



THE DEPARTMENT  
OF SPECIAL  
COLLECTIONS  
PRESENTS...

*The*  
**GRINNELL  
LITERARY  
SOCIETIES**

**DOCUMENTS, PHOTOGRAPHS  
AND PARAPHERNALIA FROM GRINNELL  
COLLEGE'S EARLIEST STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS**

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DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AND ARCHIVES  
GRINNELL COLLEGE LIBRARIES

SPRING/SUMMER 2013

## **Traditions of Debate**

During Grinnell's earliest days, Alumni Hall rang out with fiery debate. Do we need political parties? Should the death penalty be abolished? For over 60 years, Grinnell College's Literary Societies met to dance, converse, and hold forth on issues that are still pertinent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These groups were the beginning of a tradition that carries on with the impressive number of organized student groups that the campus currently enjoys. Join us as we look back at the Grinnell Literary Societies.

## **The Beginning**

In 1852, the first of the societies formed. The Chrestomathian society supported a male-only membership, and each week they'd meet to debate a topic selected by a faculty member. The Chrestomathian Society performed a role somewhere between a classroom and a fraternity. The academic trappings of the organization, which included formal oration competitions, had a distinctly social thrust as well. Included in the exhibit are formal invitations to society events, which besides debates included dinners, theatrical performances and graduation exercises.

## **The Proliferation**

The Chrestomathian society provided a template that other groups quickly imitated. In 1870, the Chrestomathians enied entry to the men of the class of 1874, and so they struck out

on their own and founded the Grinnell Institute. A female counterpart group, the Calocagathians, formed alongside them. In 1882, the all-female Ellis society formed, working in tandem with the older Chrestomathian society. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the campus supported at least eight of these societies, including the Ionian, the Aegis, the Forum and Philadelphica, alongside the earlier Chrestomathian, Ellis, Institute and Calocagathian. Articles from the Scarlet and Black indicate that rivalries frequently formed between groups, and the promotional literature surrounding their events is permeated with playful belligerence. One flyer in particular, which can be seen in the first case, describes a “Grudge fight between the Institute and Forum Societies.”

## **The Decline**

By 1925, the male literary societies voted to disband. An article published by the Scarlet and Black noted that “Literary societies have two purposes; the first literary, and the second social. It has been evident for some time that the former of these functions is not adequately discharged by the literary societies.” Documentation of the women’s literary societies is sketchier, but they appear to have dropped out of view around the same time. The disappearance of the formal literary society began the slow transition to the variety of student groups at Grinnell today. The final case exhibits artifacts from groups that seem to have picked up where the societies left off in terms of providing extracurricular enrichment. Sigma Delta Chi was a journalistic fraternity that operated on campus, and the Quill club provided support to writers at Grinnell.

# Acknowledgments

Thanks to Catherine Rod and Chris Jones

