

“Not as an End in Itself”

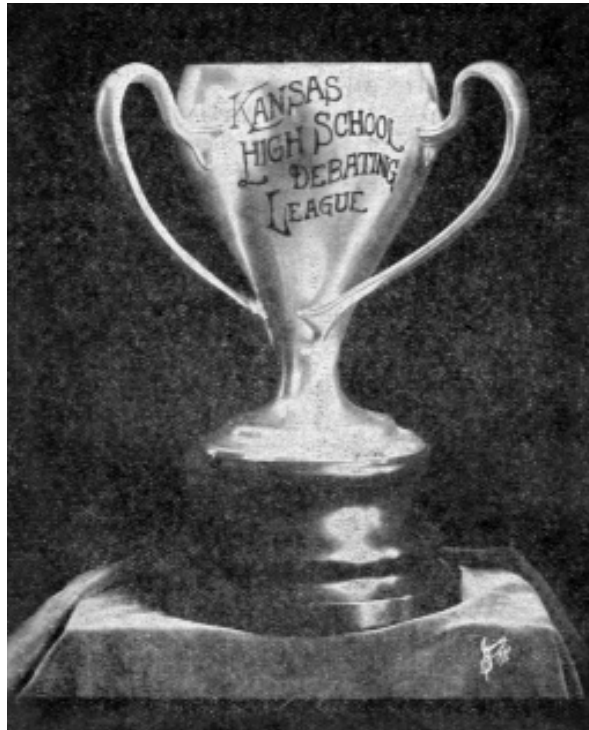
The Development of Debate in Kansas High Schools



Kansas High School Debating League state champions for Class B schools, 1931. From Hepler Rural High School are: (back row) Alva Hess, Joe Skubitz (coach); (front row) Eleanor Land, Tom Palmer, and Mary Lucille McNamee.

by Claudia J. Keenan

In 1910, during the first year of the Kansas High School Debating League, the team from Ashland, Kansas, emerged as a powerhouse. Located along the southern border of the state, fourteen miles from Oklahoma, Ashland boasted cattle ranches and wheat fields and, for two years, the state debate championship banner and trophy awarded through the University of Kansas. A pattern of small towns achieving debate success would develop through the coming years—a phenomenon that reflected in part the bullishness toward academics in Ashland and other Kansas communities that eventually would nurture debate champions. Although their high schools served small, rural populations, enrollment was increasing partly because students boarded in town during the week. Country high schools emphasized the college preparatory work, which began to flourish in American public high schools after the turn of the twentieth century. In contrast with the manual/vocational and commercial/business courses of study also offered in many high schools, the college preparatory program complemented the intensity and competitiveness that became characteristic of debate.¹



The silver regents' cup presented to the first Kansas High School Debating League champion, Ashland High School, May 5, 1911.

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1. Winning teams are listed in University of Kansas Extension Division, *Announcements of the Kansas High School Debating League, 1910–1929, Bulletins 10–30 (1910–1929)*. Edward A. Krug, *The Shaping of the American High School, 1880–1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 180, ch. 10; Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893–1958*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 1995), ch. 4, 5; David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia, A Center of Public School Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), ch. 2.

Not until 1921 did a city with a population greater than one thousand—Dodge City—win the Kansas high school debate championship. After World War II urban and suburban communities would increasingly dominate high school debate in Kansas. Yet, such small towns as Sterling and Tonganoxie retained the potential to advance to the top ranks.² Conceivably their endurance is testimony to the work of a former Hutchinson, Kansas, school superintendent who designed the state's debate program nearly a century ago.

High school debate is a distinctive phenomenon in the history of American education, yet the particulars of when, where, and why are not well known. If one were to pull together a nationwide assortment of high school yearbooks dating from the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s and flip through the pages of extracurricular activities, photographs of debate teams would be interspersed with those of the Red Cross Club and National Honor Society. Until the mid-1950s debate was a standard feature of high school life nationwide. At its very best, debate fosters an incisive intellectualism among students. It has always demanded acute research and organizational skills, and one of its rewards is the strong sensation of “flow”

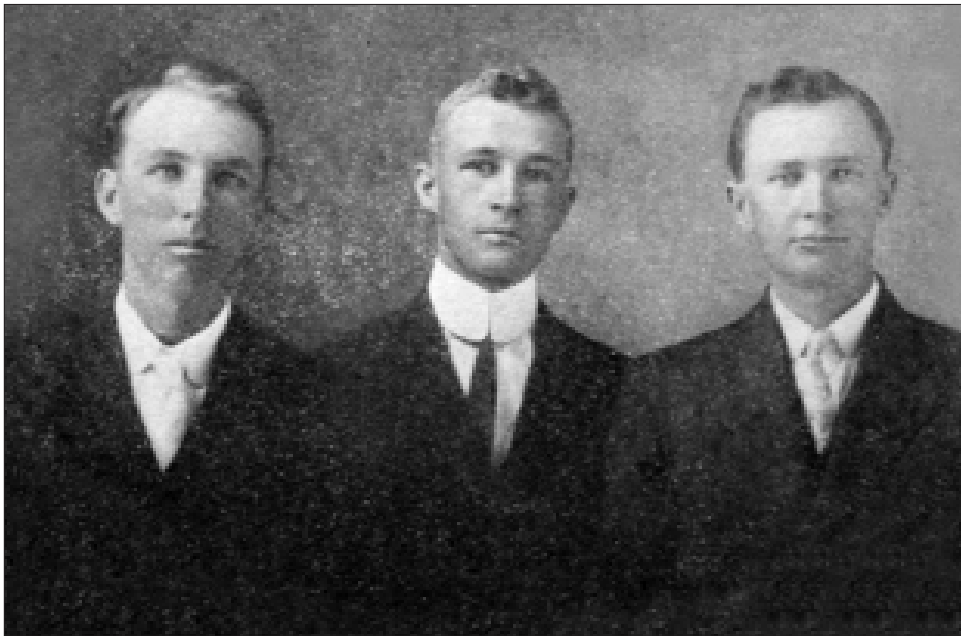
that is associated with athletic performance.³ Debaters are famously passionate about developing and winning arguments through their command of language and ideas. The familiarity of working within the formal debate structure—affirmative, negative, and so forth—is balanced by the need to respond creatively to unexpected challenges.

2. University of Kansas Extension Division, *Announcements of the Kansas High School Debating League, 1911–1937, Bulletins 11–37 (1910–1936)*. See also debate records at the Kansas State High School Activities Association, Topeka.

3. Gary Alan Fine, *Gifted Tongues: High School Debate and Adolescent Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 102.

Often a coach or teacher acts as a guide, but the student finds his or her own way through the mass of information and toward a critical understanding of it.

Debate is largely a self-directed activity that has much to do with the education of individuals yet very little to do with formal schooling even though it is organized through the schools. Nonetheless, its establishment as an activity affiliated with twentieth-century public high schools illu-



The Ashland debate team and winners of the first High School Debating League championship, 1911. Left to right are Fred Hinkle, Cale Carson, and Clarence Bare.

minates a few compelling themes related to the American educational system. In Kansas, which became one of the first states to develop a dynamic high school debate league, the very presence of this cerebral activity in such places as Ashland challenges conventional views of the rural pre-World War I high school. The fact that Kansas was among the states with the most literate populations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries must surely be a factor in the success of this activity.⁴ The popularization of high school debate in Kansas reiterates that public universities influenced high schools in unexpected venues. Further, it is notable that debate has con-

4. The author's research on the history of high school debate in the United States, including Wisconsin, Iowa, Montana, and New York, demonstrates that Kansas was in the vanguard of high school debate. See also A. Monroe Stowe, "The Motivation of Debate in Our Secondary Schools," *Kansas School Magazine* 1 (September 1912): 299–303, reprinted from *School Review*, Chicago; Mary Hurlbut Cordier, *Schoolwomen of the Prairies and Plains* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1992), 136.

tinued to be offered as part of the curriculum in Kansas high schools although it is, as well, part of the extra curriculum. Many of the courses offered by the high schools today originated in a flurry of curriculum design conducted by prestigious national committees during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These new programs encouraged standardization, vocationalism, and uniformity. As an activity that involves argumentation, challenge, and variability, debate naturally would tend to be excluded from the curriculum by local educators. Arguably, the persistence of debate classes in Kansas represents an educational legacy that is quintessentially progressive although Kansas schools of the early twentieth century were not formally associated with the progressive education movement.⁵

Progressive education has had many incarnations. During its heyday between 1916 and 1940, progressive education was associated with a series of changes in classroom practice. Many were once considered revolutionary and have since become standard. On the elementary school level, progressive educators fostered "child centered" study, developmental learning, individualized instruction, and expansion of the curriculum to include science and the arts. They also emphasized social development. At the junior high and high school levels, progressive educators were deeply concerned that students learn complementary versions of Western and American history. Many formally introduced critical thinking on the secondary level and encouraged students to back up their beliefs instead of learning by rote.⁶ Debate is inherently progressive because it requires students to open their

5. Most public high schools in Kansas offer debate classes for credit, which is not the case in most public high schools in the Northeast, West, and Southeast. For background on curriculum design, see Herbert M. Kleibard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893–1958*, 3d ed. (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004).

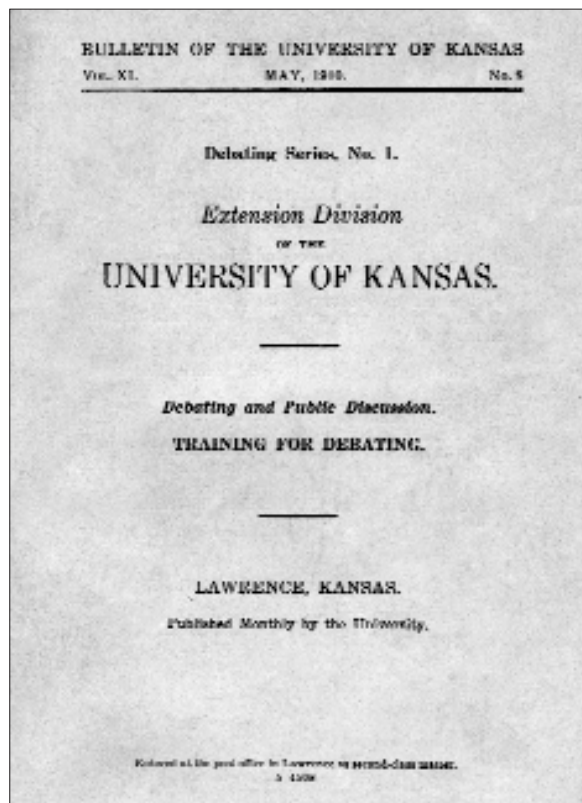
6. The discussion of progressive education is based on Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School* (New York: Knopf, 1961); Cremin, *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience* (New York: Norton, 1987); Susan Semel Krug and Alan Sadovnik, eds., *Schools of Tomorrow, Schools of Today: What Happened to Progressive Education?* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999); Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); C.A. Bowers, *The Progressive Educator and the Depression: The Radical Years* (New York: Random House, 1969).

minds to consider and develop new ways of thinking about issues and problems. Therefore, while debate did not appear on the agenda of the Progressive Education Association, it embodied several important goals of progressivism: intellectual advancement, an interdisciplinary approach to learning, challenging the *status quo*, and broadening students' understanding of problems in modern society. Progressive education did not reach every school in every community and thrived most prominently in private and public schools in affluent towns and villages. While elements of progressive education such as creative expression and studying social issues became established in some rural districts, education reformers of the time believed overall that rural schools lagged greatly behind improvements in public education.⁷ In that context, high school debate stands out as a progressive student activity that had not been mandated as a reform.

It is possible to pinpoint the very start of high school debate in the state of Kansas: March 12, 1910. That was the day that the Annual Conference of Superintendents and Principals of Accredited High Schools of Kansas voted to establish the Kansas High School Debating League. The person who pushed insistently for the league's creation was Richard Rees Price, newly installed director of the Extension Division of the University of Kansas who noted that the Debating League should be used "not as an end in itself. It should lead to a first-hand study of the great political and economic questions which are pressing for solution by the people of this state."⁸

Price's hope that high school debate would promote the study of issues demanding reform suggests that he regarded this activity as a "good government" initiative as well as an intellectual pursuit. During the last decades of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth century American communities brimmed with programs to stimulate civic involvement, moral character, and mental enrichment. High school debate brought these strands together uniquely if only because the participants were of the young ages of fifteen to seventeen. Like the continuing education movement, which started in Chautauqua, New

York, in 1874, high school debate fed Americans' appetite for knowledge and entertainment—perhaps some showmanship too. "The backbone of the Chautauqua was the lecture," once explained Ezra C. Buehler, professor of communication and debate coach at the University of Kansas for more than forty years. "There was the lecture to challenge thought, the lecture to inform, and the lecture to inspire."⁹ Debate incorporated some of these elements and



This first Kansas debate handbook, published in 1910, featured an essay focusing on the values of debate, which included self-control, correct habits of speech, organization of thought, and recognition of sound reasoning.

played to Americans' growing interest in social and political issues. It fit Richard Price's view of the world.

A graduate of the University of Kansas, class of 1897, Richard Price received a master's degree from Harvard and then returned to Kansas where he became a Latin teacher and subsequently principal and superintendent of the Hutchinson schools. In 1900 Hutchinson was a rapidly

7. David R. Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth Century Iowa* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 52.

8. Richard R. Price, "A Review of the Work of the League for 1910-'11," University of Kansas Extension Division, *Debating Series, No. 3. Announcements of the Kansas High School Debating League, for 1911-'12, Bulletin 12, no. 15* (September 1, 1911), 13. See also Clifford S. Griffin, *The University of Kansas: A History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1974), 250, 247–61.

9. Ezra C. Buehler, "William Jennings Bryan—An Eyewitness Report," in *Ezra Christian Buehler, His Life and Professional Ideas*, ed. Clare Novak and Marilyn Conboy (Lawrence: Kansas Speech Communication Society, University of Kansas, 1982), 253.

growing city along the Santa Fe railroad. Price's outlook, his interest in developing an informed citizenry that grappled with ideas, was evident in his work as editor of the *Interstate Schoolman*, a monthly journal for Kansas teachers.¹⁰ The journal's epigram, *Docendo Discimus*, means "we learn by teaching." "The Department of Public Discussion and Debate will encourage the discussion of such subjects as bank guaranty . . . immigration, etc., all live questions



Richard R. Price was superintendent of Hutchinson schools before becoming director of the fledgling Extension Division of the University of Kansas in 1909.

which will bring the young men and women of the day into touch with things which the citizens of the entire country have in mind," Price argued in *Interstate Schoolman*. In 1909 he left the journal and Hutchinson to direct the fledgling Extension Division of the University of Kansas at Lawrence.¹¹

The idea of universities extending educational opportunity to people, usually working people who could not

10. "New Members of the Faculty," *Graduate Magazine of the University of Kansas* 8 (October 1909): 24. In March 1905 Richard Rees Price began as the associate editor of *Interstate Schoolman: A Monthly Magazine of Education*, published in Hutchinson, Kansas. By February 1906 he was a co-editor with George W. Winans. *Interstate Schoolman* was published until 1913.

11. "The New University Extension Work at the University," *Interstate Schoolman* 8 (January 1910): 22–23; "New Members of the Faculty."

formally enroll and attend, originated at Trinity College, Cambridge, in the 1870s. Nearly two decades later several American universities including Wisconsin, Chicago, and Kansas, started extension programs. However these programs floundered until the turn of the twentieth century when administrators shifted away from the English emphasis on course credit and examinations. In the United States, extension work became oriented toward correspondence study and dissemination of information about social, business, and political issues. But an overarching emphasis was on the value of public discussion within communities.¹²

In his 1902 inauguration speech, University of Kansas chancellor Frank Strong enunciated a commitment to extension work. He said in part: "Men and women of Kansas, do you love this state? Do you love its broad prairies where in the springtime the wandering breath of God stirs the perfume in a million flowers? . . . Then do not allow the University of Kansas to miss its destiny."¹³ The destiny that Strong had in mind was akin to that of the formative "Wisconsin Idea," later expressed as "the boundaries of the campus are the boundaries of the state" or the university in service to the state. It would be articulated fully by Charles McCarthy, a member of the Wisconsin Free Library Commission who urged University of Wisconsin president Charles Van Hise to reinvigorate the languishing extension division in 1912. Decades earlier Wisconsin had embraced the concept of an extension division "as an agency by means of which all or any knowledge not only could but would be transmitted to those who sought it and those who ought to have it."¹⁴ Kansas Chancellor Strong became so captivated by the mission of the Wisconsin extension division that he visited Madison in 1911, bringing with him the progressive Republican governor of Kansas, Walter R. Stubbs. "Now, by all natural rights Kansas has more to be proud of than Wisconsin has," Strong announced. "Its people have certainly as much right to take pride in their citizenship and to assert their daily proprietorship in the affairs of the commonwealth."¹⁵

Even before Richard Price arrived at Lawrence, he had reviewed material about the Wisconsin extension division and decided to use it as his model for Kansas. He institut-

12. Cremin, *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience*, 243–45.

13. Quotation in Theodore A. Wilson, *Cycles of Change, A History of the University of Kansas Division of Continuing Education* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 8.

14. Merle Curti and Vernon Carstensen, *The University of Wisconsin, A History, 1848–1925* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1949), 2: 553–54, quotation on 564.

15. "University and State Superintendent," *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine* 13 (February 1912): 229.

ed the same four departments as Wisconsin (correspondence study, general information and welfare, lecture study, and debating and public discussion), and chose as its motto "The State is its Campus."¹⁶ Price fervently believed in the Wisconsin Idea. The university "must be the working arm of the state and must enter into the life of the people along all the lines which contribute to the building-up of a great commonwealth," he wrote. Of the extension division, Price noted that its function was "taking the university to the grass roots" and observed that it was "organized for the express purpose of acting as a clearing house through which all the resources of the institution and the expert services of its faculty are made easily available to the people of the state."¹⁷

Soon after creating the Kansas High School Debating League, Price initiated the publication of a series of debate handbooks for high school students. The first handbook presented the topic that would be debated during the 1910–1911 season: "Resolved, That immigration should be restricted by a literacy test." In framing the argument for the students, four questions were posed.

Have illiterate immigrants pauper and criminal tendencies?

Are illiterates hard to assimilate?

Do they lower the standard of American life?

Can a literacy test be effectively applied?¹⁸

Obviously these questions required knowledge and analysis. From his work as a superintendent, Price understood that many small towns were without public libraries and had scant information about the policy issues posed in debate. Therefore debaters who lived on farms in western Kansas were at a disadvantage in tackling these questions.

But there was a solution. In developing affirmative and negative arguments, the debaters would come to rely largely on information furnished by the Department of General Information of the Extension Division. The staff of this department compiled books, magazine articles, and documents prepared by the federal government and vari-

ous social and political advocacy organizations, and shipped them off to schools that requested them. The reference material, provided as "package library services," could be held for two weeks. Journals clipped often included the *Independent*, *The American Journal of Sociology*, *The Nation*, *North American Review*, *The Outlook*, and *Atlantic Monthly*.¹⁹ Therefore students who read from package libraries encountered new ideas, intellectual allusions,

III.

ARGUMENTATION.

An effective argument is composed of three parts: an introduction, an argument proper, and a conclusion.

A. INTRODUCTION.

The introduction is that part of the argument which cuts the whole case down to a few central or vital issues, upon which the decision of fair-minded men should rest. The good debater is not content to talk *on the subject*; he must go right to the heart of the case and discuss only the essentials. For instance, one debating the question, "Resolved, That immigration should be restricted by a literacy test," when he comes to debate finds himself grouping his arguments about the following central points:

- 1st. Have illiterate immigrants pauper and criminal tendencies?
- 2d. Are illiterates hard to assimilate?
- 3d. Do they lower the standard of American life?
- 4th. Can a literacy test be effectively applied?

The first debate handbook for Kansas high school students presented the topic that would be debated during the 1910–1911 season: "Resolved, That immigration should be restricted by a literacy test."

and policy positions that they needed to interpret and understand. United States Bureau of Education records show that by 1913 the Extension Division of the University of Kansas had distributed thousands of package libraries. In contrast, the University of Iowa supplied material to high school debaters in a slightly different way, via the Iowa State Traveling Library whose librarian met personally with students.²⁰

16. A diagram showing the four departments is in University of Kansas Extension Division, *Debating Series*, No. 4. *Announcements of the Kansas High School Debating League, for 1912–'13*. *Bulletin* 13, no. 18 (September 1, 1912), between 8 and 9.

17. Richard Rees Price, "The University of Kansas Extension Division," *Twentieth Century Magazine* 6 (October 1912): 3–12.

18. University of Kansas Extension Division, *Debating and Public Discussion, Training for Debating, Debating Series*, No. 1, *Bulletin* 11, no. 8 (May 1910), 12.

19. Frank T. Stockton, *The University of Kansas Launches and Tests an Extension Division: 1909–1922*, University Extension Research Publication (Lawrence: University of Kansas, June 1957), 44. Magazines and journals used by debaters often were cited in debate handbooks; see, for example, E. C. Robbins, *The High School Debate Handbook* (Chicago: McClurg, 1913), 96–99.

20. Denise K. Anderson to author, August 16, 2004; Cremin, *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience*, 245.

The first debate handbook that Kansas published, *Debating and Public Discussion, Training for Debating*, featured the essay “Principles of Effective Debating” by Rollo L. Lyman, professor of rhetoric and oratory at the University of Wisconsin. Lyman wrote: “The disciplinary value of debating may be discussed under four heads: (1) Training in self-control; (2) formation of correct habits of speech; (3) organization of the power of thought; (4) ability to recognize sound reasoning.”²¹ Certainly mental discipline has always been part of the value of high school debate. But it is a value that is cautionary in nature, evocative of the lessons imparted in the nineteenth-century schoolhouse. In 1910 Kansas, Richard Price expressed other compelling reasons to initiate a statewide high school debate program.

Foremost, high school debate encouraged students to consider college. It would be the best means to establish liaison, Richard Price noted, between the University of Kansas and high school students. By organizing the state into eight debating leagues with whose coaches and members he was often in contact, Price promoted the progression from high school and college. He chose the officers of the Kansas High School Debate League with the intent to cultivate students for college; the officers were local principals and superintendents with just one representative of the university.²² Despite Price’s inclusion of educational administrators from the big cities—Topeka, Kansas City, and Wichita—most of the schools that participated in the debate league (until after World War II) were small towns in western Kansas. Arguably the urban students were more likely to have been headed to college with or without the debate experience. High school debaters in rural Kansas, however, could have been strongly affected by the introduction to the university made possible by Price. Since Price intended to forge bonds with Kansas high schools, it is possible that the debate league’s reach into rural Kansas may have helped diversify the university’s enrollment.²³

Further, high school debate posed a challenge to the existing emphasis on high school athletics. “Debating goes far to produce a sane and normal balance of interest as between things pertaining to the body and things pertaining to the mind,” Richard Price wrote in 1911. “Already in

many of our high schools the football star and the track team hero have ceased to occupy the undisputed preëminence as subjects of high-school hero-worship,” he added, implicitly attributing the shift to the expansion and prestige of debate. Among the fifty-two schools that were members of the debate league, in small towns spread across the state, Price perceived that contests calling for intellectual achievement would become as esteemed as athletic contests.²⁴ While sports would always dominate high school culture, debate added a new niche into which students could fit.

Finally, the Kansas High School Debating League created an opportunity for school boosterism and socialization. From Lawrence, the Extension Division publicized state and regional tournaments to increase attendance and urged local districts to present debate at school assemblies, parent–teacher association meetings, church events, and gatherings of women’s and men’s clubs. In this way the community became informed about the work of its high school students and developed a new incentive to support the schools. By fostering a “localized sense of community,” historian Laurie Moses Hines has suggested, extracurricular events eventually would become the center of small school-based towns.²⁵

The educational value of high school debate lies in its fundamental progressiveness—information is a form of currency and therefore of power; Americans should be informed about all aspects of their daily lives, and society benefits as a whole from greater knowledge and intelligent discussion. The entire Extension Division, of course, was a progressive institution that reached from the professions of law, journalism, and clergy, to labor unions, granges, farmers’ institutes, parent–teacher associations, civic improvement clubs, and to high school debating societies. However, high school debaters constituted a unique category because they were young—younger than anyone else within the reach of the Extension Division—and extremely conversant with issues and ideas related to industrialized society. For example, Richard Price commissioned Kansas professors to write informational essays expressly for use by high school debaters. An American history pro-

21. Rollo L. Lyman, “The Principles of Effective Debating,” University of Kansas Extension Division, *Debating and Public Discussion, Training for Debating*, 7.

22. “Constitution and By-laws of the Kansas High School Debating League,” *Debating Series*, No. 2. *Announcements of the Kansas High School Debating League, for 1910–’11. Bulletin* 11, no. 10 (July 1910), 9.

23. Price, “A Review of the Work of the League for 1910–’11,” 13–16.

24. *Ibid.*, 13; Price, “A Review of the Work of the League, for 1911–’12,” University of Kansas Extension Division, *Debating Series*, No. 4, 14.

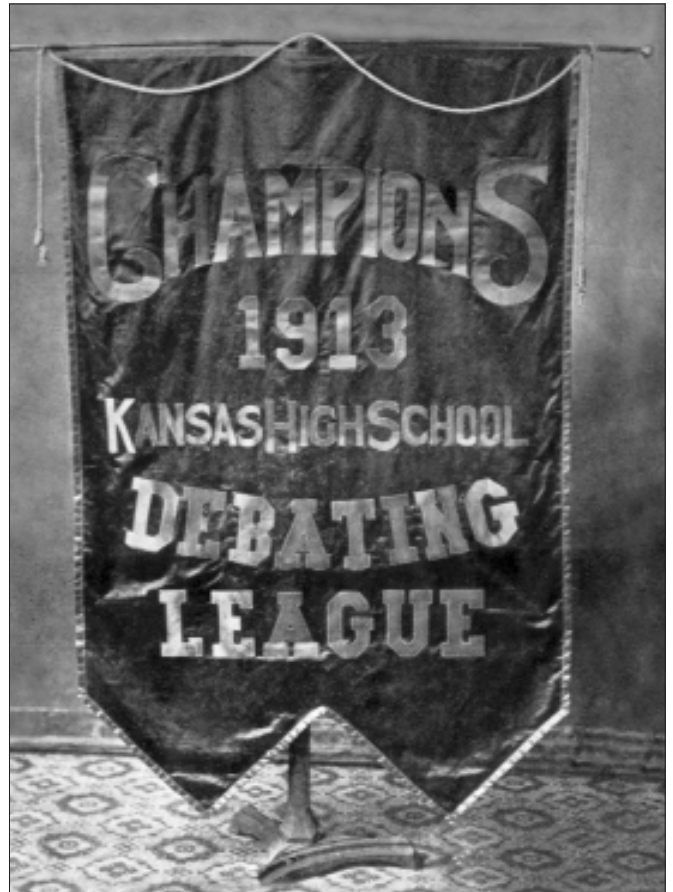
25. Laurie Moses Hines, “Community and Control in the Development of the Extracurriculum,” in *Hoosier Schools: Past & Present*, ed. William J. Reese (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Richard R. Price, “Preliminary Statement,” University of Kansas Extension Division, *Debating Series*, No. 3, 7–11.

fessor, Frank Bates, prepared a report on “The Commission Plan of Government,” for example, and a public speaking professor, Gerhard Gessell, wrote about “The Recall of Judges,” and these papers were distributed to debate teams. Prior to World War II the closest public high schools would come to the level of critical analysis of social problems conducted by debaters would be through the textbooks and pamphlets written by the innovative Teachers College professor Harold O. Rugg during the 1930s.²⁶

High school debate would seem to have descended naturally from nineteenth-century classes in rhetoric, elocution, and oratory. In fact it was a twentieth-century invention. The activity and its broad organization may be said to reflect the public university’s progressive values, the promise of encouraging and extending education to all citizens. Progressive Era concerns among educators are also revealed in the juxtaposition of high school debate to issues current in secondary education between 1900 and 1920. Among these issues were escalating high school enrollment, the growth of the immigrant population, the expansion of consumerism, and the diminished authority of the church, family, and school. All influenced educators’ ideas about high school requirements and extracurricular activities. Debate was not for everyone, but its strong presence in the schools raised awareness of the importance of oral and written expression, enhanced insight into social change, and encouraged an understanding of modern culture.

Around 1910 the pages of *Kansas Teacher* magazine began to reflect a kind of agony about the public schools as educators argued about the flight of farmers’ sons and daughters. How could this trend be reversed to preserve the agrarian way of life? Allegiance to rural culture would need to come through the school, charged the Country Life Commission appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt and chaired by horticulturalist Liberty Hyde Bailey. Those who stayed, it was thought, must develop a “sense of dignity in rural living and an intellectual attachment to the countryside.”²⁷ Notably, country life was characterized by “social disorder,” lacking cohesion—hardly a surprise since farms were so dispersed across the Plains. The com-

mission urged the development of the school as a social center to create an enduring sense of community. It also proposed a shift in the curriculum so that students who lived on farms would study subjects that resonated with their daily lives. “There may be a difference of opinion about the advisability of training these children for country life, but there can be none about the necessity of utilizing their experience gained in the country in teaching them the



Banner won by Burlington High School, the 1913 champions of the Kansas High School Debating League.

procedure of successful living,” wrote W. W. Charters, an educator with a special interest in curriculum development, in an introduction to a series of texts for rural teachers.²⁸

During these years of despair when educators and social activists proposed solutions to the “problem” of country life, high school debate in Kansas generally drew more participants each year: thirty-four in 1910–1911, thirty-

28. William Albert Wilkinson, *Rural School Management* (New York: Silver, Burdett and Co., 1917), viii.

26. Frank G. Bates, *The Commission Plan of Government* (1910), and Gerhard A. Gesell, *The Recall of Judges* (1913). See University of Kansas Extension Division, *Debating Series*, No. 4, 2. Although the bulletin states *The Recall of Judges* will be ready in December 1912, this title was issued December 1, 1913. Harold O. Rugg, *The History of American Civilization: Economic and Social* (Boston: Ginn, 1930).

27. Paul Theobald, *Call School: Rural Education in the Midwest to 1918* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 171; *Report of the Commission on Country Life*, 60th Cong., 2d sess., 1911, S. Doc. 705.

three in 1911–1912, and fifty-two in 1912–1913, dropping to forty-two to forty-four teams between 1914 and 1916, then steadily rising to 144 by 1922–1923. The next season, 1923–1924, high school teams were split into two categories: Class A for larger schools and Class B for smaller.²⁹ The Kansas debaters worked with a great range of issues: capital punishment, old-age pensions, conservation of natural resources, federal versus state rights, restriction of immigra-



An all-female debate team from Mt. Hope won the 1917 state championship. Left to right are Marcie Tucker, Lola Hoover, and Mildred Tihen.

tion, woman suffrage, social purity, and the “yellow peril.” Paradoxically, the commitment of rural students to debate increased at a time when urbanism was widely equated with intellectualism. Further, debate went against assumptions about rural education: it was secular and its content usually was not related to agricultural practices. Finally the “speaking” component of high school debate bore no relation to recitation, the standard form of teaching and learning in rural schools at least until the end of World War I.

In 1913 University of Minnesota president George Vincent recruited Richard Price to run Minnesota’s extension

29. Richard R. Price, “A Review of the Work of the League, 1912–’13,” University of Kansas Extension Division, *Debating Series*, No. 5. *Announcements of the Kansas High School Debating League, for 1913–’14*. *Bulletin* 14, no. 17 (August 1, 1913), 13. See also University of Kansas Extension Division, *Announcements of the Kansas High School Debating League, 1914–1924*. *Bulletins* 15–23 (1914–1923).

division. Two years later Price helped establish the National University Extension Association, whose founding member institutions included eighteen land-grant universities and first president was Dean Louis Reber of the University of Wisconsin. Meanwhile back in Kansas the extension’s ties to Wisconsin were reinforced when Price’s position was filled by Frederick R. Hamilton, former president of Bradley Polytechnic Institute who had worked in the Wisconsin extension division. He was particularly pleased in 1917 when an all-girl team won the state championship.³⁰ Subsequently, Harold G. Ingham, also from Wisconsin, would serve at Kansas until 1935. He reported on debate regularly and about the 1932–1933 season, he commented:

The most remarkable feature of the entire season’s work was the ability acquired by these high-school debaters in comprehending and discussing intelligently so difficult and involved a question as that of the sources of taxation and the justice of the property tax as compared to other types of tax levies. Many school officials, debate coaches and others interested who felt, at the beginning of the season, that the question involved problems of economics far beyond the comprehension of the average high-school student, were most enthusiastic in their commendations before the season closed.³¹

Harold Ingham’s commitment to high school debate led him to establish a University of Kansas summer debate institute where students had the opportunity to be evaluated by Kansas professors and attended lectures by politicians, business executives, and civic leaders about issues of the day. The University of Kansas continued to operate the high school debating league until 1937 when the Kansas High School Activities Association assumed leadership. However, the summer debate institutes continue today.³²

The men who popularized high school debate in Kansas were inspired by the expanse of possibility embodied in American education and to that end they were true progressives. In seeking to maximize the university’s service to the state they also were focused on

30. The National University Extension Association became the National University Continuing Education Association in 1980. For the 1917 championship team, see University of Kansas Extension Division, *Debating Series*, No. 5, 6; *Kansas Teacher* 5 (May 1917): 18.

31. Quotation in “A Review of the Work of the League, 1932–’33,” University of Kansas Extension Division, *Announcement Kansas High School Debating League for 1933–’34*. *Bulletin* 34, no. 15 (September 1, 1933), 15.

32. “Debate Institute November 25 and 26,” *University of Kansas Newsletter* 37 (October 29, 1938): 3, Artificial Records of the Division of Continuing Education, University of Kansas Archives, Lawrence.

efficiency, not simply willing but eager to use the state to “expand the domain of public schooling,” in the words of historian David Tyack.³³ The high school debate program is an unconventional but excellent illustration of that expansion, for through it the state of Kansas served both the secondary schools and the university thereby increasing its own breadth and influence.

One of the twists in the history of high school debate is that it became popularized largely as a rural endeavor yet is today best known through the National Association of Urban Debate Leagues. This organization, founded in 1997 and funded by the Soros Foundation, promotes debate in twelve large American cities and is active among 221 urban public high schools. The association’s literature notes that debaters receive higher grades than non-debaters and are more likely to attend college.³⁴

The history of debate in American high schools is useful in examining regional education trends and issues. Since most debate programs that date from between 1900 and 1915 were developed through or with help from state universities, it is worthwhile to ask whether all were responding to similar concerns about young people and community stability. After all, the main focus of the extensions was adult and continuing education. The University of Kansas extension, for example, supported high school students who were involved in civic work or correspondence study or needed reference books and lantern slides.³⁵ Yet debate was the only extracurricular group that received formal attention from the extension in the form of handbooks, newsletters, and active encouragement. Such devotion is intriguing if one considers the multitude of issues that rural schools faced during the first few decades of the twentieth century.

33. David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, *Managers of Virtue, Public School Leadership in America 1820–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 95.

34. See www.urbandebate.org/factsheet

35. “Correspondence-Study,” University of Kansas Extension Division, *Debating Series*, No. 4, 62–63.

Since about 1900, high school debate programs have served the needs of at least five state universities and reflected regional issues in secondary schooling. As a competitive “extracurricular” infused with the joy of argument and ideas, debate quickly gained stature in early twentieth-century high schools. Certainly some of its importance was conferred by the strong connection to the state university and professors. Debating’s association with higher



The University of Kansas continued to operate the high school debating league until 1937 when the Kansas High School Activities Association assumed leadership. Pictured here are the 1937 champions from Mulvane: Winifred Farber, Betty Kimble, Vivian Pike (coach), O'Thene Huff, Margaret Valeria Burress, and (back row) Superintendent Rider.

education, however, and its intense intellectualism would ultimately keep it marginal in most parts of the country. Even after World War II when most high school debate leagues cut their ties to university extension divisions, the fact that debate as an activity was actually dependent on divergent viewpoints posed a threat to strict classroom control. For this reason debate has remained largely extracurricular although the strengths it imparts to students are among the very ones that are said to be sought by educators. Its presence in Kansas signifies a truly progressive enterprise.

