PHILOMATHIA SOCIETY (1868-1917) MINUTE BOOKS, 1868-1893, 1904-1917
Series 38/4
5 Volumes

History

Philomathia was one of five Academy literary societies, two for women and three, including "Philo," for men. The literary societies were the heart of the Academy's social life. One of the ladies' societies would be invited for a "mixed social," consisting of various literary presentations, storytelling, singing, and refreshments.

A typical meeting would open with a musical presentation, followed by a prayer and more music. The programs included select readings, impromptu speeches, declamations, and orations. A structured debate was usually the highlight of the evening, with two members appointed to argue each side.

The topics of debate reflected the concerns and attitudes of Philomathia members. Some examples: "Resolved, that wealth is more to be desired than education; That the Indian territory should be opened for immigration; That the Irish should be sustained in their war against high rents; That a man in love is more to be pitied than an old bachelor." In 1916, immediately following President Wilson's election, the debate focused on whether the President should be elected by popular vote.

A general drift away from more erudite discussions, and a decline in membership, is discernable in the Society's later years. Fewer oratorical events are recorded in the program, while a session called "hot talk" is introduced after 1910. The society shifts debate topics from earlier subjects, such as whether the signs of the times indicate the downfall of the American Republic, or whether Demosthenes was a greater orator than Cicero, to whether Germany will win the war, or will Northwestern will the football championship, or whether Illinae is better than Pieria (two women's literary societies). The Society's last debate topic proposes that the senior class dues of the Academy should have been raised to five dollars. The last motion presented demands that one member pay for breaking the marble on the President's pedestal. The minutes end with a cryptic notation, “big fight.”

Description of the Series

The Philomathia Society Minute Books record the minutes of this Northwestern Academy literary society from its inception on May 8, 1868, to its final meeting on May 4, 1917, with a break of over 11 years, from February 1893 to September 1904. Philomathia, meaning "love of learning," was founded to "supplement the routine of school-work by providing an opportunity for original thinking and expression," according to an essay in the 1907 Academy annual, The Bear (p.38). The Society met on an irregular weekly schedule, usually on Fridays.

The five bound volumes are shelved in chronological order, with a gap of more than eleven years between volumes three and four.
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Cross References
- Adelphic Literary Society Minute Book, 1877-1893 (Series 31/6/9).
- Hinman Literary Society Minute Books and Librarian’s Record, 1857-1868, 1869-1882 (Series 31/6/8).
- Rogers Debating Society Minute Book, 1904-1913 (Series 31/6/10).

Provenance: These volumes were donated, by order of the Society, to the University Library after each was completed. They were transferred to the University Archives sometime prior to June 1, 1974.

Restrictions: None.

Processor: Andrew Leslie; July 1980.