

# Philomatheans celebrate 175 years of intellectual rowdiness

By TINA GOLDBERG

The first time students venture to the lofty heights of the fourth floor of College Hall, they may be a bit surprised.

The floor creaks, the rooms smell faintly like sweet cigar smoke, and ancient artifacts are scattered throughout the halls. In the library, old and dusty volumes share the

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shelves with more recent works, towering over the dark wood tables and stately arched windows. The place has the feel of a museum.

Unlike a museum, however, the fourth floor is full of activity.

Sitting near the windows are two students, smoking and

discussing the Bible.

"I never knew the Bible had so much sex — I'll have to read more of it," one of them quips.

Another student joins the group and discusses a plan for a campus literary magazine. In other parts of the room, other students plan an art exhibit, while still others play chess or doze off.

This collegial setting is home to the Philomathean Society, the first University club and oldest collegiate undergraduate literary society in the United States. As the society approaches its 175th anniversary this fall, its members reflect proudly upon a long tradition of intellectual contributions to the University community.

But despite the tradition and formal setting of their group, Philomathean members do not take themselves too

seriously. According to their unofficial motto, the students "raise hell with their brains."

As the first student club at the University, the "Philos" can claim some special privileges. After the 13 members of the senior class presented their idea for an intellectual group, University trustees passed a resolution in 1813 formally recognizing the society. The Philomathean Society has departmental status, is recognized as an official academic arm of the University and has been incorporated as a non-profit organization under Pennsylvania law.

The purpose of the Philomathean Society, according to its original constitution, is "to promote the learning of its members and increase the academic prestige of the

University."

While called a literary society, the Philomathean Society is not an English or philosophy club. The Society, whose name in Greek means love of knowledge, is one of the few remaining campus literary societies of its kind.

Over the years, the Society has undertaken a variety of intellectual endeavors, ranging from drama productions to debates, lecture series and poetry readings.

The official motto of the Society is "Sic Itur Ad Astra," which means "Thus shall we climb to the stars." The saying is particularly appropriate, as the Society has always occupied the top floors of any of its quarters. When the University was located in Center City, the Society oc-

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## The Philomathean Society has done everything from analyzing football to establishing U. departments

In addition, the Society produced a 1917 play called "The Masque of the American Drama," which commemorated American theater. The Society engaged over 1000 student workers and made 1500 costumes.

During this era the Philomathean Society even engaged in some non-literary pursuits, including athletics.

According to the *History*, these competitions were decided in a manner that only a literary society could. On one occasion, Philomathean members consulted encyclopedias to figure out how to play football.

"...The Philomatheans became so convinced of the inevitability of their victory [after researching the sport,] that they drew up a proof of it and submitted it to Zelo," the book says. "Strangely enough, Zelo caved in and forfeited the game on the strength of the proof."

While the Philomathean society never contributed to the efforts of the football team, many other arms of the group survive to this day in other forms.

"The Philomathean Society fills in gaps that aren't being covered [in campus events]," explained long-time Philomathean member Robert Rubinoff, an Engineering doctoral student.

The Society's *University Magazine* evolved into *The*

*Daily Pennsylvanian*. The Society has also helped to found or organize *Connaissance*, Penn Players, *Punch Bowl*, *High Ball*, *The Red and the Blue*, and a number of literary magazines, most notably Philo's own *Philomel*.

"Being on top of College Hall gave me the perspective that the student is in control," Philomathean Society member Emmanuel Morales said in reference to these achievements.

The Society has also contributed to the establishment of several departments, according to Philomathean member and College junior Lauren Nemroff. The History and Sociology of Science major, the Comparative Literature Department, the Folklore Department and American Civilization Department all were created after Society members petitioned the administration.

Despite the Philomathean Society's many activities and accomplishments, current members concede that the group is not well known among students on campus.

Michael Gessel, a Society member during the 1970s who now serves as a press secretary to Congressman Tony Hall (D-Ohio), said last week that "the University community has tended to perceive the Society in ignorance."

"It is a 19th-century literary society with no counterpart today," Gessel said. "People often perceive the Society as

an organization on top of College Hall which looked down on others, which is unfortunate. The members tend to be eccentric — eccentric members who tend to be very creative."

In the past year, the Society has hosted symposiums on the role of a free press and on Allan Bloom's book, *The Closing of the American Mind*.

As the oldest campus club, the Philomathean Society has some traditions which may seem odd to those outside the group. Society meetings are held eight Fridays a semester in the meeting room of its fourth floor College Hall headquarters.

Officers dress in robes, and those who wish to speak must stand and address each other by last names. A three-minute reading of the Society Constitution is given, and a literary exercise is presented. The "lit-ex" may take the form of a debate, musical performance, oratory, or other creative presentation.

These meetings may last up to four hours, with students discussing upcoming events or following the group's motto to "raise hell."

Some students on campus think, however, that the Philomathean Society does not have the last word on

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**Michael Gessel**  
former Philomathean member

intellectualism.

After World War II, the Zelosophic Society dwindled in membership. The Philomathean Society agreed to extend the privileges of its own membership to Zelo alumni. In the 1970s, a group calling itself the Zelosophic Society emerged on campus, much to the opposition of the Philomathean Society.

Charles Ludwig, Alumni Chairman of the Philomathean Society, does not believe the new Zelo group is legitimate.

"Philo is very respectful of Zelo and a proper maintainer of its traditions," he said. "Unless something is no longer fulfilling its purpose and need, there is no purpose of having competition for the sake of competition because then it becomes destructive."

Current Society moderator Andrew Solloway and past moderator Richard Garella claim that the current Zelo is only a club that studies classic literature. Unlike Ludwig, however, they say they have nothing against another literary society, but object that the current Zelo is not the same as its predecessor.

The legitimacy of the Zelosophic Society continues to be debated. Several weeks ago, Ludwig said he would soon meet with University trustees to resolve the situation.

Educators in recent years have emphasized students' need for a "liberal arts education," but group members claim to have understood this concept all along.

College junior Nemroff, who is coordinating the Society's 175th anniversary events committee, asserted that "there was something missing in undergraduate education," before she joined the Society.

Michael Gessel, a Philomathean member during the 1970s, said last week that both the group and its members are iconoclastic and creative.

"The members tend to be eccentric — eccentric members who tend to be very creative," Gessel said. "It . . . gives its members an outlet for creativity and service which they would get nowhere else."

"We reflect the limitless possibilities of the human mind itself," remarked member Richard Garella.

Members feel that the group's future is just as limitless. "Philo has had a structure which has allowed it to adapt," Garella said. "You don't have to join any other club because there are so many things you can do in this club."

"It's a microcosm of the University," Nemroff added.

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cupied the top floors of the President's Mansion at 8th and Market. The mansion was built for the president of the United States when city planners thought that Philadelphia would be the permanent national capital.

Occupying the halls with the Society was the Zelosophic Society, a rival literary club founded by members of the junior class in 1829. In the 19th century, every major Eastern college had at least two major literary societies which competed in activities as diverse as debating and football.

The University moved to West Philadelphia in 1873, but the Society and her rival wanted to stay downtown to become gentleman's clubs. Recognizing the importance of the Society to the University community, the trustees offered to add a fourth floor to College Hall just for the two literary groups.

The Philomathean Society engaged in many activities during its first 50 years. In 1858, three Philomathean members achieved international recognition when they published the first complete translation of the Rosetta Stone. Using the Greek which was carved in the stone, the students deciphered the Egyptian hieroglyphics.

The Society also established formal debate at the University. Debates between the Society and Zelo were often held in the old Academy of Music building and other Philadelphia forums. According to the *History of the Philomathean Society* published in 1892, the debates often attracted thousands of spectators and sometimes became quite serious.

On one occasion, students tried to test the unwritten ban of discussing slavery. Since many Zelosophic members were Southern, they did not want to debate the subject.

"[Students] came fully prepared for the discussion, which was prefaced by one of the brothers drawing from his pocket a pistol and laying it on the rostrum before him, with the remark that 'the subject of slavery will be discussed this evening,'" the *History* states.

In addition to having a history of debate, the Philomathean Society has a tradition of participation in drama. It's earliest production dates to 1886, a Greek play co-sponsored by the Zelosophic Society and presented in the Academy of Music.

The society performed plays on a grand scale. For a 1916 production of Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, a replica Globe Theater was built on Hamilton Walk. The theater cost \$1350 at the time.



Susan Wise/Daily Pennsylvanian

Philomathean officers Peter Ripley, left, Andrew Soloway, center, and Lauren Nemroff show their casual yet dressy style at a recent Society meeting.