

Winthrop cultivated tradition of debate, culminating in '30s

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The arrival of WWII, with travel restrictions, ended remarkable era

From the founding of Winthrop, with its injunction to train teachers for the classrooms of South Carolina, it was recognized that students needed training in public speaking. However, the speaking was done only in the classroom by women doing their "practice teaching."

A January 1913 issue of *The Record*, a Rock Hill newspaper, announced a big debate at Winthrop. The paper said the auditorium would be overflowing when the "second annual debate between University of South Carolina and Davidson occurs on January 13. Special trains will bring teams and their supporters from all over the two states."

The debate question was whether ships under the U.S. flag should be allowed to pass toll-free through the Panama Canal. The reporter thought this event would draw Rock Hill's largest crowd of the year.

Winthrop women were present at the USC/Davidson debate but did not participate. They were not ready. The Department of Expression was just then offering the college's first course in public speaking. Incidentally, in that first year, all the public speaking assignments were related to the women's movement, including women as an economic factor as well as women's suffrage.

In 1929, the chairman of Winthrop's history department, Warren Keith, organized a debating/

COMMENTARY

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public speaking club called Strawberry Leaf.

Strawberry Leaf directed the Winthrop Student Assembly, which was, at first, somewhat loosely organized with 100 student House members and 50 Senate members.

In the early 1930s, the program was largely drills in parliamentary procedure and speaking contests. A large room in Main Building became Clio Hall. Freshmen were recruited into a Freshman League. Dues were not money but one glass and one spoon, this to build up kitchen equipment for socials. History majors were organized into a club called Clionides, and an International Relations Club was sponsored by Strawberry Leaf.

By 1935, Strawberry Leaf was publishing a newsletter called *Clio Hall Reporter*. Topics were announced, and the names of the chairs of numerous committees were listed. Some of Rock Hill's leaders became sponsors of events.

Top debaters competed for the yearly Archie Joslin Cup (Joslin was manager of the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Co.). Other sponsors included J.C. Hardin, D. Wills Hunter and R.M. London.

In 1936, the first Dixie Tournament was hosted at Winthrop. Undergraduate students, including men, were invited, and more than 30 colleges and universities

sent competitors. Most of the delegates came from Carolinas and Virginia institutions, but there were also groups from Dartmouth College in New Hampshire; Waynesbury, Penn.; Stetson, Fla.; and Durant, Okla. Women delegates were housed in Winthrop dorms, and the men stayed with Rock Hill families.

The main debate question of 1937 was "Resolved that the Federal Government should own and operate railroads." Strawberry Leaf prepared a 215-page guidebook on the question with a copy for each of the visiting teams.

That year, Winthrop sent a delegation of Strawberry Leaf members to the Pi Kappa Delta National in Topeka, Kan. The Winthrop team scored the most points of the 75 women's colleges.

In 1938, there were 40 colleges at Winthrop's Dixie Tournament, including one from Oregon.

By 1939, the Dixie Tournament had evolved into the Grand Eastern Debater's League with more than 200 members. Rock Hill homes opened their doors to women contestants as well as to men. The main debate topic was "Resolved to follow a policy of strict isolationism." World War II had already broken out in Europe.

When Winthrop's President Shelton Phelps died in 1943, Warren Keith applied for the presidency. He didn't get it and left Winthrop at the end of the semester. Keith's departure and U.S. involvement in World War II, with its restrictions on travel, ended a remarkable decade of debating achievement at Winthrop.

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