The Hinman Society was the first literary society at Northwestern University. Founded in 1855, the Society claimed all thirteen members of the first two graduating classes and five of the eight 1861 graduates. It first met at the "old college," then situated at the northwest corner of Davis and Hinman streets, on Wednesday afternoons because candlelight provided insufficient illumination and kerosene lamps were not yet widely available.

Debate topics in the first few years were pressing issues and heatedly argued; questions included the dissolution of the union (in 1858) and the relative merits of Stephen Douglass and Abraham Lincoln during their senate contest. Until the 1890s the literary societies were a dominant force in the University's social life. They provided intellectual stimulation and social mingling, through receptions and inter-society debates as well as regular meetings.

On November 5, 1869, the Society moved into its own room, "Hinman Hall," on the fourth floor of University Hall. Hinman invited women students to join the Society in 1871, and three women are listed on the program in February 1873. With the arrival of Dean of Women Ellen Soule in 1874 the women were segregated into their own society, Ossoli, although the action was publicly protested by Hinman, which had resisted pressure from the faculty to segregate the year previous. In 1871, together with the Adelphic Literary Society, Hinman founded the Tripod, Northwestern's first student newspaper.

During the period of Hinman's existence many cash prizes were offered by various people for excellence in oratory and debate, and to select representatives of the University for the Central Debating and Northern Oratorical Leagues. The prizes were generally restricted to members of the literary societies. The first such prize, the Hinman prize, was awarded to the Hinman member who composed and delivered the best English essay, until the prize was abolished in 1893.

The rise of the Greek fraternity system and special interest clubs coincided with a general decline in the importance of and interest in the literary societies, especially during and after the 1890s. Hinman disbanded in 1915, the oldest and one of the last of the University's literary societies.

Description of the Series

These records are comprised of three volumes: two containing the minutes of the Hinman Literary Society and one recording the volumes and charge-out particulars of the Society's library. The library had been the personal collection of University President Clark Titus Hinman, for whom the society was named. The minutes are for meetings from September 1857 to January 1868, and from September 1869 to May 1882. The librarian's records span the years 1864 to 1868.
HINMAN LITERARY SOCIETY (1857-1915) MINUTE BOOKS AND LIBRARIAN’S RECORD, 1857-1868, 1869-1882
Series 31/6/8
3 Volumes

The minutes record the activities and organization of the Society's meetings. A typical meeting opened with a musical offering and prayer, followed by one or several readings, declamations, and orations. A regular debate (with two or three appointed debaters on each side and appointed judges) was the central event, followed by an irregular debate (open to the floor) decided by majority vote. Business meetings, when held, followed the literary program. The first volume includes the roll calls from 1857 to 1868 on the last few pages, while the second volume does not record the roll.

Cross References

Adelphic Literary Society Minute Book, 1877-1893 (Series 31/6/9).
Philomathia Society Minute Books, 1868-1893, 1904-1917 (Series 38/4).
Rogers Debating Society Minute Book, 1904-1913 (Series 31/6/10).

Provenance: These records were transferred to the University Archives sometime prior to June 1, 1974.

Restrictions: None.

Processor: Andrew Leslie; July 1980.