We owe a great debt to Allan and Janet Balch, who provided $500,000 so that Caltech could have the finest faculty club in the country — the Athenaeum — and to Gordon Kaufmann, the architect who made their dream a reality. Allan Balch was a New Yorker who earned part of his way through Cornell University by working in the college blacksmith shop. It was there that he met Janet Jacks, a young lady from California who brought her riding horse into the shop to be resoled. The Balches moved to California in 1896, and he became a Caltech trustee in 1925, serving as chairman of the board from 1933 until his death in 1943. Janet Balch was active in social and civic affairs, including in addition to Caltech the Los Angeles Symphony and Scripps College.

The original governing board of the Athenaeum consisted of Balch as president, and a group of distinguished friends of the Institute — historian William B. Munro, Walter Adams of Mount Wilson, Max Farrand of the Huntington Library, trustee Henry Robinson, and associates Albert B. Ruddock and James Page. The chairman of the House Committee was a brand-new young assistant professor of economics, Horace Gilbert. The other members were Mrs. Balch, Mrs. Josephine Hixon, Edwin Hubble, Mrs. Donald O’Melveny, and Earnest Watson.

According to a letter Watson wrote Gilbert in July 1930, the composition of this committee caused for consternation. He said, in part:

Help! Succor! Assistance! Our dear Athenaeum has turned into a women’s club overnight. Women are to enjoy all the privileges of the club, Women are to live at the club if they so desire. Women have been put on all the committees. Women, to the number of three, have been added to our House Committee. With both you and Hubble gone for the summer, what is a poor, scared bachelor like myself to do?
The main lounge of the Athenaeum as it has appeared at three different periods in the last 50 years. Some of the furniture from the very first version (above) is still there — the octagonal table, the fire screen, and a pair of settees, for example — and pieces of the original rugs are still in use in Dabney Lounge. The tassels have long since been removed from the chandeliers.

The hallmark of the lounge for most of its existence was its magnificent carpet, the Royal...
Meshed rug in the picture above. Measuring 47½ by 28½ feet, it had to be turned under along the south wall to fit into the room. The story is that the rug was over a century old when it came to Caltech, having been woven for the palace of a Persian nobleman in the city of Masha. When that city was threatened by Bolshevik uprisings, the rug was smuggled out of the city, eventually was acquired by P. G. Winnett, president of Bullock's, and in due time was presented to Caltech. The portraits on the south wall are of Mr. and Mrs. Balch. Time and traffic finally caught up with the whole room, and in the early 1970s it was redecorated. Below, the Athenaeum lounge today.