

AN HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC  
SPEAKING ACTIVITIES ON THE CAMPUS OF  
KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY 1864 - 1951

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report has been to take an historical look at the way public speaking activities emerged on the Kansas State University campus. The process of public speaking is traced from its beginning, in 1864, to the point that it became an event which was highly selective and competitive, in 1951.

The first literary society on this campus was started in 1864. These societies continued to gain popularity, until a total of ten societies were established. These societies flourished until the 1940's. It is the consensus of this report that several factors influenced their decline. Fraternities and sororities were gaining popularity, and they could offer more social activities of a different nature. The process of selecting a debate team to represent the University was also becoming much more rigorous. Not everyone had the opportunity to be involved in inter-collegiate debate. The last factor contributing to the decline was World War II; students had very little time to be involved in the work of the societies.

During the time that literary societies were popular, the students took part in many inter-society contests. These contests consisted of orations, declamations, debates, and musical numbers; however, with the passing of time, intercollegiate debate became more popular and the other activities died out.

After World War II, and the literary societies died out, debate became a much more selective and competitive activity. Public speaking was no longer an activity in which all students could participate. This was because the intercollegiate public speaking activities had become very selective and competitive in nature.

Of the hundreds of campus organizations and clubs that have been established over the years, the early concept of the literary society was probably most important in terms of providing social and educational agencies for the student. For almost 200 years, these societies played a major part in the education of thousands of students, while at the same time providing a center for the students' social life. Through the organization of these societies, the student was given excellent training in the art of public speaking, while also gaining social involvement with his peers. These literary societies, which were generally started by the students, carried considerable force, and by the late 1800's they had earned a distinguished and honored place in the colleges and universities of the United States.<sup>1</sup>

In the early American colleges, the students' social and educational activities were closely controlled by the school administration. The daily life of the student was designed to reduce to a minimum the time the devil might find employment for idle hands and idle minds.<sup>2</sup>

Although the students' daily activities were closely supervised, their schedule did offer them some free time, and it was necessary for the student to find some approved method of working off this excess energy. In most of these early colleges, the company of ladies was usually forbidden during college sessions, organized athletics were unheard of, and "even the privilege of reading contemporary periodicals, much less current fiction, was denied him because the ordinary college library contained few if any 'authors who have written within these 30 years.'"<sup>3</sup>

The privilege of being able to socialize with fellow students was practically the only legitimate form of entertainment that these students could take part in. Because of the limited social opportunities available

to the student, it was to be expected that some type of organization, offering social and competitive activities, would be established on college campuses.

Although religious societies for students existed as early as 1716, the first college literary and debate society appears to have been the Spy Club, established at Harvard in 1722.<sup>4</sup> With the Spy Club taking the first step in establishing formal literary societies, other major colleges soon followed. By 1825 most of the prominent eastern colleges had at least one literary society.

Literary Societies began to gain popularity and many of them were formed as soon as a new school had opened its doors. In most cases, they were formed a year or two after the first classes were scheduled, but at Hamilton College, the Phoenix and the Union literary societies were founded the year in which the college was chartered.<sup>5</sup>

As was stated earlier, literary societies proved to be a social and educational organization for the students. They gave students the opportunity to form a social life with their peers, and they also provided valuable practice in mastering and improving their debating and public speaking skills. Although early society records indicate that the members were involved in spelling contests, importing prominent speakers, and conducting exhibitions for the enjoyment of the public, their primary focus from the 1820's until their decline, was on public speaking and debate.

Before the rise of literary societies most American colleges only approved of one form of public debate. This form of debate was the Latin Syllogistic disputation, which was first introduced in medieval universities.<sup>6</sup> Its format was controlled very strictly, by rules found in prominent textbooks on logic.

Although the format was very simple, the debate itself was a very complicated project, usually following this pattern: the college president or a professor selected a question dealing with one of the subjects taught; this question, which was generally accepted as the truth, was to be defended by one person, chosen by the person who picked the topic; the other students were to be opposed to the question. They raised logical objections, which the defender either affirmed or denied.

The defender opened the debate by reading a carefully worded speech. The speech, which was in Latin, stated and defined the question, and also presented the strongest logical arguments. The rest of the class stated objections to the case. These objections were presented as syllogisms which denied the major or minor premise. The defendant had to counter the arguments with syllogisms of his own. The arguments continued until "truth" logically won.<sup>7</sup>

Because this type of debate was so formal and closely supervised by members of the faculty, the literary societies quickly adopted types of exercises that were more flexible and fun to take part in. Although these new forms of public speaking were still carefully worded and well thought out, most literary societies banned the use of Latin, and began to present the exercises in English. There were probably two major reasons that the societies took this action.<sup>8</sup> First, the societies were established so that the student would have some type of social life and be relieved of some of the classroom boredom. Since Latin was a major study, the students probably wanted to forget it for awhile. Also, English was the primary language and it was much easier to speak and listen to; thus, it was the most natural language for them to use. The second reason had to do with the proof of

their arguments. In the Latin exercises use of emotional proof was expressly forbidden, while the English disputation actually encouraged the use of emotion. This added an extra dimension to the art of argumentation, and thus made it more exciting.

The next method of public speaking to become popular was the Extempore disputation or extemporaneous debating which, by the end of the eighteenth century, most literary societies used as an additional form of debate. Although this was a very popular form of debate, it is not clear what this style involved. The extemporaneous styles seemed to range from a debate within a debate, which was arranged in a very impromptu manner, to the debate form known today, in which the debators are assigned a topic in advance to provide them time to adequately prepare the material.<sup>9</sup>

Intersociety debating became popular in the early 1800's. This type of debating seems to have developed from the intense rivalry which existed among the societies on the same campus. Each society wanted to prove that it was the best, and because of this, intersociety debating was born. From these intersociety debates, it was a very short step into intercollegiate debating.

Aristophanes once said "Nothing is more useful to man than to speak correctly," and the activities of the literary societies seem to have reinforced his statement, for through literary societies some of the greatest names in American oratory got their start.

In the so-called Golden Age of oratory in America, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, John Calhoun, and Patrick Henry began their careers in public speaking while they were members of literary societies.<sup>10</sup> Daniel Webster received his speech training at Dartmouth University, where he was a member



of the United Friends literary society. He built his reputation as an orator by taking part in their weekly debates. Henry Clay helped form a literary society while attending Richmond, and it was there that he was able to improve his speaking voice. John Calhoun was a member of the debating club at Waddel's school, and it was there that he received his training for his later debates with Webster and Clay. Patrick Henry was not a member of a formal literary society, but he received basic training in an informal discussion group that was set up in his general store.

Other prominent figures who were involved in literary societies and debating were Abraham Lincoln, William Seward, Booker T. Washington and James Garfield.<sup>11</sup> This list of names is by no means complete, but it helps to clarify the generalization that many of America's most prominent speakers were members of literary societies.

It is also important to remember that it was not the literary societies themselves, but the training and experience that they provided that helped improve the skills of the speaker. It is, therefore, easy to see why this sort of activity should continue, even if the formal literary societies disappeared along the way.

When reading about the early literary societies, it is easy to stereotype the members as very serious people involved in discussing the great public questions of the day, or as persons trying to find the ultimate truth. However popular this view may be, it is not a complete picture of the societies. These societies also had their share of practical jokers, unmotivated students, and trouble-makers.

Most literary society minutes are very colorless and dull accounts of the meetings, even though evidence points to the fact that a secretary

occasionally recorded subjective comments in the notes. Even though the accounts of a few instances cited here certainly do not justify wide generalizations about the excitement of literary societies, they give some insight into the lighter side of the societies.

One of the major problems facing the societies was that of disorderly conduct among members. The Philo Society of Jefferson College seems to have had a large problem with the conduct of its members.<sup>12</sup> In reports, prepared by the society's presidents, the charge of disorderly conduct and poor preparation of materials appears many times between 1851-1861. On May 18, 1854, the report of the president noted that in one meeting, an intoxicated member drew a weapon on another member. Worse yet, one member reported that incident to the faculty. Obscene language was also a problem; many societies fined their members for any such outbreak.<sup>13</sup> K-State was not without its problems of this type, for it can be noted in the Bluemont Society minutes of November 11, 1865, that Wendell Williston was expelled from the organization for "misconduct toward the society."

Lack of preparation for scheduled activities was also a major problem which affected the societies. Members of all societies became apathetic and many who were scheduled to speak failed to show up on the night assigned. Many times, when the speakers did show up, the grammar and preparation was so poor, it took the enjoyment out of the meeting.<sup>14</sup> The Bluemont Society at Kansas State College suffered from this problem, also. On one occasion, June 20, 1868, four speakers were to present a debate. When called upon to speak, it was discovered that not one of the four was present. More speakers were chosen from the audience, but they refused to speak.<sup>15</sup>

Practical jokes and an air of frivolity were necessary in order to help relieve the burden of serious debating and everyday studies. One of the favorite actions of the K-State Bluemont Society was to confuse the president on his parliamentary rules.<sup>16</sup> They enjoyed confusing him as much as possible in order to throw the meeting into total chaos. Other actions which added an air of lightness to the societies were debating, card playing, dancing, theatre, and female companionship. A favorite topic of debate was the age-old "chicken or egg dilemma." No one ever worded the proposition more eloquently than the South Carolina Clariosophic society, however. The question was presented in the following manner:

To which female member of the gallinaceous tribe does the infantile gallus belong? Whether to that female member of the tribe gallinaceous which did give birth and light to the ovum or to that individual of the same tribe which by setting upon the afore-said ovum did generate and thus put forth the gallus upon the earth.<sup>17</sup>

Although the literary societies had their problems and some of their time was spent on humorous matters, they did accomplish their major goal of providing a social organization to promote the improvement of public speaking abilities. Much of their time was spent on serious matters, with serious debates being presented.

As higher education spread to the western states, the literary and debate societies followed, supplying the social and educational needs of students. During the rise of these societies in the West, many of the older societies in the Eastern and Southern states were in a period of decline, because of the apathy of some members.<sup>18</sup>

The literary societies at Kansas State University developed in much the same way as the earlier societies in the East; they were strong, long

lasting organizations, which offered a wide variety of public speaking activities in which the students could take part.

Literary societies received an early start on this campus. This college, first known as the Bluemont College, opened its doors on September 2, 1863. By November of 1864, the Bluemont Literary Society had been formed.<sup>19</sup> Although it is thought that the first meeting was held on November 26, 1864, this date can not be verified because the minutes of the first three meetings were not dated. The fourth meeting was held on December 17, 1864. Because subsequent meetings were held once a week, it is reasonable to assume, by back-dating three weeks, that the first formal meeting was held on November 26, 1864. Admission to this society was open to men and the main activity of the society was to be debate, with the understanding that parliamentary law, written speeches, and orations were also to be included in the function of the society. By very good fortune, the original minutes of this society still exist, so it is possible to see exactly how this society functioned. By the third meeting, which was probably held on December 10, 1864, three women, Mary Green, Hattie Mather and Ellen Denison, were admitted to the society.<sup>20</sup> There is no mention of their taking part in debates or orations at later meetings, however.

The society held meetings once a week. The meetings usually opened with a prayer or devotions of some type. This was followed by a business meeting and then the speaking contest or debate.<sup>21</sup> The debate topics covered a very wide range of interests, but they usually presented a concrete, practical question. Over the years, the same question might reappear, stated in a different manner.

Since the Bluemont Society was organized during the Civil War, many of the first debates centered around topics connected with it or with war in general. A select list of topics follows:<sup>22</sup>

Resolved, That the North is the most guilty party in this war.

Resolved, That the highest good of a state demands occasional wars.

Resolved, That the United States should assist in expelling the French invaders from Mexico.

Another topic that produced broad interest was education and sociological problems. Many of these topics were chosen several times and modified a little each time. Some examples are:

Resolved, That slavery is a greater evil than intemperance.

Resolved, That education produces more happiness than wealth.

Resolved, That capital punishment should be abolished.

Resolved, That the teaching of military art and science in our state institutions will be detrimental to the best interests of the United States.

In the 1860's, just like today, economic and political topics were of constant interest, but party differences seldom seem to have been discussed. Perhaps this was due to the strong, one-sided conservative political view that most Kansans held during that period. The following shows the broad range of topics:

Resolved, That the city of Manhattan would be benefited by licensing a liquor saloon.

Resolved, That the signs of the times indicate the dissolution of the Republic.

Resolved, That women have the natural right to vote and hold office of public trust.

Religion was also a popular subject for the debates. The following topics give some idea of the religious values held by the students during this early period.

Resolved, That man is an immortal soul.

Resolved, That the wicked will be subjected to endless punishment.

Resolved, That a plurality of denominations is a benefit to the cause of religion.

With a debate held each week, the selection of suitable topics became somewhat difficult. Because of the difficulty in picking serious, interesting, and timely topics, the questions sometimes became humorous. These light-hearted topics sometimes became abstract in nature, thus requiring a debator to have a good ability at invention. Some of the subjects were:

Resolved, That pride and ambition have caused more evil than ignorance and superstition.

Resolved, That city life is preferable to country life.

Resolved, That learning is more powerful than wealth.

The early inter-society debates were ordinarily comprised of two disputants on each side. Of the two, one was usually a more experienced debator, and the other was a novice. The more experienced affirmative speaker opened the discussion, and he was followed by the experienced negative speaker. The novice speakers spoke in a similar order, and then the experienced speakers each had a second turn in which they spoke in rebuttal of the points their opponents had attempted to make.<sup>23</sup>

Even though debate was the main feature at these meetings, there was also room for essays, orations, and sometimes a lecture by someone outside the group. Extemporaneous speaking was also a favorite, with the topics being assigned to the members without advance notice.

The Bluemont Society continued to function until October 7, 1868, when it was disbanded as a result of a major conflict within the society.<sup>24</sup> No one is sure just what caused the controversy, but it was violent enough to cause the dissolution of the society. The minutes of the final meeting do not contain many clues, either, as they state,

There had been a desire among quite a number of the members for disruption of the society. Accordingly, under the head of miscellaneous business, after other things of unimportance, the question was laid before the society. After a lengthy and hot discussion it was decided in favor of the affirmative. Mr. Johnson then left the chair and 'The Bluemont Literary Society' was formally declared dissolved, and its constitution and laws null and void.<sup>25</sup>

The campus was not long without a literary society, for from the disbanded Bluemont Society, the Webster Society and the Alpha Beta society were formed.

The Webster Society was organized on October 10, 1868,<sup>26</sup> and one of the major organizers of the Webster Society had been the secretary of the old Bluemont Society. The secretary produced the old Bluemont Society minute book, and the Webster group began to use it for their own minutes. It was probably this small coincidence that saved the minutes of the first literary society on this campus. The Webster Society used the book to keep a record of their meetings from October 10, 1868 until September 24, 1870. According to the College Symposium, the first published annual, or yearbook on campus, the Webster society was on very weak footing for the first three years of its existence, because members "spent most of their time electing new officers and the remainder of their time challenging the Alpha Betas to joint debates, instead of attending to their legitimate duties." Because the Webster constitution stated that their purpose was to promote debate

and improve their speaking ability, the College Symposium statement seems overly critical.

Since a complete university library did not exist in 1872, the Webster Society started its own in February of that year. It began when a faculty member agreed to give five dollars to a library fund, if the society would match it. As a result of many contributions and donations, the society library grew to 250 volumes by 1885. By this time, however, it was not necessary for the society to keep a library, since they had the use of the more complete college library. The society sold its library in order to raise funds to meet the costs of furnishing its new meeting hall. The books were authorized to be purchased for the university library by President Fairchild. The sale of the books netted the society \$17.00.

The Webster Society suffered one minor setback in 1875. The membership became divided on the question of whether women should be admitted into the society. The controversy was not resolved before some of the men withdrew from the Webster. They joined other students and organized a society called the Diagnothean Society which would admit both sexes. This society was very short-lived, lasting a year or less. There is no mention of it in 1876.

The other half of the old Bluemont Society formed the Alpha Beta Society, which was organized on October 17, 1868.<sup>27</sup> This society was originally established for men only, but on November 19, 1874,<sup>28</sup> it was voted that women be allowed to join. This society got off to a slow start, and on several occasions, meetings were not held during the second half of the semester because of poor attendance. The society got a fresh start at the beginning of each new semester, because of the efforts of a few enthusiastic



and dedicated members. There is some evidence to support the conclusion that the reason for admitting women was simply to increase the number of members and to promote more interest in the society.

The Alpha Beta Society's activities included public debate, plays, and the writing and delivering of orations. At this time, their only competitors were the members of the Webster Society.

By 1884 the two existing societies had grown so large there was a need for a new society to help distribute the memberships. On November 8, 1884, the Hamilton Literary Society was organized because "the old societies did not furnish sufficient training to their members on account of the large numbers."<sup>29</sup> There were sixteen members the first year, and they had to work hard to make their society a success; their hard work and dedication paid off, because the Hamilton Society, lasting eighty years, was to become the oldest on campus. The all male society disbanded in 1944, because most of the members were going to war. During the time they were active, their main interests were debate and other forensic activities.

By September 1887 another society, this time an all woman group, was formed under the name of the Ionian Society.<sup>30</sup> This society, unlike the previous societies, was mostly interested in music and literature. Debate was not a major concern of this group, even though they did occasionally hold debates.

At the close of the nineteenth century, there were four active literary societies, and each had full membership. The societies that existed were the Webster and Hamilton for men, the Ionian for women, and the Alpha Beta for men and women. The Ionian was the only one which was not primarily interested in debate and public speaking.

A society could not provide adequate experience to all of its members if it got too large, so most of them tried to hold their membership down to a number where there would be opportunity for all. At this time each society had between fifty and seventy-five members. By 1902, there was enough interest to establish another society and so the Franklin society was born. Established in May 1902, both men and women were invited to join. The origin of the idea for this society is not quite clear; it was first mentioned in the College paper, The Industrialist, on February 4, 1902 as a group for men only. It seems that between February, when the society idea came about, and May, when the society became an official organization, the men had a change of heart and decided to admit women, also.

The function of the Franklin Society was essentially the same as that of the Webster and the Alpha Beta. Their main activity was inter-society debating, but they also took part in orations, declamations and extemporaneous speaking.

In January, 1905, women saw a need for another society, and so the Eurodelphian Society was founded for women only.<sup>31</sup> This was the first of several new societies, encouraged and recognized by the Faculty Board, that came into existence.

The Eurodelphian Society held its first meeting on Saturday, January 14, 1905, with twenty-five women members. The purpose of this organization was similar to that of the Ionian: they did not put much emphasis on debate and public speaking, but they were interested in music, literature and composition.

January, 1907, saw the founding of another new literary society, the all male Athenian Literary Society.<sup>32</sup> This group had a very strong start

and it developed into one of the major societies on campus. Debating was a very prominent feature of this society, but like other public speaking oriented societies, it also concentrated on orations and extemporaneous speaking.

The last society to be formed on this campus was the Browning Literary Society, which was formed in October of 1910 for women only.<sup>33</sup> Named for Elizabeth Barret Browning, who was considered to be a model woman providing examples of living a good life,<sup>34</sup> members of the society were pledged to follow her example. Their major function, like that of the other women's societies, was to deal with literature and music; little emphasis was to be placed on declamation and debate.

This is a complete list of the literary societies which were established on the Kansas State College campus. The Bluemont was the first, established in 1864 and the Browning was the last in 1910. With three societies for women, three for men, and two for both men and women, each student was able to find a group to fit his or her needs for improvement in public expression.

These societies flourished until the early 1900's when they began to disappear, one by one. These once proud societies, which performed a very useful educational function when they were at their height of their popularity, now live only in the long forgotten records and newspaper clippings in the University Archives. Why did the literary societies disappear? There were several possible reasons; however, there is no concrete evidence to support any of the reasons. From the first, the social opportunities which the societies created were an important segment of the attractions to membership. Man is a gregarious animal, and these early literary societies

were able to bring together men with men, women with women, and men with women. With the establishment of the Greek letter fraternities and sororities, which provided greatly superior social opportunities, that feature of the attractions of the literary societies was more than offset. Training in writing, speaking and debate came to be offered in college classes for credit toward the requirements for graduation; this reduced the contributions of the literary societies in promoting those skills. As the College enrollment increased, rooms available for the use of the societies were difficult to get, and joint use became necessary to a greater extent. Athletic events made Saturday afternoon meetings for societies impractical, and many students were too busy to meet at night. Improvements in high school speech training were being made and this further reduced the need for the societies. Another possibility to help explain the societies' decline was the rapid development of new mass media devices. With radio, film, and efficient same day newspaper printing, the need for literary societies as an agency for public information was drastically reduced. So, while there were features of the literary society work that were not covered by present opportunities, they were not sufficiently prominent to continue such organizations on a going basis. The Hamilton Society was the last survivor, disbanding by vote at the end of the spring semester, 1945. This action came in part as a result of loss of members to national defense service. The decline and disappearance of literary societies may be classed as a casualty of World War II.

Now that a brief history of the literary societies has been presented, it is important to look at individual occurrences which influenced the outcome of societies in general.

The earliest record of literary society exhibitions appears in the Faculty Record of December 1, 1868. This faculty meeting appears to have

been held for two reasons. First, the faculty wanted to assign "parts to the students who were to take part in the exhibition." These exhibitions were much like the speech contests of today, except that the competition was between societies, and not schools. These exhibitions involved music, orations, essays, and other examples of public speaking. The second reason for the meeting was to accept a petition presented by an unnamed literary society. In this petition, the society asks that women be allowed to join the society. This request was turned down, because the faculty "thought it inexpedient to grant the request." No further reason was given for the action.

The societies were permitted to give one exhibition each term, so that there was time for thought and preparation for each presentation. The members of each society took the exhibition occasion very seriously, looking on it as an opportunity to prove their superiority in talents over members of other societies.

The faculty made every effort to be sure that the society exhibitions did not interfere with the students' classwork; as was mentioned earlier, the faculty allowed only one exhibition per term. They assigned parts, designated the time for the exhibition, and controlled the choice of guest lecturers whom the societies could invite to speak. On March 18, 1889,<sup>35</sup> the faculty voted that no society lecture could be given after the middle of the spring term, unless all societies united as one group to invite a lecturer on or near commencement week.

The Administration and Faculty were also much opposed to the idea of the societies charging admission to the exhibitions. On several occasions, the students presented petitions to the faculty, requesting that admission be charged, but they were turned down each time. On December 3, 1894, the