

Benton Literary Society Ledgers
1893-1906, 1907-1930, 1931-1942, 1937-1949

Extent: 4 items

Accession Number: 2008.015.009

Abstract: Four ledgers of the Benton Literary Society at Missouri State Normal School—Third District and Southeast Missouri State Teachers College. Each ledger has information of the society's meetings, members, and events.

Processed by: Esther H. Bohnert, June 2008

Repository: Special Collections and Archives, Southeast Missouri State University
Phone: (573) 651-2245; Fax: (573) 651-2666; Email: semoarchives@semo.edu

Provenance: University Archives

Citation: University Ledgers Benton Literary Society Ledgers, [Ledger Title], [Dates], Special Collections and Archives, Southeast Missouri State University

Restrictions: None

Related Collections:

Benton and Webster Literary Societies Collection, 1897, undated
Benton Society Scrapbook, 1953-1955
Friant Papers, Julien N., 1909-1939
Grauel Collection, Harold O., c. 1860-1985
Webster Society Constitution, undated

Organizational Sketch

In 1875, shortly after the organization of the Missouri State Normal School—Third District, students began forming literary societies. The first ones were the Union Literary, the Humboldt, and the Arion. The faculty supervised, but the students conducted most of the business. The societies drew both men and women as members. ¹ In 1876, the three original societies disbanded and two new ones organized, the Adelphi and the Zenonian. The Philomathean Literary Society originated in 1879; the Van Guard formed in 1888.²

¹ Robert Sidney Douglass, *History of Southeast Missouri: A narrative account of its historical progress, its people, and its principal interests*. Cape Girardeau, MO: 1961, 430-431. Originally published in New York. by Lewis Publishing Company, 1912.

² Douglass, 1961, 430-431.

In 1892, the organization of literary societies began to change. Students of the class of 1893 (with the assistance of then-president of the school, Richard C. Norton) decided that the societies would “prosper” more if the men and women met separately. New societies were then organized.

The men of the Missouri State Normal School—Third District organized the Webster Society, the first men’s society; a short time later that year the women organized the first women’s society, the Sorosis. The next year the Bentons came into existence and several members of the Sorosis left their organization to form the Clios.

A group of twelve men established the Benton Literary Society at the Normal School during the years 1891-1892. They wanted an association dedicated to the encouragement of literary efforts, particularly debate and oratory.³ Students named the society in honor of Thomas Hart Benton, a well-known orator and political figure who had served in the Missouri legislature, as well as in the U.S. Congress. Their motto was “Once a Benton, always a Benton.”⁴

In the early years of the college, literary societies were a very important part of the social and scholarly life on campus. As time went by, the growing need for classroom space, more interest in social life, and declining interest in debate and other scholarly activities led to the marginalization of literary societies.⁵ After much discussion, fraternity houses gradually replaced literary societies. In the late 1950s, the Benton Literary Society petitioned to become a chapter of the Sigma Chi Fraternity.⁶ On April 10, 1960, the Bentons officially became the Epsilon Phi chapter of the 133rd chapter of the Sigma Chi fraternity in the United States.⁷

Scope and Content Note

Four ledgers of the Benton Literary Society at Missouri State Normal School—Third District and Southeast Missouri State Teachers College. Each ledger has information on the society’s meetings, members, and events.

Each ledger contains different types of information, even though some ledgers are multi-volume sets. Each of the individual ledgers have been described below in chronological order.

Archivist Note: Ledgers are marked with the following numbers: 1096 U, 1097 U, 1098 U, and 1122 U. These numbers were assigned by archives staff and have no

³ “Epsilon Phi Chapter History.” Sigma Chi Fraternity, Epsilon Phi Chapter, 2006. Online database, available at: <<http://www6.semo.edu/sigmachi/chapterhistory.htm>> 1. This chapter history states that the Benton was the first literary society on campus; Douglass states that the first literary society was the Webster, 430.

⁴ “Epsilon Phi Chapter History.” Sigma Chi Fraternity, 2006. 1.

⁵ Arthur H. Mattingly, *From Normal to University: A Century of Service*. Cape Girardeau, MO: Missourian Litho and Printing Company, 1979, 98.

⁶ “Epsilon Phi Chapter History.” Sigma Chi Fraternity, 2006. 1.

⁷ “Bentons Go Sigma Chi,” *The Capaha Arrow*, 28 April 1960.

bearing on the ledgers now.

Rules or Conventions: Finding aid prepared using DACS

Ledger Descriptions

Benton Literary Society Records

Volume 1: 1893-1906

Volume 2: 1907-1930

Volume 3: 1931-1942

Box 3160

Ledger 001

Ledger 002

Box 3159

Ledger 003

These ledgers were the secretary's books for the purpose of recording the minutes of the meetings and the membership roll. These ledgers also name members, officers, and record attendance.

Benton Literary Society Banquets Minute Book and Roll of Attendance Ledger 1937-1949

Box 3160

Ledger 003

Records who attended the banquet each year. The last banquet recorded here was April 23, 1949. A separate envelope with the constitution of the society has been placed in the ledger.