

THE ORIGINS OF INTERSCHOLASTIC DEBATE IN A SMALL TOWN IN SOUTH-CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA

by

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H i s t o r y

The history of academic debate at Mechanicsburg began in 1925 when Professor A. Glenn Mower, a member of the high school history department, announced that he was interested in starting both affirmative and negative debate teams at the senior high. Mower was a first year teacher at Mechanicsburg. The previous year he was captain and assistant coach of the Lebanon Valley College negative team and his team won every de-

Torch also reported allegations from the Hebrew Temple team that Mechanicsburg students were spying on the Hebrew Team the previous Sunday as they prepared for the match. The newspaper indicated that the Mechanicsburg coach investigated and found that this was not true. (*Torch*, January 15, 1926)

The national debate topic was not standard until 1928 and each local school formulated their own resolution. The topic for that first round, and for much of the first year, was Resolved: That the Government should own and operate the coal mines." Mechanicsburg traveled to Harrisburg on the 28th to oppose the Hebrew Temple team. Representing Mechanicsburg as members of the Affirmative Team were William Boffenmyer, Richard Marzolf, and Clifford Kiracofe. Harry Berkheimer was the alternate. The judges were the Dauphin County District Attorney, a member of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and a high school principal from a third school.

"Debate in the 20's required fielding a separate affirmative and a negative team."

bate they entered, according to the *Torch*, the Mechanicsburg High School newspaper. The goal for that year, according to the same article, would be to organize matches with other schools in the county that have established debate teams. (*Torch*, November 27, 1925)

The team held their first meeting on December 3, 1925. Mower would be head coach with Miss Aungst, chair of the English department, serving as his assistant and Mr. Barry B. Fehl, the supervising high school principal, as advisor to the team. Nine students attended the first meeting. (*Torch*, December 4, 1925)

Debate in the 20's required fielding a separate affirmative and a negative team. It was common during the period for a team to have either two or three members. It was also common for one school's team to host while the second school's team traveled to another site at the same time. The debates were normally held in the evening and the public was invited. Accounts of the debates indicate that there were many in the community who did attend the public events.

The first match in school history was scheduled for January 21, 1926 against the senior class of the Hebrew Temple, a local Harrisburg school, but the match was postponed until Thursday evening, January 28 because the Mechanicsburg team was not prepared. The

Mechanicsburg lost their first round as the judges awarded the win to the Hebrew team 3-0. (*Torch*, February 12, 1928). The *Torch* article also mentioned that the debate was broadcast live on WHBG radio and that the team traveled to Hershey the following evening but did not discuss the results of that round.

Mechanicsburg won their first round of debate on March 12, 1926. It was a victory for the negative team. Home field advantage may have helped as the team of Hugh Castles, Robert Brunhouse, and William Ritter defeated the team from Lebanon High School at the match held at Mechanicsburg while the affirmative team lost on the same evening in Lebanon. (*Torch*, March 12, 1926)

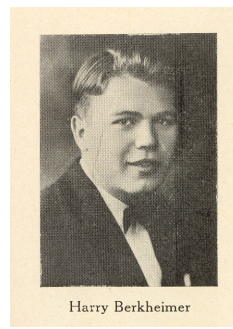
The *Torch* covered the debate very extensively in the first year of its existence. The March 19 edition recounted that "both the affirmative and negative teams of our school started the season in apparently bad form, as victories were slow in coming." The article went on to state that the team was improving and scored double victories against Biglerville on March 18. The article discussed the strategy advanced by the Mechanicsburg team. "Harry Berkheimer opened the argument for M.H.S. and surprised his opponents by giving them questions to be answered. Biglerville fell into the trap." Mechanicsburg won the round, according to the reporter "although Berkheimer was not in his best form and

Marzolf's rebuttal was weak." (*Torch*, March 19, 1926)

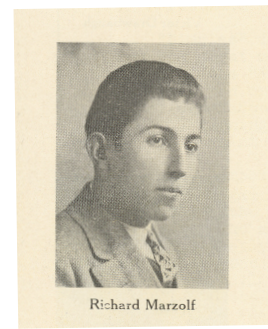
Coach Mowery must have been impressed with the team's success because, according to the March 26, 1926 issue of the *Torch*, he issued "a challenge to any and all schools in the county with debating teams for a dual debate to decide the championship title. Should there be no answer to this challenge, Mechanicsburg will claim the championship in scholastic debating." (*Torch*, March 26, 1926)

Evidently no other team answered the challenge and the team declared themselves county champions. The years record was Affirmative 2-3 and Negative 3-2. (*Torch*, April 16, 1926).

After the first year, Professor Mower must have moved to another assignment or left the school districts employment entirely because neither he nor interscholastic debate are mentioned again for the next few years. Further issues of the *Torch* cover debates in classes and between classes organized by Mr. Robb (*Torch*, December 23, 1926; March 4, 1927) but failed to mention interscholastic debate until it was revived at Mechanicsburg in 1934.



Harry Berkheimer



Richard Marzolf

Harry Berkheimer and Richard Marzolf were two of the original debaters, Class of 1926. The team debated the 1925-1926 season.



Mechanicsburg HS 1925-1926

(Bill Murray, an NFL diamond coach, is a member of the national debate topic wording committee.)



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