

Philadelphian and Wrightonian Halls: The ISNU Debate Societies

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The Establishment of the Debate Societies

Four days after the opening of ISNU in 1857, a majority of the all-male student population met to form a society for the purpose of “elevating and extending their moral character and intellectual attainments” (Cook and McHugh 1882:102). Following a candlelight meeting to discuss a plan of action, a convention was held in a small room on the second floor of Old Main where a constitution was drafted for the newly dubbed Normal Debating Society (Cook and McHugh 1882; Marshall 1956).

The society consisted of a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, librarian, critic, marshal, editress, and chorister congregation leader (Marshall 1956). Although the exact date women began to be admitted into the societies is unknown, women were joining the Normal Debating Society by 1858, which was to be renamed the Social Friends to reflect their newfound coed admission practices (Marshall 1956). One woman who voted against this new name, Jennie Michie, proposed the name Philadelphian in order to convey a message that those in the society were in fact, “a band of brothers” (Cook and Hughes 1882:103). This name was soon adopted despite the admittance of women into the once fraternal order.

In 1858, a rift occurred within the society that resulted in the creation of the opposing debate society (Marshall 1956). Following a ruling by the acting President enforcing a 25 cent fine for any member that left the Hall without the express consent of the President or presiding officer, a number of men either chose to leave or were expelled. These expatriates went on to create the Wrightonian Debate Society. After both societies were established, professors were equally divided and assigned to the societies by the president (Marshall 1956). ISNU required that incoming classes of students were assigned to one hall or another “alternately and alphabetically” (Marshall 1956:90).

Both societies began very much at odds, especially at the individual level. The Wrightonians proposed their motto (which was eventually placed over the door to their hall) “Dare to be wise” (Cook and McHugh 1882:109). A professor associate with the Philadelphian Society retorted, tongue in cheek,

that the Wrightonian motto in fact should be “Sap heads and adders” reflecting his distaste for the rival Society (Cook and McHugh 1882:103).

The Philadelphian and Wrightonian Halls

Under their new title, the Philadelphian society long held debates on the third floor of Old Main in their debate hall, named the Philadelphian Hall. Adjacent to this was the Wrightonian Hall where the Wrightonian students met.

When the establishment of both halls was complete, the societies competed through the renovations of their halls. Red and white Brussels carpeting costing nearly \$250 was purchased for the Philadelphian Hall by the professors of the University in a ploy to show up the opposing hall with their bedecked floor style (Cook and McHugh 1882:110). The plan was foiled by the Wrightonians who soon had similar, albeit floral patterned, carpeting installed.

Both of the societies eventually acquired pianos for each hall, updated lighting from tallow candles to chandeliers, created pulpits for the president and speaker, built piano platforms, painted frescoes upon the walls (twice), and gilded the windows as well (Marshall 1956).

The Role of Women in Debate Societies

As mentioned previously, women began being admitted to the Philadelphian Society in 1858. Soon the Society had to decide whether or not women could become officers. One President of the society moved to remove women altogether from the Society on the basis that they, “would embarrass the beginners and leave all of the talking to a favored few, and that many men would simply begin to attend to escort them (the ladies) and disturb rather than assist in the meetings” (Cook and McHugh 1882:104). The motion failed almost unanimously and women soon began to acquire officer positions. In 1870, Alice Emmons became President. Emmons was a senior at the University and the daughter of a judge. Some men of the society were undoubtedly wounded by the election of a woman to such an esteemed position in the Philadelphian society and whispers of “collusion” between the women around Emmons’ election began to drift amongst the men (Marshall 1956:136). A committee was created to

verify the authenticity of the election and Emmons was removed from office in favor of University President Edwards' son to fill her seat.

Debate Society Activities

Lectures, professorial readings, a society paper (*The Literary Paper*), and the first students manual entitled, *Our Ladies Garland* (Later simply, *The Garland*) were all products of the Philadelphian society (Cook and McHugh 1882:104). These student run debates soon attracted the attention of various professors who began to attend the debates and critique students on argument and prose. Meeting every week, the members developed a close knit bond with one another to the point that the debate societies became very important to them both socially and academically. It has been said that even high marks and graduation were secondary to membership in the Society.

The societies obtained charters from the state of Illinois in 1867 allowing them to now borrow money, own property, and act as legal agents (Marshall 1956:135). Their intense rivalry continued throughout their existence for better and for worse. Dues were collected, pledges recruited, plays performed, and suppers held all fostering the rich development of student civic and academic involvement. These two societies were the cornerstone of student life from the Universities beginning until their dissolution.

The End of the Philadelphian and Wrightonian Halls

On May 22nd, 1946, the third floor of Old Main was officially closed due to the unsafe condition of the building (Marshall 1956:314). The debate societies never met in the Wrightonian and Philadelphian halls again, and by the fall, a flat roof sat where the third floor had once risen.

References

- Cook, John W. and James V. McHugh
1882 *A History of the Illinois State Normal University*. Pantagraph Printing, Normal.
- Marshall, Helen E.
1956 *The Grandest of Enterprises*. Lakeside Press, Chicago.