

## CHAPTER XXI

### DEBATING IN UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

Debate was king in University of Wisconsin in the early '90's. While athletics in Wisconsin in this period seemed crude in comparison with modern attainments, debating by the time your grandfather entered college had attained in Wisconsin an intensity of student interest and a prestige which has probably never been excelled in any American college.

For years there had been two debating societies occupying rooms in old College Hall across a corridor from each other, and the rivalry between these two had waxed hot. This rivalry expressed itself once a year in a public joint debate.

Sessions of the societies were held every night from seven to eleven, and a member absent without accepted excuse was fined 25 cents - a consequential sum to students of that day. So many of the leaders in college affairs were in one or the other of these societies that their rivalries came to affect every phase of college life, and nearly every student developed a preference for one or the other. Thus, the whole college came to be divided into two camps of rival rooters, and this rival rooting and rival betting reached its climax each year in the "joint debate".

The system worked like this. A Freshman might visit both societies and either by invitation of a member or upon his own initiative, might apply for admission to one of them. If admitted, he was put on a debate every two weeks. Each society had normally about sixty members.

These were divided into two groups which furnished alternate programs. Each group had a program committee which selected topics for debate and the chairman of the program committee would post two weeks in advance two topics for debate with all the members of his group divided into affirmative and negative of these two questions. The questions were usually economic problems and rarely were of a facetious nature. Upper classmen usually led each side with five minutes to open and two minutes to close and every other speaker had five minutes. An ambitious Freshman would spend several hours on each assignment, marshalling arguments and authorities and boiling his material down to five minutes, assured that the president would not extend him an extra 30 seconds.

Toward the end of the Freshman year came a "Freshman Blowout" when Freshman had the entire evening. Again there were two topics and four leaders, this time all Freshmen. On these debates it was usually possible to allow each Freshman about eight minutes and the leader ten. The "Freshman Blowout" drew all the upper classmen and as many visitors as the room would hold. At the meeting following the "Freshman Blowout", representatives for next year's Sophomore Semi-public were elected by the society - first of all, two debate leaders, then two debate assistants, an orator, an essayist and a presiding officer, all, of course, being Freshmen who would next year be Sophomores. With upper classmen as arbiters, the debate leaders agreed upon which leader should have which second, what the topic for debate should be and who should have which side.

Work was sometimes done on the Sophomore Semi-public during the summer vacation. At any rate, several weeks of hard work was put on the

debate during the Fall and before Christmas the "Semi-public" was held in old Library Hall. It was open to all without charge and usually the hall was well filled, much interest being felt by the student body in getting a line on future "joint debate" material. From men who had distinguished themselves in the Semi-public were chosen usually representatives for the joint debate.

The joint debate was usually held in the middle of the winter term (school running by three terms instead of by two semesters). About two weeks after one joint debate was over, each society elected a leader and two associates for the next debate. The six debaters then met and flipped a coin. The side which lost on the toss had six weeks to submit a question, the winner had three weeks thereafter to choose its side. In the determination of a question and in choice of side, alumni took an active interest, and leading attorneys and judges were consulted. Extreme care must be taken with the wording of the question, for the arguments were legalistic and a debate might be won or lost on the interpretation of a word or phrase as well as on the merits of the subject.

With the question and the sides settled, the matter rested except for preparatory work on plans and correspondence until summer vacation. A joint debater was expected to spend, at his own expense, most of the summer in the State Historical Library at Madison or in some other outstanding library. A team was also expected to correspond, at their own expense, with everyone, wherever located in the world, whose opinion might prove of value on the topic. This usually cost a team \$200 or more for postage and material.

Labor for the correspondence was furnished by Sophomore members of the society, and beginning with the Fall term, the room in which the joint debate material was kept was guarded day and night, a Freshman being assigned to watch whenever the debaters were out to lunch or at the Library. Juniors and Seniors furnished some help in library research, but usually they had lost ambition when they were passed over in the joint debate election and were not of much service.

There was no faculty supervision or direction of any phase of this debate system, except that every debate for semi-public and joint debate had to be submitted in writing and rehearsed to Professor Frankenburger, head of the Elocution Department, who always acted as presiding officer at the Joint Debate. The boys fully trusted Professor Frankenburger's fairness and integrity, but did not fully trust his astuteness, and hence the debates written and rehearsed for the professor frequently differed materially from those presented on the real occasion. They succeeded in getting by with this device, partly because the professor could not remember clearly what he had previously seen and partly because they must, of necessity, be allowed latitude for extempore handling of their subject in the contest.

No University credit was given for any part of this debate work, but it was a universal practice, to which I never knew a professor to object, for a joint debater in the Fall term to carry less than required work - usually about half work - and in the winter terms to absent himself from all classes until after the debate, which meant that joint debaters were carried in good standing on class rolls six or seven weeks without

attendance. The professors knew that the joint debaters were not loafing, but were burning midnight oil getting ready for the University's yearly intellectual classic. After the debate, professors were very helpful in coaching the debaters on work missed and were very considerate in term's marks.

The joint debate was the betting classic of the year, and everyone inclined to make wagers put up money on his champions, whether he was a member of a debating society or not. Alumni, too, took an interest in this phase of the Sport. Debates were held in old Library Hall, no admission being charged. The hall always was packed to over-capacity. If one wished a seat, he had to go without supper and get there early.

Three judges were chosen by the debaters themselves, usually from the Supreme Court judges or leading attorneys or, occasionally, professors of outstanding ability. One of the peculiar features of choosing judges was that each debate team personally interviewed on the question to be debated every person likely to be proposed for a judge. In losing a debate, it was no excuse to be "gypped" on a judge. Selection of judges was part of the contest and a joint debater should be shrewd enough not to get outwitted in the struggle for favorable judges.

The debates usually were researchers into some economic subject, and the speakers used large display charts and huge bundles of letters. At the debate each side had a long table with a veritable library of books, documents and letter files. There were card indexes and a crew of Junior and Sophomore assistants to work the indexes and find any passage the leader might request.

The leaders spoke last, the debate being built by the other two speakers, with twenty minutes each and the leader having thirty minutes to complete the structure and win the verdict. The speakers spoke in an illogical order - affirmative, negative; affirmative, negative; affirmative, negative. This gave the negative, quite illogically, the close, with a full half hour and made the negative the more attractive side if the question were at all equal.

It was, however, the custom for the negative speaker just before he gave his peroration, to step to the affirmative side and inquire: "Has the affirmative a question?" The affirmative speaker was off the stage at his long table covered with books and card indexes, and while he usually took a shot with a question, he seldom was able to do his cause much good for the negative leader on the platform could answer his question without its counting against his time and he already had possession of the stage and his audience.

After the debate the judges retired for consultation and one announced the verdict, whereupon the student audience which had listened with rapt attention to more than two hours of heavy discussion, let loose in a wild shout, carried the successful debaters out of the hall on their shoulders and gave themselves up to an evening of hilarity. The debaters as a rule were of a studious, non-convivial type and usually declined to go down town, but some of the rooters carried on the debate at Tommy Morgan's until nearly morning.

The leader of the successful debate was for the moment the king of the campus and honorary positions in class and university were his

without the asking. The debates were printed in full in a special edition of the Aegis. In the absence of stenographic reports, much of the spice of the debates never appeared in the record; in fact, the printed debates were usually little more than the written debates which had been submitted to Professor Frankenburger. You would probably consider them dull reading. To the students of ~~that~~ day the printed debates appeared interesting, for they recalled the greatest college event of the year.

Such was debating at the University of Wisconsin when Grandfather entered in the fall of 1889.