

The Societies--Overgrown or Outgrown
Walter Pliny Fuller
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[This was written right before what most people now think of as the golden era of the Societies, those days when Albert Coates, Sam Ervin, Luther Hodges, Thomas Wolfe, Paul Green, William Bobbitt, etc. graced the societies' podia.]

The Di and Phi Literary Societies as present organized are worn out, outgrown institutions--with a grand past of achievement and glory, it is true,--but nevertheless obsolete. They must be reorganized. Never before in history has Carolina suffered such defeat on the platform as last year. It was wither the men or the system. Many think it was the latter.

At one time the whole interest of all the college centered in the societies. They were founded the same year the college opened: June 3, 1795, and for a half a century they were practically the only extra-curriculum institutions in college. There were no publications, no organized athletics, no out of-town attractions, no social orders. A man's society colors meant as much then as does a man's frat pin, varsity sweater, dramatic club monogram, paper editor-in-chief-ship today.

The societies simply absorbed all the energies of all the men in college; and they were wonderful organizations. They even had supervision over the morals of the members. Men would and frequently did fight to defend the honor of their society. There were no professional schools. Every man had practically the same studies: History, English, Ancient Languages, Philosophy and Mathematics; and therefore to a large extent the same tastes and inclinations. The number of students was small and moreover they were all housed in three closely grouped buildings; The South, East (now Old East) and West (now Old West). It was practically impossible to leave the Hill and no attraction to make it desirable. No wonder then that that earnest group of young men who dared travel horseback across half a state of wilderness in search of education and who were thrown so closely together, and with absolutely no other attractions or distractions, formed a society whose reputation traveled up and down the Atlantic seaboard.

But that day is past. The old reputation is ballooning out a shell today that otherwise would have collapsed two or three years ago. Today there are a hundred influences at work that make it impossible and in reality undesirable that the societies maintain their former position in University life. Fraternities, the Library, Dramatic Club, Sigma Upsilon, Omega Delta, Amphoterothern, the English Department, Star Course, the literary publications, the professional schools, automobiles, varsity athletics, the Pickwick, have one by one stripped power and prestige from the societies until they are now almost destitute of their former glory.

Custom, reverence, tradition and inertia have all maintained the old forms; but the spirit is gone never to return to the old body but only to come with re-organization. I will trace the important events in the history of the two societies, and significant changes in student life; and attempt to show how they have affected the two societies.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century student life at Chapel Hill was rather limited. Outside of society work activities consisted of shinney (or bandy), marbles, skating, dancing, walking, annoying the faculty and townspeople, and consuming alcohol.

In 1851 fraternities were established in the University and the first great rival of the societies appeared. They had attempted to enter in 1842 but were forbidden because they were "not less injurious to the regularly established Literary Societies in the University than to the cause of

good morals and sound learning." Their presence made a serious break in the power of the societies. As a matter of fact the societies had to a great extent served the purpose of the fraternity. Extracts from Dr. Battle's "History of the University" show this. He was in college during the years '45-'49.

"Old students sometimes rode miles into the country to meet the incoming freshmen. Girls wore the society colors in much the same spirit as they wear the frat pins today. The societies had elaborate regalia for the special ceremonies. The colors worn by ball managers and other gala day officials were always the society colors. The moment a new student arrives at the Hill he is seized by the members of one of the two societies, receives every attention, has every wish gratified, is taken to the libraries, introduced to other members, is flattered and cajoled. If this isn't sufficient to secure him, every little inconsistency or rash act of the other society is presented to him."

But the coming of the fraternities marked a gradual cessation of these customs. By 1884 the situation was quite serious. Each society was divided into "fractions," or parties, usually distinctly frat and non-frat. New men were pledged to one or the other at entrance and usually the voting, which was always along strict party lines regardless of ability, was very close. At this time the Phi was nearly wrecked because the two factions were even and one side ran two new members at the last meeting before election. The defeated faction seceded and all the efforts of the faculty toward reconciliation were vain. A little later (1889) joining one or the other was not made compulsory, concerning which Dr. Battle says: "It is probable too, that some fraternity men were satisfied with their own meetings and desired no other."

The next crippling influence was the library. All that remains of a once dominant factor in the influence of the societies is the tablet in the entrance of the library which reads, "Library of the University of North Carolina endowed by the Dialectic and Philanthropic Societies."

The societies founded the first libraries in the University. They started with fifteen books in 1796 and ended 1886 with about 9,000 each. They also subscribed for papers and periodicals. The rivalry was keen. When one society bought a book the other would duplicate it. When one remembers that often no mail arrived in the village for weeks on a stretch, that postage was from fifteen to forty cents on a letter, that newspapers and novels were a rarity and the modern magazine unknown, one realizes to some extent the attraction these libraries had for the members. By 1812 the libraries had from 800 to 1,000 volumes, and by 1844 the number had grown to 7,000 each. In 1844 "The two libraries together had probably the best collection in the State." As a fine example of the prestige of the societies in 1850 Smith Hall (the Law Building) was built by the university at the petition of the societies with the idea of using it among other things for a library. There the books were kept until consolidation on March, 18, 1886.

Consolidation came after bitter opposition: "The minority of the Di (the vote being 42-30) with great justice thought that the movement would diminish the prestige of the Societies." And it did; although as a matter of fact even at that early date, the newspaper, cheaper postage and the popular magazine were all rivals for its popularity. For a while the societies had a partial control of the library but that, too, gradually ceased.

At about this time another serious competing force was felt. This was the department of English. Two statements, the first made in 1848, the other in 1889, show this graphically. "The members listened with interest to the written theses or compositions which were read on each alternate Saturday, and the one deemed of sufficient excellence was on motion, by vote of the members, filed in the archives." The second quotation was the result of a discussion on the advisability of having class work on Saturdays. "The chief opposition came from the Di Society in which

declamations and readings of compositions had for many years been features and were considered of much educational value. In answer to this it was argued that this practice had grown up when practically there was no English Department in the University." The proposed change was made and it eventually ended essay work as a feature of the societies.

The early nineties were bad years for the Di and phi alike. The University was getting too large for two efficient societies, the professional schools were becoming disturbing factors, and varsity athletics began to grip the attention of the student body.

The question of size has always been a sore one with the societies, Only twenty-two days after the birth of the first society a split was made so as "to have the number so small as to allow and require every member to perform some duty at each weekly meeting." Again in 1838 a split from the Di attempted to form a society styled the "Delphian." The main cause of the split was too large a membership. A statement of their position follows.

"They (the Delphians) have formed a body for mutual improvement in oratory and science for advantages impossible to be secured in bodies containing as many members as the Di and Phi Societies. There are few, if any, of the members of the old societies who do not find the duties arduous and fatiguing. From the increase of numbers these duties have become a burden rather than a pleasure. For advantageous improvement fifty are sufficient for any literary society."

A final evil effect of too large a membership is shown in another quotation. "For many years it was the rule that all students should join one or the other of the two societies. As the numbers increased it became necessary to excuse first the Seniors and the Juniors from regular attendance. (This was bad as it put the society in the hands of inexperienced members.)

"Then again, the increase of the Law, Medical and Pharmacy Departments and of the special science schools introduced a large number of students who would have found it extremely irksome to be forced into the society obligations." So in 1889 joining was made voluntary because hostile members were introduced in such numbers that "there was begun disorder unknown in the early days such as applauding or hissing speakers, which seriously affected the character of the bodies."

The great defect in the societies today is a large membership, only a small per cent of whom are interested. In 1894 with a total of two hundred and sixty-two members in both societies, forty students entered the varsity try-outs. Last year twenty candidates were an exceptionally large number. Yet the two societies today have four hundred members.

Then, of course, the expansion of dormitories consequent upon a larger student body has had hurtful effect. Up until 1878 all students roomed in the South, East and West buildings. The important part from a society standpoint was that each society had definite dormitories for its members, were held responsible for damages to the rooms, and to an extent, for the order in their sections. The Phi had the East and the front half of the South. The Di had the west and the other half of the South. As the halls were in the East and West respectively it practically amounted to a frat hall. It is significant, too, that the frat faction was usually located in the South away from the direct influence of the society halls. As the dormitory accommodations spread the influence of the societies was dissipated and soon the definite society quarters ceased.

But probably the greatest influence against the societies in the early nineties was the organization of varsity athletics. Walter Murphy, Baskerville, and George Stephens were putting Carolina on the athletic map. The students went athletic mad. In 1891 sixty out of every hundred played football; thirty-three, baseball; fifty, tennis. "Every man in the University except one approves of college athletics."

Then, as a direct result of the athletic fever came another weakener of the old societies. The Tar Heel was started by the Athletic Association. The magazine which had been having an "off again, on again" sort of existence since 1844 was a child of the societies. But this new publication came from a rival organization and gave it more offices to fill and consequently more power and importance.

That the literary spirit had been growing among the students but not strong enough to force itself upon and into a large society full of men with diversified and conflicting interests was proved by the foundation of the "Odd Number Club," a chapter now of Iota Upsilon, in 1905. A little after the Tar Heel came the Yackety Yack, for a long time merely a fraternity handbook. The Magazine was having its balmy days. The energy that had been first absorbed from the societies by the English Department had grown until it came forth, not in the societies where it had appeared twenty years before but as the times and conditions demanded; in an efficient compact organization devoted to one thing--creative literature.

A corollary to this and another blow at the parent trunk was the Dramatic Club. Years before the societies produced and staged elaborate and creditable plays. But again a complex society had forced specialization upon the students. The societies continued to lose ground.

During the last three years the losses of the societies have been appalling. Their natural enemies have multiplied on every side. The Pickwick, the automobile habit, Durham shows, Amphorothen, the Star Courses, have all conspired to make the old position of the societies impossible. Even the High School Debating Union has practically no connection with the Delta and Phi.

The automobile lines to Durham and the shows there have but hastened the inevitable "Saturday Exodus" problem that has been vexing the Eastern Colleges for a generation. So even the good roads movement is hostile to the societies.

Amphorothen is the strongest opponent and strongest sermon the societies have. Founded in 1912 for the purpose of stimulating discussion and thought along certain lines--the very thing the societies are supposed to do--it has drawn many of them men into it that the societies can not afford to lose. In fact this organization is the modern reproduction of the society in 1796. With a limited membership carefully chosen, real work is done. Personally my connection with it for a little over a year and under rather unfavorable circumstances has meant more to me than the literary society ever can. The Amphorothen type is the inevitable future of the debating societies.

So one by one time and expediency have stripped the honors and departments from the grand old societies until none remain but one: debating. No longer can the societies hope to be the organization on the hill. They must specialize as all their kindred orders in their little world are doing. They must have for members only those men whose main or large minority interest is debating.

In my opinion the societies should do three things. They should have a limited membership with a hundred as the outside limit; initiation should be in the late fall or spring after the new men have had time to choose their college work; resignation from the society should be made easy. There are two other things that might be advisable. In the first place, abolishing the custom concerning Eastern boys joining one and Western boys the other might enliven interest by competition. Second, the value of secrecy is open to question.

For a man who loves the societies to consider such a move is painful. The idea of giving up the old traditions and customs and the recognition of the organization as eclipsed in importance is painful. But restoration of the societies as they were is impossible. The trouble is organic. What

is needed is the surgeon's knife of the reformer, not the physician's pill of the orator. Invoking the ancient Gods of Tradition cannot put life into a dead body. The Societies must face the fact that this institution is now really a University, not a college, and that there are a hundred pregnant counter currents of taste, desire, ambition, training and necessity. Let them concentrate on their one duty. Let them specialize. Strip off the dead wood of tradition and get down to a fighting basis. As it is they are consuming ninety-nine per cent of their energy in revolving the machinery of operation, and the one in useful work.