

4-14-1903

Chronicles

Phi Sigma

Amelia A. Fitch

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Recommended Citation

Phi Sigma and Fitch, Amelia A., "Chronicles" (1903). *Selected Letters*. 7.
http://digitalcommons.colum.edu/phisigma_letters/7

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II Chronicles.

April 14, 1903. (25th Anniversary)

I wonder if any of you remember the Beard Brothers' book store at 453 W. Madison St. That was the birthplace of the Phi Sigma class. One night, about nine o'clock, after the front lights had been turned out, some boys gathered in the back part of the store. There, - "on a bench, two chairs, a stool and a keg (I think there was a keg - empty keg) the old Phi Sigma started!" That was early in April, 1878.

Henry Wilson called the meeting to order, and moved that Herbert Small be chosen Chairman. Harrington Beard, Gerald Beard, John Mabbs, and Robert Jensen complete the list of the six charter members. Of all the six, only John Mabbs is here tonight living in this city.

I have just received a letter from Henry Wilson, now of Wichita, Kansas, which speaks so happily of the purpose of these six boys in starting the class, that I want you to hear it. -----
Now was there not fine material in the class to begin with? And here is an extract from

another letter, from Gerald Beard - the second
 Chairman of the Class -, and later a Yale student.
 ----- This same Gerald Beard is now pastor
 of the college church of Burlington, Vermont, and
 sends his hearty greeting to us this evening.

John Mabbs and Robert Jeneson soon resigned
 from the Class, and Frank D. Moulton and Wm.
 Hulin joined to fill their places. After searching
 about a month, we found Frank Moulton in
 business at Ottawa, Ill., and have received a hearty
 response from him. Wm. Hulin hopes to be present
 this evening.

The following Jan., 1879, Frank E. Whitman
 joined the Class, and kept up his membership
 even while attending Amherst College, a few
 years later. He is now living in Boston, and
 sends you all a pleasant greeting.

This brings the membership down to Carlos
 P. Sawyer, whose voice we have heard this evening.
 He is also an Amherst man.

I have spoken thus particularly about the first

ten members, because they gave the class its impetus in the right direction, and made it an honor to themselves and a benefit to us all.

For the first three years the only officer was termed a Chairman, after that the title President was used. It was hard work at the beginning. With an average attendance of only five members, they practised declamations and readings, studied history, and debated with zeal. When there was a debate, one of the boys was appointed as judge. Then, besides the Chairman and the two debaters, there would be only one left as audience. The debates and papers were gotten up on short notice, for the class met once a week. Sometimes there were two debaters on each side, even the Chairman taking part, and no audience except themselves, or a visitor or two, but their ardor was unquenched.

It was arranged at the very beginning, that at each meeting the Chairman should appoint one of the members to act as critic of that meeting,

and to read his criticism at the beginning of the following meeting. This served to keep a record of the meetings, and to aid the members in their improvement. There are now extant 278 of these Critic's Reports, of from 3 to 12 pages of legal cap each. I have read over 200 of them, and find them very interesting. It is like reading an autobiography of the Class, for each member said his little say sooner or later.

In Jan. 1887, these reports were discontinued, and a regular Record Book was kept by the President within which he wrote the minutes of each meeting. It was not till 1898, when the Class was twenty years old, that a Secretary was elected to record the meetings. When the Class was three years old, its documents were placed by vote in the custody of the Beard Brothers, at their store. When Mr. Fanning became President, he took charge of them, and later Mr. Newcomb has had them, and now they are at our home in two wooden boxes.

Having thus spoken of the early membership and the preservation of the documents of the Class, let us turn to the plan of study. For the first year they devoted much time to Hume's History of England, reading aloud from it and asking questions about it. After that, they took up Guizot's History of Civilization for a half year, but found it rather dry, I fancy. It was then that Harington Beard exclaimed, "Oh that we had a few more members to fill up the empty chairs!"

Seven more boys joined at different times, and some resigned. Then came that great day in the annals of Phi Sigma, Mar. 21, 1882, (the Class being nearly 4 years old) when five girls signed their names to the Constitution, and became regular members. It had required a deal of discussion among the boys, before they actually decided to invite these girls to join the Class. We cannot read the discussion, because it has been carefully expunged from the Critic's Reports. But there are sufficient hints

to show that there was a lively time. Four more girls joined the next month, and the Class rejoiced in new zeal and renewed literary effort.

No more empty chairs now! The membership was at once limited to 10 ladies and 10 gentlemen; and a year later, Apr. 1883, this number was increased to 12 ladies and 12 gentlemen.

The meetings, which had been at first every week, were found to be too frequent. So they were held once in 4 weeks, beginning with Sept. '81. Then they seemed too far apart; so in Feb. '82, they were changed to be held every two weeks. That was just before the ladies joined the Class. After a little while, the Class decided to meet once a month, on the fourth Tuesday evening.

On Feb. 1, 1889, they changed to the third Tuesday, and on Oct. 13, 1897, they changed to the second Tuesday, as we have it now.

The programmes have been as varied as the times of meeting, but the "Voice" has appeared each year since it started, June, 1879.

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We have devoted ourselves to debates, book reviews, the Greek poets, Norse legends, epochs of history, socialism, philosophy, journalism, the history of art, realism and idealism, the Madonna in Art, (indeed one whole winter was devoted to art topics). We have studied the drama, the Greek Church, evolution, Mahomet, monks, troubadours, the Reformation, lives of great authors, and artists, and musicians, scientific inventions, and sketches of famous cities. We have written original stories and poems. We have discussed politics, the drainage canal, free kindergartens, social settlements, ^{immigration} psychology, sociology, and every other "ology", till, if I had remembered it all, I should indeed be a wise woman.

With all these studies, there have also been many good times. Some of the happiest moments of my life have been in Phi Sigma gatherings. Many lifelong friendships can testify to the heart to heart fellowship of our members. And those lucky 18,- we who married within the class, - are doubly grateful for our sweethearts. Amelia M. Fitch.