

Debate Societies Once Ruled Student Life in Chapel Hill
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Though the art of public speaking is not dead, it has dropped from its role as the heart of a college campus down to a slow, quiet pulse beat among the bustle of more enthusiastically supported activities.

None of the blame for the decline in debating's importance can be laid at the doorsteps of the Dialectic Senate and the Philanthropic Assembly at the University of North Carolina.

For these two debating societies, the oldest in the south, have been the training ground for many of Carolina's sons who have achieved fame and fortune.

Among the famous alumni whose names dot the old rolls of the Societies are James K. Polk, Archibald D. Murphey, Zebulon B. Vance, Elisha Mitchell, Thomas Wolfe, Archibald Henderson, William A. Graham, John Motley Morehead, John J. Parker, and Frank P. Graham.

How much the training received in these societies meant to these collegiate Tarheelians can be illustrated best by the late William B. Umstead, Governor of North Carolina and former U.S. Senator. Speaking before the Philanthropic Assembly at its 1951 inauguration of new officers, Umstead asserted:

"I wouldn't trade what I got from my experience in this society and the course under Horace Williams (the philosopher) for everything else I got out of my University work, as valuable as the rest of it was.

Modern UNC student government--which won second place in the Student Government Achievement Competition at the National Student Association's Congress this year--owes its life to the societies.

Born June 3, 1795, not quite two years after the cornerstone for the first building was laid, the societies began as a single organization under the name, "The Debating Society."

Kemp Plummer Battle, in his "History of the University of North Carolina," gives credit for formation to Tutor Harris. Harris had been a member of the renowned Whig Society of Princeton and had seen its results.

The first speech before the North Carolina group was by James Mebane of Orange County, who later became speaker of the Senate of the North Carolina General Assembly. He took the affirmative on the query, "Is the study of ancient authors useful?"

Among the officers of this new society was one dreaded: the Censor Morum. With compulsory membership rules, which remained until 1899, this officer's duty was to keep discipline among the body.

The single group did not remain long. Within two months it split and "The Concord Society," forerunner of the Philanthropic Assembly, was formed.

Battle cites three reasons which might have influenced the split: internal party feeling with the ConCORDS following Jeffersonian Democracy's "rights of man doctrine, a desire for smaller membership so each member might participate each week, and possible opposition to the Censor Morum.

The new group held its first meeting Aug 10, 1795; Richard Eagles of Wilmington, was made its first President. Its first query: "What is best--an Education or a Fortune?" Education won.

But these Society names soon vanished. The following year the remaining Debating Society replaced 'Debating' with its Greek Equivalent, "Dialectic;" and the ConCORDS followed suit, removing "Concord" and inserting "Philanthropic."

This move probably came about because the youthful members felt that English names lacked sufficient dignity.

With the compulsory attendance rule went many others and the societies financed many of their undertakings with fines imposed on those who broke the rules; either those of the society, of parliamentary procedure or of the gentleman's code.

More serious infractions of the rules were tried by the societies in trials hardly surpassed by state courts in dignity and solemnity. If the offender was found guilty, his penalty would range from a heavy fine to expulsion from the society.

A society's expulsion sentence automatically carried with it suspension or expulsion from the university.

"Damn you, you will hear from me again," one youth found guilty of stealing money from a classmate told his judges in the Philanthropic Society.

They did.

He moved to Missouri and was elected to the U.S. Senate where he served for 30 years. He was Thomas Hart Benton.

Some of the topics debated in that era sound trivial; others reflect the early strugglings of America as a nation.

As examples of their queries and answers:

--Are talents or riches greater recommendations to the ladies? Talents

--Are ladies or wine most deleterious to students? Ladies.

--Should a man marry for gold or beauty? Gold.

In other more serious debates, the membership affirmed that Spain was blamable for obstructing Mississippi navigation; that the United States should not continue negotiating with Algiers; and that a mixed government was to be preferred over a pure democracy.

Shortly after their formation, the two societies decided to begin building their own libraries. So successful was this venture, that by 1812, along with an enumeration of other University improvements and advantages, the Raleigh Register carried the note that the Societies libraries each contained 800 to 1,000 volumes.

In 1839, the two libraries contained a combined total of about 7,000 volumes. By 1875 this number had grown to about 14,000 books. Eleven years later, the Di and Phi, as they had come to be known, consolidated their collections with the University library. They then had about 9,000 volumes each.

Meanwhile, the quality of the debates grew within the two societies, although the two bodies may have lacked a fraternal feeling for each other since an intense rivalry existed on campus between the eastern and western North Carolina sections and was carried over into the societies.

The Di represented the West, the Phi the East. Both made fervent attempts for the loyalties of entering students.

In 1838 a schism developed--mainly in the Di--which produced a third Society, the Delphians. Only one member of the Phi joined these dissenters who asked for trustee recognition.

Two reasons prompted the secession: the bitter sectional feeling between east and west and opposition to the strictness of University rules requiring morning prayers and compulsory chapel attendance among others.

A committee formed to arbitrate the grievances between the groups, termed it "inexpedient," to form a third society. The Delphians agreed to dissolve their organization.

After this spat, The Di and phi returned to working on mutual projects, some of them designed deliberately to win back the allegiance each had lost during the secession. The most successful of the latter projects was one by which the two societies agreed to alternatively elect some member each year to speak before the alumni and senior class.

Both societies annually sponsored orators for Commencement Day. These were generally of exceptionally high quality. As one visitor to the 1906 commencement exercises remarked, "Those students make far better speeches than one hears made by men of distinction at similar gatherings in our larger cities."

During the Societies growing period, most students took similar courses of study and common interests held the bodies together. In 1851, fraternities came to Carolina but society colors continued to mean as much as fraternity pins or athletic letters.

But near the turn of the century, in 1899, with a growing student population and establishment of several professional schools, some students began to display "arrogant behavior" at being forced to attend either Di or Phi meetings. The compulsory attendance rule was dropped and membership in the groups were limited to 50. Seemingly interest in the debating bodies declined considerably between 1899 and 1926. In that year resolutions before both groups calling for consolidation threatened to end 131 years of separate meetings. The move failed and separation continued until Spring 1959.

Last spring, modern college life caught up with the South's oldest literary societies. Membership for the previous academic year in Di was down to 12 and 20 in the Phi. Too many distractions and a lagging interest in the ancient art of debating caused the merger, after 164 years of separation, to the Dialectic and Philanthropic Literary Society, as it is now called.

The Phi, not too long before, had reorganized itself after the State House of Representatives and had adopted the title of Philanthropic Assembly. The Di had long patterned itself after the State Senate, going under the title of Dialectic Senate.

The 1930s witnessed a breakdown of tradition in both societies as coeds were admitted to membership for the first time. The Phi went first in 1930; the Di, thinking the Phi a bit hasty and might regret its decision late, held out until 1935 before admitting its first girl.

During their long life on the Carolina campus, the societies had headquarters in various buildings,. Bout 1813, a combined meeting hall and library on the third floor South Building was given for their exclusive use.

About the beginning of the Civil War, the Phi moved into its present hall on the second floor of New East; the Di taking residence in New West about 1861. Thus, though the east-west feud no longer holds, it continued in location.

The present student government system at Carolina is perhaps the most important gift of the two societies to the modern campus. From 1875 to 1904, the societies chief responsibility was governing the student body--except for the law and medical students. But in 1904 the Student Council was created taking over this function; and in 1946 the present form of student government was set up. The Di and Phi still have what is considered one of the largest and most important collection of portraits of imminent men in North Carolina. Most of these men were former students who, after distinguished debating careers achieved great fame as statesmen, scholars, and businessmen.

Many of these portraits, most of them oils, were done by some of America's foremost artists.

Although the societies no longer play their former dominant role in campus life, the topics debated within the historic halls still often capture newspaper space.

Though the seriousness of the debates has not diminished, occasionally humor finds its way into the topics. The Philanthropic Assemble furnishes the best examples of frivolity.

In 1950, after two hours of debating on who won the Civil War, the members burst into strains of "Dixie." They did later decide, however, to let the results stand as recorded by history, even to the extent of recognizing the United States government in Washington.

1957 saw the phi come out with a resolution condemning rock n' roll as "an uncivilized expression of man's desires, passions and talents."

To this the Raleigh Times editorially remarked, "the boys could well turn to another "uncivilized expression of man's desires, passions and talents--to wit, panty raids."

These examples of college debating furnish concrete clues that college life has not regressed. It stands just where it stood 164 years ago--or to rephrase an old cliché: "college boys will be boys."