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A Century of American Chess History

The Marshall Chess Club Turns 100

By **DR. FRANK BRADY**

The genesis of the Marshall Chess Club can be traced back to the summer of 1915, when Grandmaster Frank J. Marshall, who had been the U.S. Chess Champion since 1907 (a record-holding title he would keep until he relinquished it in 1936) opened a small store in the arcade at Captain Young's Old Pier, jutting out from the boardwalk at Atlantic City, New Jersey. He called it Marshall's Chess Divan, set up boards and sets, charged a nominal fee for players, gave individual chess instruction, performed simultaneous exhibitions, and also played games for money. He rarely lost.

Atlantic City was at its height, with throngs of tourists and beachgoers at that point, and from early June to late August, Marshall, who had just turned chess professional, could earn enough money every summer to support himself, his wife Caroline, and his little son, Frankie, while giving them a sea-breezed vacation at the shore. But for the rest of the year, in order to provide for his family, Marshall was almost always on tour giving lectures and simuls, and for the most part being separated from his wife.

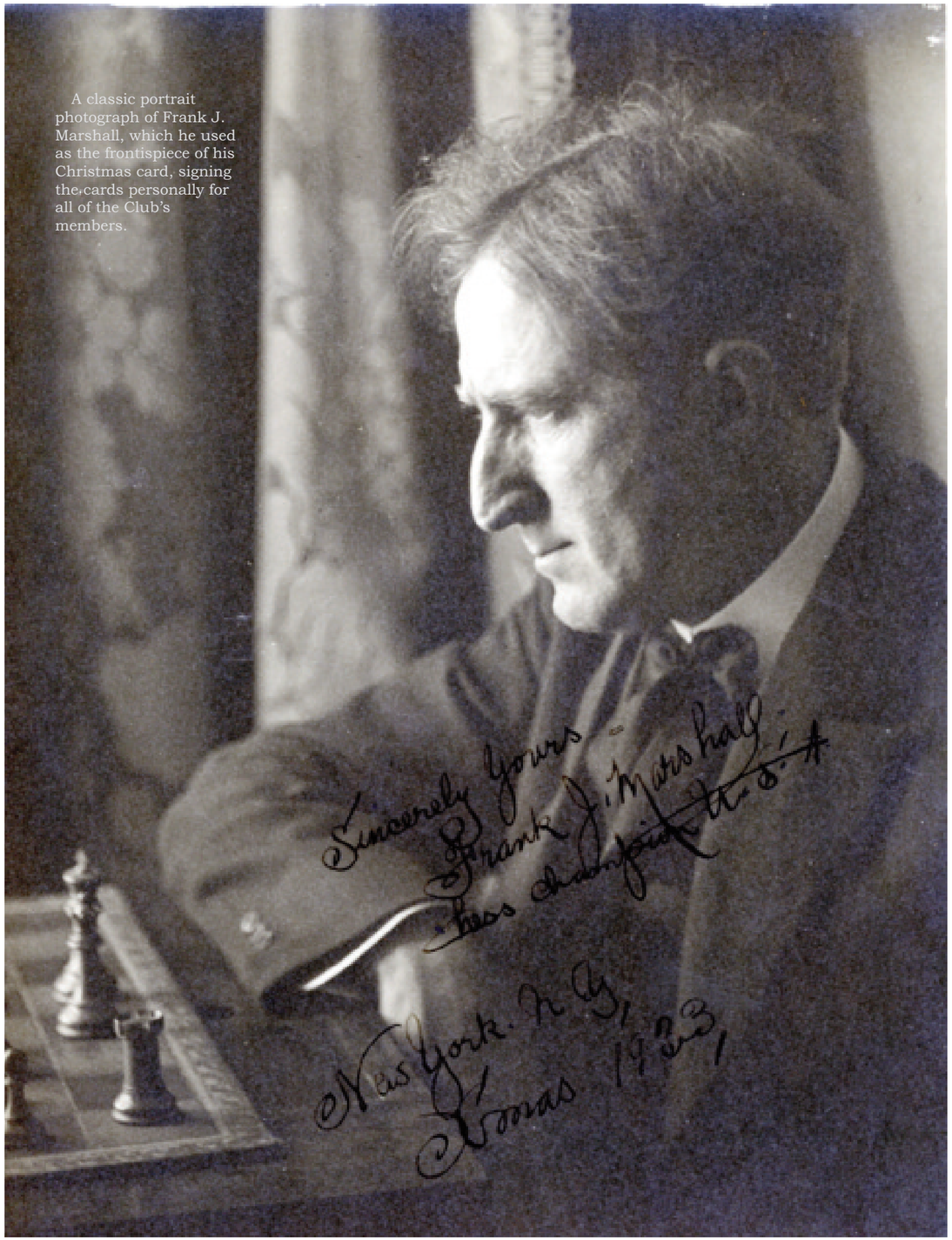
It was she who urged him to establish a club in New York City, one that could develop into paying him an adequate salary through membership dues, private lessons and other sources of income, and keep him more grounded at home. As early as 1900, upon his return from the Paris International where he placed 3-4th behind Emanuel Lasker and Pillsbury, Marshall implied that he was becoming tired of traveling: "There is no place like home and I have been away long enough." (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 9, 1900).

Thus, that September, one hundred years ago, Marshall opened a club at Keen's Chop House, one of the most famous restaurants in Manhattan, made infamous when sued by actress Lily Langtry, the mistress to the Prince of Wales—later King Edward VII—who insisted that she had the right to dine there despite Keen's policy of barring women. She won in the courts and therefore many restaurants in New York, including Keen's, opened their doors to women.

Keen's catered to the rich and famous: Theodore Roosevelt and his successor in the White House, William Howard Taft, dined there, as well as Babe Ruth, Will Rogers, George M. Cohan, and other Thespians of the Broadway stage. Decidedly British in cuisine and appearance, the restaurant would occasionally have a "Beefeater" garbed in the traditional bright red uniform and tunic, on duty for special events.

The chess club was set up in a back room, next to the Green Room reserved for actors. Although the room was small, the quality of players and celebrities among its early members was high, such as: Albert B. Hodges, a former U.S. Champion and one of the strongest masters in the country, who was not only a member of the Marshall but one of its financial backers. He was also one of the players (as was Pillsbury) hidden inside "Ajeeb," the chess automaton, that would be destroyed by fire in 1929 at Coney Island. Marcel Duchamp, the painter who just two years before Marshall opened the club had astounded and confused the art world with the showing of his cubist painting, "Nude Descending a Staircase," became a member and remained so for the rest of his life. Others joined, including Mischa Elman, the famed Russian violinist; David Janowski, the champion of France; H. Snowden Marshall, the U.S. attorney for New York; William E. Napier, a great player, who won more brilliancy prizes than he did first place trophies in international tournaments; philanthropist George Emlen Roosevelt, a cousin of the former president; and Christy Mathewson of the New York Giants, the first college graduate in baseball, who became one of the greatest pitchers in the history of the game as well as a strong chessplayer.

Soon after the Club opened, "Dean of American Chess" Herman Helms, former New York State champion and chess columnist for the *Brooklyn Eagle* (and eventually the *New York World-Telegram* and *The New York Times)*, joined the Club and played in its tournaments and on its team.



A classic portrait photograph of Frank J. Marshall, which he used as the frontispiece of his Christmas card, signing the cards personally for all of the Club's members.

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For many years the Marshall held an annual dinner for its members and their guests. This one in 1933 was at the elegant Hotel Brevoort, conveniently located one block away from the Club. After dinner, many of the members repaired back to the Club and played far into the night.

During the evenings at the Club, there was always a white-coated waiter in attendance ready to bring food (mutton chops were the specialty of the house) and drinks to the players. Diners in the restaurant would often stray into the Club after dinner to watch the games. Some became members. Tournaments were held, as were team matches, Marshall gave simuls and lectures, often about the intricacies of the Petrov Defense, or the Scotch Gambit, or an analysis of a game by his idol Paul Morphy. In time his Club became a fixture in New York's chess scene, comparable to—although much smaller in size and not as strong as its uptown rival—the Manhattan Chess Club (which was founded in 1877, ironically the year of Marshall's birth). However, over the years the Marshall Chess Club, as it has become known, developed into one of the most active, vibrant and revered chess clubs in the world.

Aside from the chess cognoscenti who were members, Marshall was the star attraction of the Club. Beginning his international chess career in London in 1899, he beat Levitsky in a game in Breslau in 1912 that was so spectacular his board was showered, perhaps apocryphally, with gold pieces. Marshall was proclaimed a grandmaster by Czar Nicholas II in 1914, and competed against many of the greatest players of his time, such as Emanuel Lasker, Capablanca, Alekhine, and Pillsbury. Playing in more than 80 major tournaments and dozens of individual and team matches, he was one of the most respected and feared masters during the first quarter of the twentieth century. His chess was not always consistent, however: he played one match for the World Championship against Emanuel Lasker, but was defeated, and then essayed another non-Championship match against Capablanca in which he also lost.

It wasn't just Marshall's chess reputation that attracted players to the Club, however; it was his personality. He loved the game, was willing to analyze with anyone—patzer or champion—at just about any time, and was deservedly popular as he held court at the Club day in and day out, always with a smile, always self-effacing. Tall, slightly stooped—perhaps from bending over the board for so many thousands of games—he had red, wispy hair, blue eyes, a fair—sometimes rosy—complexion, and spoke in a high-pitched and friendly tone. His trademark dress was a black lavaliere frock tie, the kind worn by actors and sometimes by artists of that day, giving testimony to Marcel Duchamp's often-quoted observation that "All chessplayers are artists." The tie, his aquiline nose, similar to John Barrymore's, and his bearing made Marshall look something like a Shakespearean actor. The yarn that he was never seen without holding or puffing away at a long cigar was probably true.

As the Club grew in numbers, the room at Keen's was just too small to accommodate the players and their activities, and over the next number of years, the Marshall moved to various parts of the city always seeking perfect or at least suitable quarters. For a time it met at The Chelsea, a hotel that favored artists and writers: Mark Twain and O. Henry (who was a chessplayer), among hundreds of others, stayed there.

Despite the popularity of the Club, however, Marshall was experiencing a difficult time making a living, and in 1931—the worst year of the Depression—a group of wealthy patrons, including George Emlen Roosevelt, Alrick H. Man and Gustavus A. Pfeiffer got together and purchased a townhouse for Marshall on one of the prettiest streets in Greenwich Village. The Marshalls were given a spacious apartment on the second floor, rent-free for life, and the two lower floors of the building were set aside for the Club, which also had a private study for Marshall that contained a fireplace, a bay window and a spiral staircase to a secret exit leading to his apartment.

Built in 1832, during the presidency of Andrew Jackson, the building was located in what was then farm country, and still remains as the home of the Marshall Chess Club, the "Wimbledon of chess" as it has sometimes been called for its elegant appearance and reputation as being wholly dedicated to the art of chess. From World Champions Emanuel Lasker to Magnus Carlsen and many in between, such as Alexander Alekhine, José Raúl Capablanca, Mikhail Botvinnik, Vasily Smyslov, Robert Fischer, Anatoly Karpov, and Garry

Here in 1915 was the burgeoning Marshall Chess Club, then located at the back of Keen's Chop House. At right foreground, Marshall can be seen facing an unidentified player. At left foreground, Dr. Edward Lasker has started his game against Jose Capablanca, the future World Champion.

Here on December 27, 1933, Alexander Alekhine is giving a simultaneous exhibition in the Great Hall of the Marshall Chess Club. Peering out from his right shoulder is Marshall, who served as Arbiter for the event. The player with glasses on the right foreground is Anthony E. Santasiere, the Club's first junior member.

Kasparov, great and aspiring players of all strengths from all over the globe have traveled to the iconic destination that the Marshall has become, as painters journeyed to Paris in the 1920s to meet other artists and to hone their art. Together with the Manhattan Chess Club and other extremely strong clubs—now long-forgotten—such as the Isaac L. Rice Progressive Chess Club and the Brooklyn Chess Club—New York and the Marshall became the center of chess in the United States. The great players David Janowski and Carlos Torre (Mexico's first grandmaster) became fixtures at the Club in the 1920s, the latter winning almost all of the Marshall's weekly speed tournaments.

By the early 1930s, the Marshall was the strongest chess club in New York, winning the prestigious Metropolitan Chess League tournament for three years in a row. Eventually, the now-defunct Manhattan Chess Club would eclipse the Marshall in team play and ultimately win more titles in most years with powerful players such as Samuel Reshevsky, Arnold Denker, I.A. Horowitz, Abraham Kupchik and Isaac Kashdan on their roster, against such Marshall masters as Edward Lasker, Arthur Dake, Herman Steiner, Reuben Fine, Fred Reinfeld, Anthony Santasiere and, of course, Frank J. Marshall himself. The rivalry between the Clubs was bitter, and each attempted to recruit the best players they could by offering free memberships just so that they could play that year in the Met League. All the New York newspapers carried the results of the Marshall-Manhattan annual team match.

The Marshall had the look and ambience of a private men's club and still does. Three fireplaces warmed the wood-paneled playing rooms, paintings and photographs of famous players adorned the walls, a waiter was available to serve tea or coffee, an étagère of rare chess sets, together with busts of Philidor and of Marshall, gave one the feeling of entering not just an extremely active chess club but a chess museum as well, steeped in the echoes of legendary games, epic battles, brilliant wins and aching losses. Windows were draped with plush velvet curtains, the oak tables were fitted with brass lamps, the garden out back was available for playing games or just relaxing; Members were given keys to the front door and had the right to enter the Club at any time giving them the feeling of proprietorship. Often in the afternoon or early evening, members would gather informally to play casual chess, solve a problem, analyze a game, or just to talk chess and discuss the issues of the day. Mondays were set aside principally for social occasions; Tuesdays were devoted to a rapid transit tournament to be played at a sudden death time limit of 10 seconds a move. Because of its somewhat Victorian, or Edwardian look, the Club has often been used as a background set for documentaries and feature films.

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The presidents of the Marshall comprise a roster of dedicated players and lovers of the game who have given hours and days of their lives, unpaid, and often unheralded. Too numerous to name all of them—the list stretches out for 100 years—a few stand out for greatly helping the Club to grow: Alrick H. Man, an attorney and real estate magnate, was the first president. He organized how the structure of the Club was to operate, and he held the post until 1934, the year of

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In June 2015, World Champion Magnus Carlsen, a frequent visitor to the Marshall Chess Club, gave a simultaneous exhibition for 12 players. Here he is analyzing his game against one of his opponents. *(Photo by Gary Forman).*

his death. George Emlen Roosevelt, a railroad executive, then filled the post and gave support and financial assistance to not only the Club but to the Marshall family as well. Walter Goldwater, a bibliophile, chess book seller and chess benefactor, served for several years and sponsored an annual tournament. Milton Hanauer, a chess master, author and high school principal was extremely active as a player and president of the Club, as was Saul Rubin, an attorney and outspoken proponent of both the Marshall and US Chess, who often did pro bono legal work for Club members. Dr. Edward Lasker was perhaps one of the most distinguished presidents in the Club's history: always with a wry smile he cordially agreed to play all challengers no matter what their strengths. More recently, Douglas Bellizzi, a strong master, was president for six years and was responsible for many improvements in the building. The current president, Stuart Chagrin, a retired business executive, is a philanthropist and active tournament player who has helped maintain the financial condition of the Club while organizing and promoting many activities such as the New York International, and the Marshall Championship, the Club's stellar annual tournaments.

Atypical of many chess clubs at the time, women players were encouraged to join as members and were charged a reduced membership fee. In 1934, Marjorie Luce won the Marshall Chess Club Women's Championship with a score of 11-0.

The first junior member, in 1919, was 16-year old Anthony E. Santasiere, an irrepressible young man, who was a lover and adept of the King's Gambit. He became a poet, painter, and school teacher and went on to win the prestigious Marshall Chess Club Championship six times, the New York State Championship three times and the U.S. Open Championship once. An opening often played by him, *Santasiere's Folly (1. Nf3, b4)* supposedly came about when he accidentally touched the **b** pawn rather than the **c**. The Club formed a Junior Chess Association at that time, open to any player who was a high school student between the ages of 14 and 17. Santasiere became the president of the fledgling group and for years after that the Club conducted a Junior Championship Tournament. In 1947, Larry Evans at 15, became the youngest player to win the Marshall Club Championship. His record stood for more than 50 years until he was eclipsed in 1999 by Dmitry Shneider who won the tournament at 14. Shneider, now an international master, is currently a member of the Marshall's Board of Governors.

Carrie Marshall, the Club's Secretary and Frank's tiny wife, attempted to keep junior members on their best behavior. She believed that the youngsters should dress and behave like little gentlemen. All through the years, the teenagers Bobby Fischer, Bernard Zuckerman and many others incurred—and ignored—the wrath of Mrs. Marshall who demanded that their comportment and their attire be appropriate to the formality of the Club. No such dress code at the Club exists today.

In the 1950s, Archie Waters was the first black player who became a member of the Marshall. He was a journalist, checkers champion, class A chessplayer, and a life-long friend and ping-pong companion of Bobby Fischer's. The first black master in the United States, Walter Harris, who achieved the title in 1964, was a member, as was the player who became the nation's first black grandmaster, Maurice Ashley, who went on to win the Marshall Club Championship.

Many of America's grandmasters sharpened their skills in their youth as Marshall juniors and gained experience spending countless hours playing and analyzing at the Club. Some became grandmasters, among the strongest in the country, if not the world: Reuben Fine, Larry Evans, William Lombardy, Andrew Soltis (winner of the Marshall Championship nine times, a record that will probably never be broken), Hikaru Nakamura and Fabiano Caruana.

Currently, in any given week the Marshall will see a dozen or more grandmasters, international masters and strong untitled players, teaching, analyzing and lecturing. The Club, the first in the nation to become an affiliate of US Chess, conducts more than 300 tournaments and events a year. Some of the other strongest players in the Club are often present to play, analyze, teach or just talk several nights during the week, such as International Master Renato Naranja, who drew with Fischer, Lajos Portisch and Smyslov in the famed Palma de Majorca Interzonal; FIDE Master Asa Hoffmann, one of the top speed players in the country, who was also known to have beaten Fischer on occasion; International Master Jay Bonin, "the iron man of chess" who has played more tournament games than just about anyone in the nation, and has wins against such lights as Samuel Reshevsky, Robert Byrne, and Gata Kamsky; and International Master Justin Sarkar, a young master who just earned his third grandmaster norm in 2015, a player capable of beating anyone.

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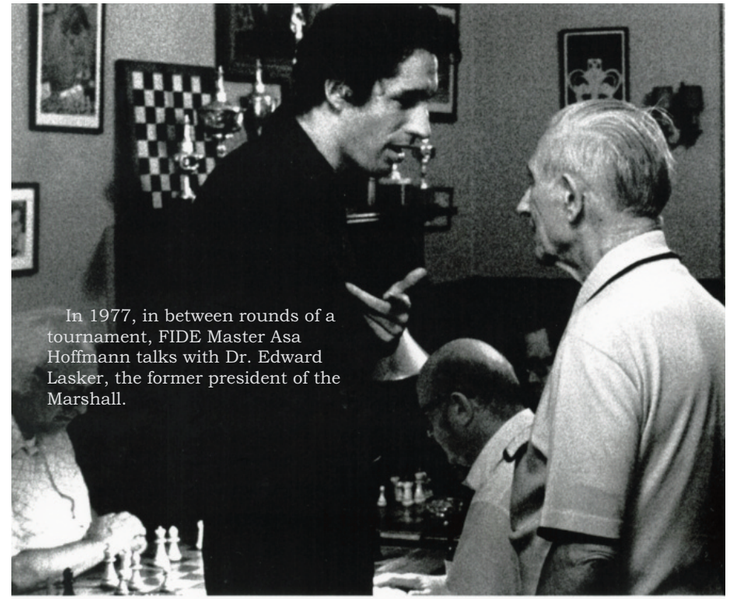
Of the millions of moves made and thousands of tournaments played during the Marshall's one-hundred year span, the defining historical moment might arguably have been on October 17, 1956, when 13-year-old Bobby Fischer, competing in his first adult all-Master tournament, The Lessing J. Rosenwald Invitational, faced International Master Donald Byrne, the former U.S. Open Champion who had just defeated Grandmaster Reshevsky in the previous round. The game took place in the Great Hall of the Marshall, and spectators simply could not believe that a child could play as Fischer did that evening. The tension and excitement of the spectators was almost palpa- ble. Playing black, Fischer's effort was so brilliant in the depth of his sacrifice that it became—and remains—one of the most memorable games in the history of chess during the game's more than 15 centuries. Hans Kmoch, the arbiter of the event, dubbed it "The Game of the Century" and that appellation has remained until this day.

It would be difficult to name any other chess club in the world that has had and continues to have such a varied menu of tournaments and events during its 100-year span: Game in 30 moves virtually every week, memorial tournaments for renowned players, class tournaments, blitz or speed tournaments constantly, and the so-called "Grandmaster Challenge," conducted in the mid-2000s, a beloved series sponsored by Master Yvgeny Margulis, who catered a Russian lunch (complete with blinis and caviar, sweets and soft drinks, and occasional Russian songs in between rounds); simultaneous exhibitions, blindfold displays (recently, Grandmaster Robert Hungaski played six players simultaneously blindfolded and won all of his games); debates, classical music concerts, book signings, lectures, seminars, chess films, the weekly Marshall Masters tournament (which has now become a monthly event) first conducted by Greg Shahade and John Fernandez; and team and individual player matches. Social activities often abound: couples have chosen the Marshall as the site for their chess-themed wedding receptions; birthday parties have been held; Member Jeremy Graham had his Bar Mitzvah ceremony and reception at the Marshall; barbecue parties for members and their guests are held in the garden several times a year.



In 1977, in between rounds of a tournament, FIDE Master Asa Hoffmann talks with Dr. Edward Lasker, the former president of the Marshall.

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Periodically, the Club undergoes physical improvements to modernize the interior while retaining the feeling of the 183-year-old townhouse, but memories of former players and games and tournaments of the past, either personally experienced or found in chess literature, still permeate the very fabric of the Club: the intoxication of victories, the inevitability of defeats, a century of chess at its finest.

Over the years, the Club has kept up the spirit and activities that have formed it into a premier chess club, even after Frank Marshall's death in 1944. With the help of an active board of governors and a tournament committee, Carrie Marshall took over running the Club until her death in 1971; thereafter until the present day the Club has been run by the board, the club president, various committees and the executive director, currently Bryan Quick.

In the last number of years, children—some not much older than toddlers—engage in summer and after-school chess camps, enter tournaments, and take individual instruction from top players. It is amazing to witness their progress, not only from year to year but sometimes from week to week. Budding champions, the juniors of the Marshall are the fastest growing category of members. In 2008, the Club formed the Marshall Chess Foundation primarily to promote through funding and other means a series of educational programs for children in enhancing their intellectual acumen, developing their social skills, and increasing their proficiency over the board.

The Club is open approximately 360 days a year, and only shuts down for occasional holidays. Some members come to play at the Marshall virtually every day. It is a place where visitors drop in from foreign countries and from out of state to engage in a tournament, see where some of the major chess events in American history have occurred and continue to occur, and perhaps to have a first-hand glimpse of some of the finest players and games of the day. ♚

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See the TLA section for a listing of current events at the Marshall Chess Club.