

# The Cornerstone

SUMMER 2000

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE RICE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOL. 5, NO. 4

## THE LITS - RICE LITERARY SOCIETIES

*Note: When Mary Dix asked me to prepare an article about the women's literary societies at Rice, I envisioned a short history about clubs that began as serious discussion groups anticipating women's suffrage and ended as little more than pseudo-sororities sponsoring formal dances each year. The literary societies clearly owed their initial success to the fact that women had no comfortable place on campus in the early years; it was not until the residential college system was firmly established that they lost their significance. I myself witnessed great changes in the popularity of these organizations when I was a member of the Elizabeth Baldwin Literary Society from 1964 to 1968. It seemed almost necessary to go through rush in 1964, and it clearly was optional and somewhat unpopular in 1968. There were five when I started and only two when I finished. In 1966 the Thresher ran an "In Memoriam" editorial about the societies and continued to question their validity throughout the sixties. A tombstone graced the pages dedicated to the literary societies in the 1968 Campanile. When a cousin got married in the late seventies, I was amazed to learn from her Rice alumnae friends that the lits were still around.*

*Karen Rogers*

**D**r. Edgar Odell Lovett, during the opening ceremonies, rejoiced in the "freedom from tradition [in which] the Rice Institute is pre-eminently fortunately



*E.B.L.S. pledges, 1954: (left to right) bottom row: Annita Fite, Eva Sue Baldwin, Carolyn Satterwhite, Barbara Nash, Beverly Taylor. Top row: Ruth Barnes, Corinna Carr, Joan Busby, Graeme Baker, Patsy Heard, Nancy Head, Patsy Spratling, Alice Cowan, Patti Blackledge, Cody Caldwell, Penny Blackledge, Caty Caldwell, Joan Field, Mary Virginia Pittman.*

situated to undertake the building of halls of residence as an integral part of its programme." While he was a professor at Princeton, Dr. Lovett had supported that university's president Woodrow Wilson in his plan to rearrange student life around the residential college system or "quad" plan. At that time student life at Princeton was dominated by exclusive eating clubs, which, with the substantial support of alumni, eventually defeated Wilson's plan for a more democratic system. Dr. Lovett hoped to avoid at Rice the entrenchment of elitist organizations

that Wilson found impossible to dislodge at Princeton. Dr. Lovett stated in his remarks that "there is nothing unusual in insisting that the spirit of one's college is democratic. Every college in the country contends that it has the spirit of true democracy; the only difference, if any, is that here we do have it." The residential college system was inaugurated at Rice in 1957. It did much to democratize student life and for the first time in Rice history women had a place to live on campus. But in the interven-

*Continued on page 6*

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NEWSLETTER DESIGNED  
BY TOMORROW'S KEY

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*E.B.L.S., 1954*



*The Riceonian Society, 1917*

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# THE MEN'S LITERARY SOCIETIES AND THE SOCIAL CLUBS

In the early days of the Institute there were two literary societies for men: the Owl and the Riceonian. These were primarily debating societies that had a social aspect as well. It was noted in the



*The Riceonian Society, 1917*

December 5, 1916, *Thresher* that “the purpose of the Owl Literary Society is to hold as its first aim the development of its members in the field of oratory and debate, and as of secondary importance, though by no means to be neglected, the social or entertainment side of club work.” The Riceonian Society held a banquet at Black’s on the Bay in May 1916; according to the *Thresher* they “made the trip down to Morgan’s Point in three automobiles and a Ford.” These groups debated such topics as “Should the U. S. give Filipinos independence in 1920?” and whether appropriations for deepening rivers, dredging channels, and improving harbors to be used for purposes of commerce should be made by the states where they are located. They debated whether movies should close in Houston on Sundays, if the presidential election of 1920 should be by popular vote, and whether the use of cosmetics by girls of the Rice Institute should be abolished.

A December 15, 1916, article in

the *Thresher* describes their role in starting the student newspaper, noting that the Owl Literary Society took the lead, supplying both the editor-in-chief and managing editor. It concludes “the literary societies at Rice

furnish the students with ample opportunities for the development of their literary and debating abilities...holding regular meetings each week, giving members the opportunity of expressing themselves before an audience, and giving

them inducements for the study of questions that have to do with present day conditions.” The author felt that debate was “the most important method of developing men into public speakers.” The Owl Literary Society went so far as to use props and costumes on occasion. They sponsored literary events like book reviews, essays, and learned papers as well.

Although these seemed to be popular clubs during the early years, the April 13, 1916, *Thresher* reported that the Owl Society had limited the number of members to fifteen. “It is believed that this step will stimulate interest in the literary society’s work, which interest has not been very noticeably manifest this year. When there is greater difficulty in getting into the society, it is thought there will be more who will aspire to the ‘honor.’” This tactic may not

have worked since both groups had added members by the end of the year and “injected some new enthusiasm.” Organized in 1914 with twenty charter members, the Riceonian had expanded to forty by 1916.

The men’s literary societies, perhaps because of the interruption of the First World War, did not survive into the twenties. A *Thresher* editorial decries the lack of debating societies in 1921. In the early twenties a number of social clubs, very much like fraternities and sororities, sprang up at Rice. The women had the Tattlers, Blue Moon, Hoots, Kappa Phi (for out-of-town girls) and Sigma Beta. The men had Alpha Rho, Samurai, the Toilers, and the Idlers. They sponsored dances, dinners, luncheons, boat trips, and teas. Their new members were called pledges. Some of the men’s groups had basketball teams. Each club was represented in the *Campanile* on their own page. Then, suddenly on May 26, 1922, a *Thresher* article

announced “Toilers Club Disbands in Interest of Rice,” apparently in an attempt to restore democracy to student life. “The greatest move toward the solution of the problem hinged on dissension and strife within the student body is believed to have

been made by the Toilers Club at the regular meeting Monday night when, on the first vote, it was unanimously decided to dissolve and disband the organization, visibly or invisibly, and to invite all other clubs at Rice to follow suit in the interest of college spirit

*See Men’s Literary Societies, page 5*

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*the purpose of the Owl Literary Society is to hold as its first aim the development of its members in the field of oratory and debate*

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Thresher  
December, 6, 1916

# WHERE ARE THE RICE WOMEN TO LIVE?

Had anyone ever considered the possibility that female students would come from afar or from homes in the Houston area too distant for a daily commute? Accommodations were a perennial concern from the Institute's opening until 1951, when the Banks Street apartments were made available for coeds.

Prior to this time, most out-of-town students lived in boarding houses. Catherine Hannah recalls that upon her arrival from Dallas in the 1940s she consulted a list of available rooms compiled by Miss Lane and selected a house on Bolsover, which charged \$30 a month for room, breakfast, and dinner. Her final two years at Rice she lived with nine other students in a house on Wroxton.

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*The Banks Street apartments, located in the 1100 block of Banks between Yoakum and Mt. Vernon about one mile from campus, were owned by Rice and had housed faculty during a period when there was a shortage after World War II.*

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Catherine's roommate there is still her



*Rice women students in front of the Banks Street apartments: (left to right) Carolyn Thomas of Beaumont, Jean White of the Canal Zone, and Mary Lou Brown of Dallas*

closest friend, and the two continue to meet with some of the other Wroxton boarders a couple of times a year.

The Banks Street apartments, located in the 1100 block of Banks between Yoakum and Mt. Vernon about one mile from campus, were owned by Rice and had housed faculty during a period when there was a shortage after World War II. When that shortage eased, President Houston saw an opportunity to do something about women's housing. The *Houston Chronicle* called the apartments a 39-year dream come true. Each apartment contained five rooms, including a kitchen. The cost was \$300 for the academic year. Rules stipulated that neither liquor

nor men were allowed on the site. The women had to be in by 11:30 P.M. on weekdays and 2:00 A.M. on Saturday nights.

Joyce Nagle relates an unexpected sidelight of the Rice women's housing problems. When Rice graduates requested admission to the American Association of University Women, they were told that they were ineligible because they had not lived in university dormitories. Thus rebuffed, the Rice alumnae formed The College Women's Club of Houston, which this year celebrates its 85th year. Although originally organized for Rice alumnae, it later embraced graduates of other universities in the Houston area.



*The Tattlers, 1921*

and the future of the university. Speakers taking a leading part in the proceedings of the meeting mentioned the fight Woodrow Wilson had with clubs as president of Princeton University. Three of the speakers alluded to Wilson's tenacity on the question, viewing club spirit as "repulsive toward all ideals of democ-

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*We are trying to found a college pre-eminently democratic, where men can go who prefer the democracy of a large student body undivided into social groups.*

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racy and standards by which Americans should be judged." Editorials in the same *Thresher* hinted of discord in athletics and pressure on faculty not to assist publishing the anticipated *Rice Owl* magazine. This first student magazine was to have been financed by the Toilers. They pledged to make sure it came to pass and the publication of the new *Rice Owl* was announced on the same page.

Samurai and Alpha Rho announced plans to disband as well, but the Idlers vowed to fight a ban. By the start of school the next fall, the trustees and faculty had agreed to ban the social clubs as well as hazing for one year. Dean Robert G. Caldwell noted that social clubs had always been controversial in large universities. "We are trying to found a college pre-eminently democratic, where men can go who prefer the democracy of a large student body undivided into social groups." He suggested that if anyone wanted to join a fraternity, he should go to another school.

ing years the literary societies filled a need for the women, many of whom still lived at home with their parents, to define their social group and status. The literary societies were definitely not democratic for much of their existence.

When Rice opened in 1912 women could not vote. The first women's literary society was the Elizabeth Baldwin Literary Society, formed in 1914 and named for the second wife of the founder of the university. Dr. Stockton Axson, the faculty sponsor of this group, pointed out that it was the duty of every woman to inform herself about municipal and sociological problems "in order to prepare herself as fully as possible for the duties of citizenship." He urged them to avoid "cut and dried programs of ancient historical subject matter" and concern themselves "with vital questions of the day all about you. Are you going to calmly ignore the century in which you live and debate upon whether or not King Charles should have been beheaded?" They discussed "Setting off the Results of Women's Suffrage in New Jersey, Massachusetts, New York and the Forces which Defeated it and Future Prospects" and new methods employed at Sing Sing. They reviewed Wagner's *Parsifal* and read an original short story. The newspapers of the time congratulated the society for firmly establishing itself as the pioneer and leader of all similar societies now founded or to be founded at Rice. They noted that "the movement is an enthusiastic one...with Dr. Axson's aid the women formulated their 'creed'...adopting a policy rather different from that of the average college women's literary societies, a policy in keeping with the progressive spirit of the times and with the breadth

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*The first women's literary society was the Elizabeth Baldwin Literary Society, formed in 1914 and named for the second wife of the founder of the university.*

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and democracy of Rice." Dr. Axson expected Texas "to be better for Rice women graduates; otherwise, what in the name of heaven is the meaning of coeducation at Rice?"

The members of the E.B.s (as they were called until the seventies) declared their policy of covering broad cultural subjects of lively and timely interest, presenting informal discussions as well as formal papers. They planned renditions of popular dances, musical performances, and book reviews. The *Houston Chronicle* reported on February 2, 1915, that they had participated in a debate on the proposed plan for colonizing Texas with Belgian families. They won an oratorical contest against the two

men's literary societies at Rice, and in May 1915 Miss Elizabeth Kalb won the state debating championship in Austin. They also won second place in an interstate debating contest in Baton Rouge. In 1916 the *Houston Chronicle* reported that the E.B.s had sponsored "one of the most brilliantly successful programs ever given by students at the Rice Institute," noting that it was "the only way in which this event [the tercentenary anniversary of Shakespeare's death] was recognized by any organization or body of people in Houston." It is interesting to note that, at the insistence of President Lovett, this program was limited to women. Stockton Axson praised the group, saying "I know nothing connected with the Rice Institute that has shown such remarkable development...I can safely say without exaggeration, that this

society will undoubtedly become one of the most important features of this institution." This organization planned to become "a strong force for the increasing betterment of general conditions at Rice for unity and comradeship among the women, for the promotion of co-operation and good-fellowship among all students, and for the fostering of college spirit in the university as a whole."

In 1916 the two men's literary societies, the Riceonian and the Owl Literary Society (not the Owen Wister Literary Society), and the E.B.s organized to publish a student newspaper, the *Thresher*, at Rice. The December 9, 1916, *Houston Chronicle* reported that "the staff for a bi-weekly student newspaper at the Rice Institute was chosen Wednesday by a group of nine students, composing the committees of three students each from the three literary societies of the Institute." This article explained that in the fall of 1915 several students approached Dr. Lovett with a proposal to organize the first student publication. "Finally it was decided to ask the literary societies to take control." A December 15, 1916, article reported that "the paper was a success from the very first, securing flattering support both from

the students and from the merchants of the city."

When the E.B.s organized, Rice had a small student body and membership in the literary society was open to all girls. In 1915, 75% of all women students were in the E.B.s. By 1919 the student body had grown so dramatically that the existing literary society

could not accommodate all of the girls who wanted to join. Supposedly for discussion purposes, membership was limited to fifty. So six members of the group withdrew and chartered

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*If the literary societies existed for a worthier purpose than delving in the department of literary masterpieces (which is itself a farce) then they would not be the butt of so much criticism.*

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the Pallas Athene Literary Society. Their stated purpose was to study literature and “furnish a means of contact between the girls who would otherwise be bare acquaintances.” It was to bring them together “under a common interest” and furnish “a bond between the students and the school” because “as the women students cannot live on the campus, there is a tendency to regard Rice Institute as a place to attend class and nothing else.” A

third literary society,

the Owen Wister Literary Society, was formed in 1924 with the help of the P.A.L.S and the E.B.s They began with twelve charter members and admitted fourteen pledges one month after forming. This group planned to raise money to buy library books and band uniforms; they required their mem-

bers to maintain a minimum grade-point average. A recent interview with Wilminor Carl '25 suggested that the demise of the purely social clubs in the early twenties (see related article) created the need for another club for women.

Even though there were other organizations women could join, the strongest social influence was exerted by the literary societies. One of the most significant ways the lits made their influence felt was in their domination of the May Fete elections. The breaking of the lits' hold on the elections did not come until 1936. The Houston *Post* carried a headline that cried, “Married Woman is Elected Queen of May Festival at Rice Insti-tute.” It went on to say, “A married woman will be queen of the May at Rice Institute...Mrs. Bowe Davis Hewitt was chosen Friday...she

will be the most democratic queen in the university's history. Her election was practically an uprising of the proletariat. For all the preceding sovereigns...have been members of what constitutes the aristocracy at Rice – the co-ed members of the so-called literary societies. A few hours before the election the [women's] council passed a rule that May queens in the future must be unmarried co-eds. The rule does not apply to Mrs. Hewitt.

The president of the Women's Council asked her to withdraw from the race. 'I said “no” politely but firmly', she said.”

The lits flourished through the twenties, thirties, and forties with membership by invitation only. These were frequently perceived by some as exclusive clubs for wealthy young Houston women. As late as the 1930s there was a regulation that women had to be off the Rice campus by 5:00 p.m.

The nature of these groups changed significantly during the thirties, but they did still sponsor some literary activities. By the forties, the focus was almost entirely social. During the Second World War the *Thresher* criticized their activities as “thieves of time and energy,” although the lits maintained that they contributed to the war effort by maintaining a normal social life and throwing parties for the Navy men. A 1943 *Thresher* editorial stated, “If the literary societies existed for a worthier purpose than delving in the department of literary masterpieces (which is itself a farce) then they would not be the butt of so much criticism. Instead of endeavoring to give the biggest dance of the year why don't they see who can roll the most bandages in a year?” A 1948 editorial insisted “it is possible to have social organizations that can lend a colorful,

healthful and enjoyable atmosphere to the campus without leaning upon false promises of ‘exclusiveness’.”

In the July 15, 1943, *Thresher* a photo and article appeared which illustrated how crucial being selected by the “right” society was. The caption reads, “One hundred gathered at bulletin board straining in tense anxiety to see the lists of new pledges for O.W.L.S., E.B.L.S., and P.A.L.S. Two minutes after the picture was taken, the scene was transformed from nervous expectancy to one of mass confusion and uproar – girls crying... laughing...jumping...squealing and pinning their ‘little sister’.” For all of the joy this scene implies, there must have been a number of girls who were disappointed not to be chosen.

In 1947 Rice's dean Hugh Scott Cameron recommended adding another literary society to make the groups more inclusive. It was named after Sarah Lane, a 1919 graduate who worked in the library from 1920 until 1962 and served as dean of women, 1931 - 1950. By 1950 only half of the women students were in the four literary societies, but four new ones were formed to ensure every girl of a bid. The four existing lits initially opposed the addition of the new ones, but President Houston warned them that he would abolish all of them if they were not adopted. The vote was 110 to 72.

The new societies were the Chaille Rice Literary Society, the Mary Ellen Lovett Society, the Olga Keith Literary Society, and the Virginia Cleveland Literary Society. In 1960 the Mary Ellen Lovett and Virginia Cleveland Societies merged to become the C.L.L.S. (which lasted until 1963). In 1962 the Olga Keith Society dissolved and sent members to the Chaille Rice Society. The second oldest lit, the Pallas Athene Society, disbanded in 1965 as did the Sarah Lane Society.

In the mid-sixties the societies were criticized and defended. A February

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*The Owen Lister Literary Society, 1986*

17, 1966, *Thresher* editorial entitled “Lits are frivolous; why justify them?” comments: “Once again literary societies, the alleged ‘constitutional cliques’, have come up for their annual reign as the Big Deal...all the girls have traditionally taken sides as ‘anti-lits’ and ‘pro-lits’ and briefly battle it out, while the boys have sat back and gotten a good laugh out of the whole affair...lits are ridiculous; they’re frivolous; they’re purely social; they serve no useful purpose. But who ever said they had to? If fewer than one quarter of the girls in the university want to get together in congenial groups and have a ridiculous, frivolous, purely social good time, why should they have to justify it to everyone else? Why should everyone else care?”

The president of the newly disbanded P.A.L.S. expressed strong support for the lits in a letter to the editor of the *Thresher* in 1966: “Few who have condemned literary societies have ever stopped to investigate their true nature...one wonders sometimes whether we are really a democracy when the desires of others are so greatly affected in this way. To me, it is senseless and cruel to deprive others of harmless enjoyment...These leaders of university life, these free thinkers, are actually doing precisely what they

accuse the societies of doing. They are the ones who coerce others into accepting their opinions.”

When the Chaille Rice Society disbanded in 1968, an editorial in the *Campanile* considered “why lits no longer seem to be the ‘in’ thing: The answer seems to lie outside the group and turns more and more on the individual. People in school seem to be concerned with self and with ‘doing their own thing.’ This year few club members were interested in social projects and it showed up when the E.B.s voted for no melodrama and the O.W.L.S. lost their directory. Maybe the lits will change some things and keep others to remain literary societies. Maybe the fight will be too much. Now there are two.”

The residential college system by this time had been in place for eleven years. Two colleges, Baker and Hanszen, were to become coed by 1973 with the others following suit within the next fifteen years. The Elizabeth Baldwin Literary Society lasted until the early eighties and the

Owen Wister Literary Society persisted into the late eighties. Some of my younger alumnae friends, none of whom wants to be quoted, said that they belonged simply because they had a formal dance every year. Perhaps it is just a coincidence that the year all of the residential colleges became coed the last literary society disbanded. It would be tempting to think that when women achieved equal social status with the men there was no need for these “frivolous” pastimes.

Throughout their existence the lits did some good things for the school. They bought band uniforms, raised scholarship money, bought books for the library, put out a student directory, and produced shows. They required their members to maintain a minimum grade-point average. They never discriminated against anyone on the basis of religion, and, when Rice became racially integrated, the membership of the lits reflected this diversity.

The 1983 *Campanile* ran an amusingly creative history of the lits: “The Elizabeth Baldwin Literary Society was established in the first years that Rice had begun accepting women for the express purpose of developing an appreciation of literature. In the 1950s they acquired a more ‘social function’... Today the purpose is to facilitate university-wide friendships between the women of different colleges by

uniting them in such activities as car washes, planning care packages and weekend dinners.” The Owen Wister Literary Society was established “back in the dark ages when women were not allowed to live on campus”. The lits were “started to give women an opportunity to meet the other women at Rice and to give them an excuse to be on campus at 7:00 p.m.”

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*By 1950 only half of the women students were in the four literary societies, but four new ones were formed to ensure every girl of a bid.*

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