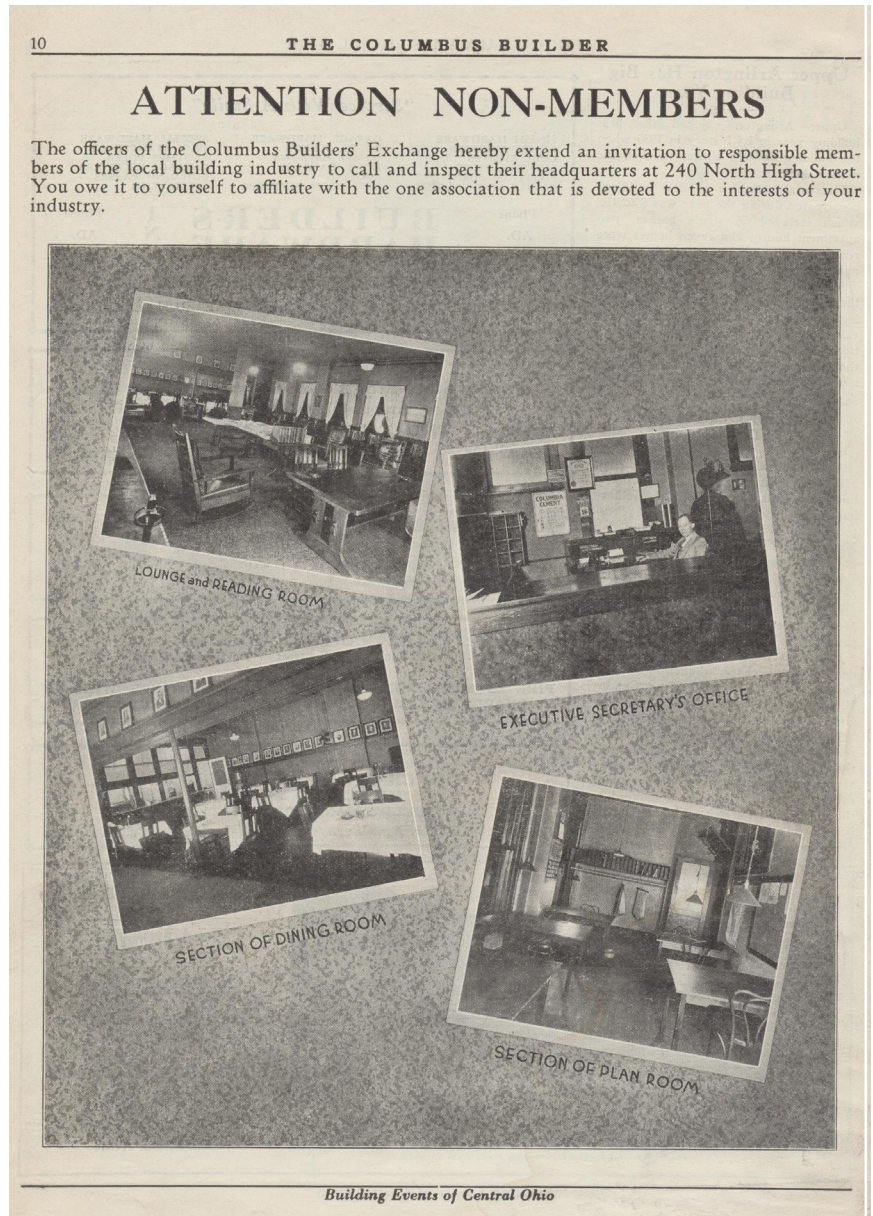
For its first half century, the annual meeting was held at the Builders' and Traders' Exchange offices, which featured a dining room, plan room and large lounge. By 1913, the Exchange offices were housed on the entire fourth floor of the unique new Arcade Building at 240 N. High St. (near High and Chestnut streets).

Although the 1918 minutes did not report the annual meeting attendance, the Arcade offices apparently had ample space for a crowd. In 1921, 115 dinners were served at the annual meeting and entertainment had been expanded to include a singer and pianist, buck-and-wing dancers and the Heber Brothers jazz orchestra.

By the late 1920s, the Exchange annual meeting was as renowned for its variety show of performers as it was for electing board members. In 1930, "Dinner was served at 6 p.m. to all members present during which an excellent musical program was given by Dolph Munkel and his troupe of Picadors." After the audit review, speeches and business reports, while votes were being tabulated, "members were entertained by a showing of motion pictures which were quite novel and unique."

Finally, the election results were announced to the record crowd of 250 and "a program of entertainment followed consisting of a boxing bout between the twin sons of Harry Mulbarger, a demonstration by Edward J. Fanley, a magician, and singing and dancing under the direction of Miss Dorothy Boyles."

Elected that night as BX president was Floyd F. Green (Southwestern Portland Cement Co.), who would mount an unsuccessful run for mayor of Columbus the following year. Green eventually did win the office, serving as mayor from 1940 to 1943.



During its early decades, the Builders Exchange annual meeting was held at the association offices – and a century ago, that was in The Arcade Building at 240 N. High Street.

Depression caused drop-off in members, participation

Entertainers continued to be part of BX annual meetings in the 1930s, even as the ebullient mood of the Roaring 20s faded and BX members felt the effect of the Great Depression. Reports on the Exchange finances and membership grew increasingly grim. At the January 1933 annual meeting, it was announced that membership had dropped by 32 percent in a year, down to 144 companies.

This was not surprising, given the condition of the country. By 1933, 67 percent of construction workers were unemployed in Ohio, according to the Ohio History Center.



The Builders' and Traders' Exchange had downsized its offices into a few parlors at the Southern Hotel. At a membership meeting there in November 1936, attended by about 50 members, the minutes noted "all present enjoyed refreshments and participated in a turkey raffle."

The 1938 annual meeting marked a turning point for the struggling association, whose net worth was reported at \$80.42. Describing that meeting a year later, Executive Director John Kight noted, "During the early part of 1938, it looked as if we might 'fold up.' A general meeting was called and consensus was that the Exchange must continue to be the center of activities for the construction industry as it always has been in the past. Any thought of disbanding the organization was unanimously voted down."

Member companies stepped up to sponsor monthly meetings at their offices and plants, including Kinnear Manufacturing Co., Case Crane Kilbourne Jacobs Co., Johns-Manville Co., Southwestern Portland Cement Co., Truscon Steel Co. and Pollak Steel Co. Harold Elford (Elford, Inc.), who had been elected second vice president in 1938, hosted a breakfast to rally a membership committee and the results were 42 new members that year.

At the 1931 annual meeting, the following members were elected to the Exchange board: Harry R. Goss (The Middle States Construction Co.), president; Ralph C. Kempton (architect), vice president; and Harry R. Burton (Ohio Elevator & Machine Co.), Merle C. Brooke (Brooke Electric Co.) and Edwin E. Spencer (Doddington Co.), directors.

Although the annual meetings were still held at the Southern Hotel, the BX headquarters had relocated to the more affordable Terminal Building at 209 S. Third St., where rent was \$60 a month. In just three years, things had improved so much for the Exchange that the board announced there would be no dinner cost for voting members at the 1941 annual meeting and guest tickets would be \$1 each.

WWII also has dramatic impact

Members attending the 1941 meeting were future-focused, voting to change their organization's name to the Builders Exchange of Columbus. Later that year, they decided to move the Exchange to a room adjoining The Riviera Restaurant at 350 N. Sandusky St., which they remodeled and expanded. It was here that the BX weathered the financial impact of World War II – a time when business ground to a halt to direct building materials to the war effort, and when many members were defending the country.

Another moment of truth came for the Builders Exchange when President George J. Igel created a membership recruiting contest in October 1944. Membership had again dropped precipitously, hitting 103 in January that year. But in the three months leading up to the 1945 annual meeting, BX volunteers went to work and the association ended the year with 222 members – 88 companies gained in the last quarter alone.



George J. Igel (George J. Igel & Co.), right, talked with Bill Halligan (J.T. Edwards Co.) at one of the many BX functions at the Southern Hotel. Igel was BX president in 1944 and 1945.



Enjoying 1947 BX annual meeting at the Southern Hotel were members leading the effort for a new headquarters: from left, Bill Halligan (J.T. Edwards Co.), Earl Case (Mulligan-Case Co.), John Kight (executive director), Parker Garwick (Garwick & Ross, Inc.), Mike Hausman (Hausman Steel Co.) and Clarence Trapp (Trapp Construction Co.).

Not surprisingly, Igel was unopposed in his bid for a second year as Builders Exchange president. He was one of only eight members to be elected for a two-year presidency in the organization's history.

The war years were difficult for the industry, so President Igel was pleased to announce in November 1944 that 36 turkeys had been donated by members "to be given away at our Thanksgiving party on November 21st... four of these will be roasted and served as sandwiches for the party, with the Exchange furnishing celery, olives, pickles, potato chips and coffee. This will leave a total of 32 turkeys to be given away as prizes."

After the war, BX membership bounced back quickly, with the "Thanksgiving Party" in 1946 attracting a record crowd of 500 to the Southern Hotel, and nearly 100 turkeys were given away. By January 1947, the Builders Exchange was too large to hold its annual meeting at the Riviera Restaurant. The event shifted to the Southern Hotel (with entertainment by the long-popular Dorothy Boyles) and conversations were underway about the association erecting its own headquarters.

Excitement and optimism were in the air at the January 1950 BX annual meeting, as guests at the Southern were updated on the construction progress of the new association offices on Dublin Road. Membership was 560 companies and by the following January, the annual meeting would be held in their own home.



Past presidents at the head table of the January 1950 annual meeting at the Southern Hotel were (front row, from left): Frank E. Mitchell (1935), J.T. Edwards, Sr. (1942), Robert W. Setterlin, Sr. (1940), L.M. Leonard (1943), Amor E. Bogen (1927), George F. Hiney (1924), L.G. Kallmerten (1923), William H. Conklin (1911), Chester A. Smith (1937), William E. Edmister (1932), Harry R. Goss (1931), J. Parker Garwick (1946-47), George J. Igel (1944-45) and Earl A. Case (1948). Behind them were speakers (from left): James S. Clutter and O.H. Seeger (Entertainment Co-Chairs), John A. Kight (executive director), Michael R. Hausman (immediate past president), Ralph H. Anderson (1950 president), James E. Humphreys (first vice president), Frank E. Wesley (bowling league president) and Steve Stepanian.