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The Lives of Clements Hall

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ABSTRACT
Clements Hall has occupied a central place on Southern Methodist University’s campus, both physically and socially, since the campus’ inception in 1915. Initially a women’s dormitory, it was later used by men after the construction of the Virginia and Snider dormitories. It included a dining space, a kitchen, and apartments for President Hyer and his family. In its time as a residential building, it housed engineering students, the football team, and briefly members of the Navy V-12 program. After complaints in the late 1950s, plans were made to renovate the building for use as classrooms and administrative space, offering services ranging from academic counseling to a print shop. The building has been intertwined with many key moments in Southern Methodist University’s history, witnessing the end of strict limitations on the social lives of its members, early attempts at desegregation in Texas, and the infamous William P. Clements football scandal. Despite its historical significance, Clements Hall has faded from its role as a social center on campus. The data for this paper was gathered from the DeGolyer Library Archives, the primary depository for documents on the history of Southern Methodist University, comprising blueprints, personal accounts of students and professors living in Clements Hall, newspaper articles on the events in the building, and photographs of the hall. I will compile these sources into a holistic view of life in the building through its history. The focus of this project was to look at the evolution of life at SMU through the lens of the various uses of Clements Hall throughout its growth.

One of the original two structures on the SMU campus alongside Dallas Hall, Clements Hall has been central to campus life from the very beginning. Although originally planned as a dormitory for men, it actually housed women until Virginia and Snider Dormitories were built in 1926. It remained in use as a men’s dormitory until 1965, when it was renovated to house exclusively classrooms and offices. However, even during its years as a dormitory, space was shared with various subjects, including chemistry, engineering, music, education, journalism, and the student publishing company. It was the home of many major programs which have since become separate colleges. Having always been a catch-all, it currently holds the Languages and Math departments, parts of the English Department, the Embry Human Rights Center, the Honors Department, and Scholarship Advising. Yet, much as in the late ‘50s, the building is once again severely out of date and short on space. For such an essential part of SMU’s history, it has been badly neglected, and deserves to be brought back to its former glory.

Clements Hall was initially known as the Women’s Building, as it was the women’s dormitory. However, that was not actually the original intention of its architects. In 1912, SMU’s building committee put out two contracts for dormitories with Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge, who had designed Conant Hall at Harvard, as well as a campus for Harvard Medical school. One contract was for the building we call Clements, which was to be for men, and a matching dormitory for women across the Boulevard where Umphree-Lee stands today. Both were to be built in the Collegiate Georgian style, according to Dr. Hyer’s original plans for the university. However, this dormitory went over budget, and it was decided to finish it for women, and create three cheap temporary dormitories for the men until more funds could be raised. These dormitories combined cost less that ¼ the cost of the women’s dormitory, and burned down 11 years later in 1926. The Women’s Building and Dallas Hall are the only two buildings from the original campus in 1915 which still survive today.

Initially, the dormitory had room to house around 160 students, as well as Dr. Hyer, his wife, and several other faculty members and their spouses. The faculty apartments were located in the south-east corner of the first floor, with temporary rooms for sororities located across the hall the north. The students dined in the dormitory at specified times, and had a strict curfew. Dr. Hyer and Mrs. Hyer were deeply involved in the social life of the students, eating with them in the Women’s Dormitory’s downstairs dining room. The dormitory also had a matron, Mrs. Harmon, who managed the building in general, and a house doctor, Dr. Minnie L. Maffet, who ran the infirmary in the northwest corner of the first floor.

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Social life in the Women’s Building was strictly regulated. The student-lead Women’s Governing Board established the penalties for “Unladylike behavior,” and “lack of decorum.” These penalties all involved restricting the offending lady to campus for a period of time proportional to her violation. Flora Lowrey, a student living in the dormitory at the time, describes some of the ‘crimes’ and their penalties:

Restriction to the campus was for a short time if caught chewing gum in public. The girl who rode in a “horseless carriage” on Sunday was campused for a half term. The girl who had dinner with a boy in a “BOOTH” at a downtown cafe did not get off the campus until she left for home at the end of the year. 9

These student-imposed restrictions were in addition to the school bylaws, which included such stipulations as section 8, “Women are not permitted to walk with men in remote or secluded place at any time,” section 13, “All men except S.M.U. students must be approved by director before being received as callers at the Woman’s Building,” and section 1, “No girl or group of girls may be permitted to go to the city or leave the campus at night without a chaperon [a senior girl or adult] or escort.” 10 All departures from campus required approval from Mrs. Hyer, and couples could only leave the campus in groups of four, on the rare occasion it was permitted. 11 These may seem extreme by today’s standards, when SMU doesn’t even have separate floors for men and women, let alone buildings, and the idea of asking President Turner for permission to go downtown seems absurd, but the school was much smaller in 1915, and these weren’t unusual regulations for the time.

Despite the restrictions, students still had active social lives in and around the Women’s Building. One school mandated aspect of student’s lives was the mandatory Chapel four days a week in what we today call McCord Auditorium. 12 The Women’s Building itself had what the University Catalogue in 1917 described as, “A large reception room of rare beauty (which) furnishes a comfortable living room for the occupants of the building and their visitors.” 13 Corita Owen, a student living in the dormitory at the time, describes a Junior-Senior Formal held there, which consisted of “…piano selections by Dean Van Katwijk, a violin solo by Francine Foster, several songs by the quartet, and a reading chosen from Henry IV and given by Paul Conner.” 14 Many piano selections were played in the reception room and in the basement, as these were the only practice rooms for the school of music. 15 There were other structured activities for students, including YMCA and YWCA groups, debate competitions, the Arden Club (the university’s theater program), publishing the student paper then known as “The Campus,” and glee clubs. 16 Such events tended to be relatively formal, but most of the campus was still very rustic. Much of the land was covered in Johnson grass, and Turtle Creek ran where today the business school, Owen Fine Arts Center, and Perkins Chapel now stand. A small copse of trees ran along it, which was dubbed the Arden forest, after a Shakespearian play with a forest of the same name was put on there in 1916. 17 One student mentions being pulled out of class by her friend to see a family of baby bunnies she’d discovered. Another, Flora Lowrey, described scouting, “around in the Johnson grass to hunt for wild flowers which we cut and put in buckets and tubs to decorate the stage of the chapel, now Arden Hall.” 18 In addition, several professors kept horses, cows, and other animals on the campus, including Dr. Hyer, who had a pig pen within smelling distance of the Women’s Building, much to some student’s chagrin. 19

However, student’s social lives weren’t truly limited to these prim and proper activities. Frances Ostatt mentions secretly teaching a male classmate how to dance in Arden Playhouse, which, as she says, “would have been most emphatically frowned on, in those days, had it ever been discovered.” 20 Rather more dangerously, one prank on the lawn outside the Women’s Building involved a couple of male students lighting a stick of dynamite near a mare which was grazing in the grass. When the dynamite went off, it apparently rattled every window that side of the building, and scared the horse into such a flight that it was never found again. 21 Similarly devious was the frequent and intentional derailing of, “The Dinkey.” This was a small train car which ran along a rail spur to help students departures from campus reach the university. Students called the driver Dad Johnson. Several students realized that if they jumped at the right time, the Dinkey would derail so they would have to lift and realign it instead of going to class. 22 A non-sanctioned parody newspaper, released on April first starting in 1917, called itself “The Dinkey” after this train car.
Only six days after the paper Dinkey's release, the United States entered the first World War, and the mood on campus shifted. Many students formed an impromptu training drill squad the day after the announcement, and it was arranged for many seniors to fast-track their degrees when they went to the war. This burst of patriotism was also the reason the flagpole was given as a class gift. Not every aspect of the war was taken seriously, however. Some soldiers training at Love Field would make 'emergency landings' where the health center now sits to see their girlfriends. W. W. Schuessler mentions that once, one pilot didn’t quite make the mark, and got his plane stuck in the trees and hedges behind Dallas Hall. Despite the changes, SMU remained cheerful, with one dean describing it as a “singing” college in 1917.

The dormitory’s time as the Women’s Building was relatively short lived. In 1926, after Virginia and Snider Halls were completed, the Women’s Building became a men’s dormitory. It was renamed Atkins Hall, after Bishop James Atkins, who first argued for the founding of a Methodist University in the Southern United States. However, Atkins Hall was rarely exclusively a dormitory. In 1928, it is listed as holding 136 men, with the west wing set aside for the School of Engineering’s classes and drafting rooms. During its period as Atkins Hall, the building increasingly became a catch-all for any departments and organizations which needed space. By 1933, the west wing included, “the School of Engineering, Chemistry Department, Journalism Department, and S.M.U. Student’s Publishing Company.” Chemistry was held in the basement, and this didn’t always go well for the students living in Atkins. Durwood Fleming describes one incident, when “the word had leaked to the dormitory and that they had turned on the fire hose to repel the attackers and that the water was coming down the stairway. I asked her why she had not demanded that the,output...
the students stop this foolishness at once. She replied that she could not go up there because the students did not have any clothes on, so would I come over and quell the riot. 45

In the basement dining room, a less serious joke went wrong. Archie Walstad, a member of the football team living in the building, described the incident, “when the football bunch used to eat at the training table in the basement at Atkins Hall; we kind of got in the habit; when someone left the table from eating we would give them a shower; of biscuits - bones or anything that would throw good.” 46 However, this backfired when President Seleman walked into the dining room to congratulate the team on a victory, just as Archie was leaving. He was caught in the crossfire. 47 Pranks ran rampant at the time, and they certainly weren’t limited to Atkins Hall. Student Wilson Crook’s list of Phi Delta’s exploits included imported boa constrictors which escaped into the house, a cock fighting ring, and a very aggressive pit-bull purchased from a dog fight. 48 He also described the decor of a party put on by Cycen Fjoder, an elite honor society. The party was turtle themed, with a live snapping turtle on the head table. The students etched the name of a notoriously cranky teacher into its shell, and left the turtle in the main fountain the next morning. 49 Al Harting describes some additional antics from his time as a student, including a newspaper scandal where the local Dallas papers were stealing from “The Campus’s” editing room to publish its stories first, until the editor of “The Campus” left a fake article on his desk as a trap. 50 However, the largest scandal of the time was what most accounts called the illegal dance. Dancing was forbidden on campus as being too risqué, so most fraternities and sororities had alumni sponsor off campus ‘receptions,’ which were secret dances. However, one night the students organized a huge secret dance on campus. When it was discovered, the power was cut to the building, but students lit up the interior with car headlights shining through the windows. This worked until the dean arrived with the police in tow. 51 Rebellious behavior wasn’t limited to the students, however. Dr. Hyer was present at the Cycen Fjoder secret meetings. 52 and there’s one mention of a professor leading a field trip to a “Strip-tease place.” 53

Social life during this period was dominated by fraternities and sororities. The only way to go to dances and similar social events was to be a member. Wallace H. Savage explains, “I don’t believe in my day at S.M.U. any right-minded person stayed out of a fraternity or sorority who could get in and pay the fees.” 54 He was not in Greek life, and was thus known as a “barb,” which he described as, “slightly lower in caste than a pariah.” 55 You had to be involved in Greek life to even be considered for any class officer positions. The situation became so bad that the university organized a faculty committee to investigate in 1933. 56 They learned that the girls not in Greek Life were socially ostracized, and they discovered the true nature of the alumni receptions, which were actually dances put on at various hotels and clubs around Dallas. 57 The committee ultimately recommended that dancing be allowed on campus, but this wouldn’t occur for another six years.

The fight to dance wasn’t the only struggle on campus in the 1930’s. Atkins Hall was home to some of SMU’s earliest attempts to resist the Jim Crow laws enforcing racism in Texas at the time. “The Campus” editor Kerryn King describes one embarrassing event in SMU’s history:

It was necessary for the Student Council to rescind an invitation extended to the National Student Federation of America to have its annual convention on the campus of Southern Methodist University during the Christmas holidays of 1936. Bear in mind this was only a few weeks before this convention was due to take place. 58

Two years prior, the organization had voted in Baltimore that they would tolerate no discrimination by race or economic status. However, Texas law enforced, “the separation of all so-called colored and white people in all public conveyances, public buildings and so forth,” which would not have allowed students of color to, “ride with and sit beside other delegates, on the trains, street cars, or even elevators.” 59 The university’s hands were tied, as they couldn’t follow the organizations’ regulations without violating Texas state law.

However, some small movements towards progress were made at the same time. In 1927 Theodore Yoder, a student living in Atkins Hall, bought in a national speaker to come speak on Jesus at Atkins Hall, and he invited students from all the surrounding colleges, including one for black students. 60 He had hoped Mrs. Gardner would provide food for everyone, but she said they couldn’t eat together, because, “if we had black students eating with our white students, word would spread and the Church would send a committee to investigate what was going on at SMU.” 61 The school’s business manager gave a similar answer, so Theodore bought everyone sandwiches and had a picnic outside for all the students. 62 Fortunately, the school has come a long way since 1927. The energetic lifestyle changed somewhat with the onset of WWII. There were major shortages of supplies and school spirit. Social life took a hit, as all the men left campus to join the war effort, with the exception of the navy V-12s living in Virginia & Snider Halls, and later in Atkins Hall. 63 During the war, since there was no student union, everyone went to the post office in Dallas Hall’s basement, or the co-op in Perkins Administration building. 64 Fondren Library was also popular, as it was the only building with air conditioning, but the librarians didn’t appreciate students socializing there. 65 After the war ended, there were still shortages, as many vets went to SMU using the GI bill. This resulted in the creation of a series of temporary shelters and trailers for veterans with families going to the school, called Trailerville, where the south residential quad sits today. 66 The university was extremely short on space, even with the additional temporary barracks purchased from army surplus to house additional students. Some classes had to be placed as late as 10pm to have space for all the new attendees. This resulted in a major wave of construction to catch up with the students’ growth.
numbers, with SMU constructing 10 new buildings in 1950 alone.

After the expansion died down, all the new buildings severely contrasted the run down Atkins Hall. Calls for a major renovation began in 1957, and William P. Clements Jr., a member of SMU’s board of trustees, put up the funds to pay for the renovation. The 1965 renovation ultimately changed the building into a fully administrative/classroom building, and brought its current name: Clements Hall. Dr. Willis Tate promised to name new university facilities after Bishop Atkins, but the facility was canceled, and as of 2018 no building has been named after the bishop. Although its uses were still very eclectic, Clements Hall’s facilities were brought up to date. The departments it housed when it reopened in 1966 were:

The offices of the Deans of The University College and The School of Humanities and Sciences, The University College advisors, the Language Laboratories and language offices, the Department of Education, the Psychological Services Center, the Reading Clinic, the Printing Department, and the Employment and Placement Office.

Two years later, Clements Hall gained the Career Counseling Office. The reception room became two classrooms and a thin study room, and an amphitheater style lecture room was added in the northeast corner of the first floor. The most celebrated addition was a modern language laboratory, which included recording equipment so students could hear themselves enunciate, and tapes of plays and other literature to listen to as practice. In addition, the lab had a closed circuit TV as an early method of digital teaching. After losing the reception room and full time occupants, Clements Hall faded as a social center on campus, but it was still host to various clubs and organizations in the years since the renovation. In the week of Feb 20, 1979, for example, Clements Hall hosted a Calligraphy workshop, the Russian and French Clubs, Canterbury House, and both SMU Republicans and SMU Young Democrats. Clements Hall was also host to the early class registration through the academic counseling office. One year, this resulted in such a mob of students worried about getting into classes, that once students entered the office to sign up for courses, they had to exit through the office window. The next day, registration was moved to McFarlin Auditorium. The biggest scandal of Clements Hall occurred on the 75th anniversary of its construction: The football scandal which involved Clements Hall’s namesake, William P. Clements Jr. When it came out that he had continued to pay to recruit football players for SMU’s team, despite numerous warnings, many students and teachers called for the hall to be renamed. The original name was kept, however.

Today, Clements Hall goes largely unnoticed by most students. The interior has not been updated since the 1960’s, and it resembles a generic high school hallway more than its elegant Georgian exterior. It is certainly far from a social center, with most students preferring the more modern and clean Hughes-Trigg to host club events. The basement Scholar’s Den is an exception, but thanks to the renovations, this is nearly inaccessible from the upper floors. A building that has been such an integral part of Southern Methodist University’s history deserves far better than this ramshackle fate. There’s certainly groups that could put the space to better use were it restored to its former glory. Dedman College has long needed a new classroom building, and if that is created and the Language and Mathematics departments can move there, the building could be renovated to once again become a social hub for the university. Clements Hall has always been a part of the hilltop quadrangle, and it deserves to be maintained as well as any other building so central to our campus, both physically, and historically.

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