

Debating Society Continues UNC Tradition

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Today students debate in the Pit, parade with protesters around the UNC campus and state their opinions about controversial issues. But long ago, students in the Dialectic and Philanthropic Societies debated moral and political issues, composed speeches and practiced parliamentary procedures in the plush chambers of New East and New West.

The Dialectic and philanthropic Societies were formed by students who wanted to improve their public speaking skills. Known for a few months as the Debating Society, the organization split into the "Di" and the "Phi" organizations in 1795.

Di-Phi President William Elliott, a senior history major, said the University used to require student membership in one of the two societies. The Di was made up of people from western North Carolina, while easterners joined the Phi Society. Out-of-state students could choose which one they preferred.

"After about ten years fights broke out over membership, so the board of trustees allowed students to join one or the other," Elliott said.

In 1895 New West and New East were built for the Dialectic and Philanthropic Societies, respectively. In addition to being a meeting place for the societies, the buildings held extensive art collections and massive libraries.

"We started buying books because the University saw little need for a library," Elliott said. Soon the individual societies owned more books than the University itself. By 1886 the joint collection amassed a total of about 15,000 volumes. That year the Di and Phi combined their collections with UNC's to form the modern UNC library.

Paintings of James K. Polk, James Dobbin, Thomas Clingman, William Davie and others adorn the walls of the chambers today. Although some paintings were lost in World War I, the art collection still serves as a source of academic and historical information.

The Di-Phi Societies were also responsible for creating UNC student government and enforcing the Honor Code.

Society members planted the Davie Poplar, formed the intercollegiate debate team, founded the "Yackety Yack" and established the "University Magazine," which is now the "Carolina Quarterly."

Some people say UNC's modern speech, English and political science departments contributed to the decline of the Dialectic and Philanthropic Societies role in teaching.

A spark of interest in team sports in the early 1900s caused debates to lose popularity, and fraternities which were allowed to come to the UNC campus, swept the social scene.

By 1924 membership was not a requirement and support of the societies decreased. Only the top floors of New West and New East were reserved as Di-Phi meeting halls and chambers.

Senior biology major Stasi Wemhoff, clerk of the DI-Phi Society, said that the yesterday's goals for the society remain the same today.

'We have a program every week and we study debating ad the whole parliamentary procedure," Wemhoff said. "We also speak out on subjects and try to disprove them through rebuttals."

The William Person Mangum Medal in Oratory was started in 1878 and is still awarded today to graduating seniors. Each spring students present prepared speeches and a committee of judges votes on the winner of this Chancellor's award.

Today the society only has five members, and it is feeling the pressure to keep the organization alive.

"There have been times with no members," Wemhoff said, "It comes in cycles. We have to tell people to get it started again."

In the absence of members a board of trustees is responsible for caring for all Di-Phi furnishings and art collections. Members of the society, however, hope to rekindle interest in the organization.

The Dialectic and Philanthropic Society meets every Monday night at 7:30 on the top floor of New West. To be considered for membership, an applicant must attend three meetings. At the end of the third subsequent meeting, the applicant must present a prepared speech, which is then voted on for membership. The society is open to all students, faculty members and citizens.