

# Calendar

## Great Gab

### San Diego Great Books Reading and Discussion Program

There are about a dozen regular members, according to Frank Spalding, a dentist who has attended meetings for 13 years. He and the others in this book group can be found on Saturday afternoons once or twice a month at the downtown library. But if you overhear one of them say, "Infield," don't imagine it's a Padres chat. More likely, the reference is to Einstein and Infield's *The Rise and Decline of Classical Physics*.

The rest of this year's book list for the San Diego Great Books Reading

#### LOCAL EVENTS

and Discussion Program is no less daunting: Aristotle's *Politics*, Euripedes's *Iphigenia*, Kierkegaard, Descartes, Dostoyevsky, Nabokov, and Joyce. Spalding's fellow members are varied but in one way are alike. None is young. "It's not that we don't welcome them, but we just don't have too many 20-year-olds."

He mentions an engineering professor, two chemistry professors, two teachers retired from government programs abroad, a holder of a Ph.D. in Greek theater, and a San Diego Gas & Electric Company executive with degrees in engineering and business.

Most are men, although the group was founded by two women in 1979.

Sometimes people come once, never to return. "They say, 'I've always wanted to read Plato and here I am.' And that's fine. What we hope is

that they'll also want to read John Stuart Mill and all the others. But when people discover it's typical to spend six to ten hours on a reading, they don't say, 'You know, that's too much time for me' or 'I'm kinda lazy, and I don't want to do that again.' But we can tell that's the case."

The group is affiliated with the Chicago-based Great Books Foundation. "The program was popular in the '50s, before TV, when a whole bunch of people bought the Great Books, 52 volumes, from Plato to Freud. The series was tossed in if you bought the Encyclopedia Britannica, since the same company produced both and sold them with high-pressure, door-to-door sales. Well, a lot of those books never got read. So the foundation was established to promote the actual reading of them."

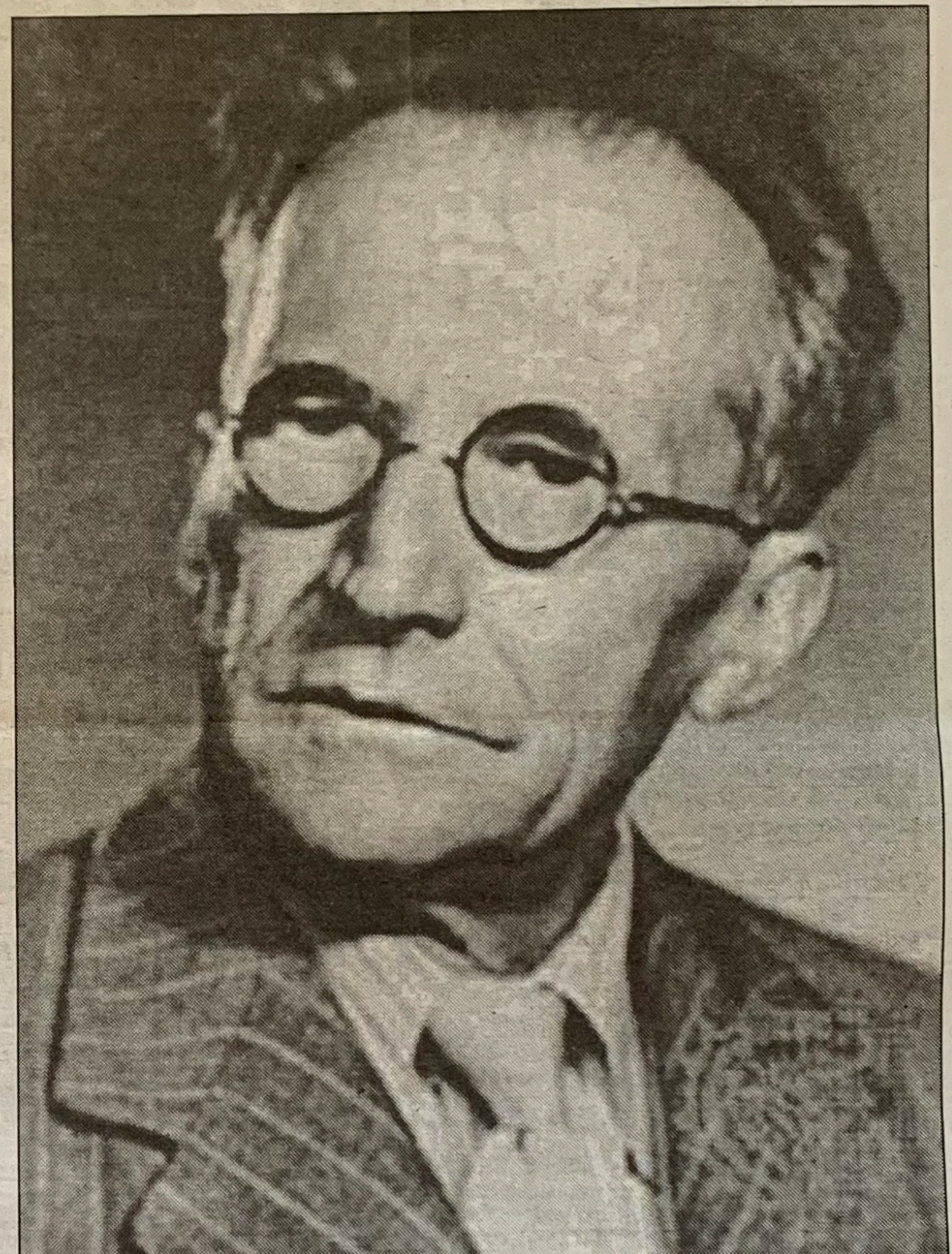
Just such an unread set is part of Spalding's checkered past. Fifteen years ago, he bought the books used; they sat on his shelves unopened. He suspects their former owners didn't read them, either, considering their pristine condition. Then, one day, he saw an ad for this group's discussion of Adam Smith. "I'm interested in economics, and I said to my wife, 'I'm going.'"

Members take turns being discussion leader. "Leaders don't lecture," says Spalding. "What the leader does is ensure that the conversation continues. They'll say, 'John, you said this. How does that relate to what Harry said?' And if John and Harry start swinging at each other, the leader has to say, 'Calm down now, fellas.'"

The chances for metaphorical swinging are high. "We discuss things that have been argued for 20 centuries. There are differences of opinion." It's how they like it. "If everybody agreed, the sessions wouldn't last ten minutes." Instead, they invariably exceed the designated two hours. "We have a tradition. There's a little bar, four blocks from the library, and afterwards we have a beer, and the discussion continues for two or three more hours."

Spalding doubts one could get very far reading these books solo. "You'd get bogged down. It's just so much easier if you've got people to read with you. You always get insights from the others. And you're forced to a schedule. The schedule acts as a whip."

Of book groups that choose less formidable titles, Spalding says, "Our



Erwin Schrödinger

feeling is that a lot of those are bull sessions." Try throwing bull at one of their meetings, and watch out. "Somebody will say, 'Yeah, but here's what we're discussing today. These pages.' We have a set of rules: 'Discuss the text,' 'Never mind what outside experts think,' and 'Listen to what other people have to say.' They are printed on a sign hanging on the wall. "So we can just point to it."

Exceptions are made. Somebody may be permitted three minutes on, say, another work by the same author. "And we actually enjoy it. We have the rules in case somebody goes berserk. Maybe it's somebody new who wants to give a 30-minute lecture. 'You guys think you know what John Maynard Keynes thought? Well, I'm going tell you.' We gotta have ways of dealing with that."

Their latest pick is Schrödinger's *What Is Life?* The discussion will be

led by their newest member, a woman who is a physicist, as was Schrödinger. Spalding says, "Schrödinger asked, 'Exactly what is the difference between the chemistry of life versus inorganic chemistry? How do you define it?'"

And if the discussion wanders into definitions of the meaning of life? "Well, it's not likely to. That won't be our focus, which is the text in front of us. Of course, that's the great question. We never have answered that one."

— Jeanne Schinto

**San Diego Great Books Reading & Discussion Program**  
**Saturday, April 22,**  
**2:00 to 4:00 p.m.**  
**San Diego Public Library**  
**820 E Street, downtown**  
**Second-floor meeting room**  
**Free**  
**Info: 858-755-8978**

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