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Hindsight is 20/19

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1990s: Fallen Wombyn

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Hindsight is 20/19
1990s: Fallen Wombyn

JULIA LOGAN: Welcome back to *Hindsight is 20/19*. The podcast where we look at 250 years of Dartmouth history through 25 objects from the Library's archival collections. I'm Julia Logan, I'll be your host for this episode.

The Sex Issue; Taking the Reins Women & Leadership; Empowerment; Sounding our Barbaric Yawp; Inter Actions; A Look Inside: Public and Private Lives. These are just a few of the issue titles from Spare Rib, a student run publication which first hit the proverbial newsstands in the Spring of 1992.

Claire Unis, class of 1995 and the second editor in chief of the 90s feminist newspaper characterizes Spare Rib as “the love child of Molly Phinney '92 and a devoted staff of Dartmouth women and men. [Molly] envisioned a publication that would encourage and improve communication between the sexes while recognizing and celebrating the diverse talents of Dartmouth women, offer a forum for their ‘different politics, different social priorities and ideals, and altogether different methods of expressions.’”

Printed termly in newspaper form, a little larger than the size of The Dartmouth printed today, the publication offers its readers a little bit of everything: Interviews, editorials, features on Arts, Sports, and local and global stories, creative submissions of poetry and fiction and a regularly occurring gossip column called, Spare Ribbings, which was self-acknowledged among the editors as the most controversial part of the paper. But more on that later. Each issue focuses on a favored theme. The premier issue's theme, communication. The front page reads in bold, black typescript, *DartSpeech How Well Do We Communicate?* The issue opens with a profile piece on “Four seniors [who] were asked to talk candidly about their perceptions of relationships at Dartmouth.” Articles cover gender dynamics in the classroom, then Dean of the College, Lee Pelton's new plan to educate Dartmouth men against sexual assault, and a piece written by Sarah Pettus titled (*Jock*) *Bitch Session*, Pettus, begins her article with a personal reflection. “Four years of college sports has left me both blessed and bitter, exuberant and livid. I have seen some great things happening in women's sports, but I have also been frustrated by the stagnancy of long overdue changes that would really propel us forward.”

The gossip column, Spare Ribbings, as I mentioned earlier is in the style of a seen and heard. Printing quotes that were overheard on campus, followed by the location, date and time of the interchange. These quotes are not humorous, nor do they highlight positive interactions on campus. They are offensive and problematic. Unis writes the following about “spare ribbings”, “In fairness, this is our one weak point in newspaper ethics, but one which we have accepted for the sake of retaining them. Sexists remarks, no matter how offhanded are not harmless; even “in context”, a spare ribbing is offensive and/or misguided. Exposing these quotes at least raises awareness that not everyone appreciates or dismisses them.” Editors require context, time, place and date of every quote they receive and names are omitted, due to problems with accuracy.

The editors are forthright with their acknowledgement of the potential inaccuracy of overheard quotes and their reasoning of why they choose to solicit and publish them. If there is any doubt of “the temporal and physical context” it is advised to leave the quote out. As I read through the ribbings column almost 30 years later, taking in every word with a grain of salt, they are still

Hindsight is 20/19
1990s: Fallen Wombyn

jarring and problematic. Perhaps the most difficult realization is that these hurtful words were being said by students to students. I am not going to read them aloud but rather reiterate what the editors said themselves. They are sexist and alarming. Even with factoring in inaccuracies, for me they still serve as a glimpse into the campus climate of the 1990's. If you would like to see for yourself all issues of Spare Rib are available in Rauner Special Collections Library.

The paper covers heavy topics of sexual assault, harassment, gender inequality, and discrimination but the publication's staff, known internally as "Ribbers" also try to bring a sense of humor to the publication. Just one example of where this is evidenced is in the staff list printed inside the issue. For example, "Molly Phinney, editor in chief. After her name, printed in italics is "Fallen Wombyn", spelled W-O-M-B-Y-N; Auguste Goldman, representing the male minority on the staff and Publisher, is referred to as "patriarch"; Andrea Greer, Alison Burrell, they are the Ladies of the Night, the copy editresses.

Phinney, Unis, and the rest of the *Ribbers* considered Spare Rib to be "a manifestation of all that women of Dartmouth have accomplished in the last twenty years, the challenges that face us now, and the victories we hope to gain in the coming years." The Statement of Purpose found on page 3 of the first issue reads:

The dialogue here involves both men and women, for it will only be when we can come together to recognize the distinct talents of Dartmouth women, as well as root out the conflicts that still lurk, that we can all share the community comfortably. The mythical Eve discovered and revered knowledge, and Spare Rib appreciates that small step of the first woman to educate herself and make space for herself in a world of men...

Spare Rib will recognize the achievements of women across the spectrum... There is room here for creative works and investigative pieces; for art and sports stories as well as news; for humor and seriousness. We are multifaceted and multitalented, and to bring all of our talents together can only help us celebrate our difference and unite our strengths.

Spare Rib wasn't the only feminist publication of the 90s. Nor the first. *Women's Writes*, a literary collection by women was started in 1985. *Womyn's Re/view*, women being spelled W-O-M-Y-N was a rejection of the "conventional spellings which refer to womyn as a subset of men" also started in the late 80s. The publication intended to "create a space for feminist thought and to break women's historical silence." It welcomed stories, articles and poems written by women of the Upper Valley. And then there was *Inner Bitch*, a zine, which presented a more radical take on women's and gender issues than its contemporary *Spare Rib*. Here is a teaser, in form of *Inner Bitch's* statement of purpose. It reads:

Deep within you, beneath the strained smiles, the cordiality, the good grades, the conceding laughter, YOU HAVE AN INNER BITCH... Well, this whole rag is in honor of that Inner Bitch. We want to help her grow and become as strong and as bitchy as womanly possible. We want to give her the power to speak her mind. Because silence is a kind of death. It keeps a part of you dormant, like a leg that's permanently fallen asleep. And it makes it easier for the next woman to get hurt, and the next and the next.

Hindsight is 20/19
1990s: Fallen Wombyn

But let's get back to Spare Rib. The birth of the publication coincided with the 20th anniversary of coeducation at Dartmouth. The second issue, *20 years of coeducation Many Sighs, many cheers* pays homage to the women that came before them, revisits the early years of women on campus and evaluates the college's position 20 years later. Featured in the issue is an article reporting on the 1975 Hums contest and the student production, *You Laugh*, which was performed by 7 women students. You might remember the contest and the performance from our 1970s episode, *Daughters of Dartmouth*. Hosts Laura Barrett and Peter Carini tell the story of coeducation and the physical and verbal attacks that the early women of Dartmouth experienced. Their story highlights the united action of 7 women who stood up and resisted their treatment with "humor and anger". As Carini states, the most powerful aspect of the performance is the way the women use their harasser's own words to make their point."

20 years later, women continue to bring awareness to their treatment, to their experiences, to their needs and voices with humor and anger just as their fore-mothers did. We see this within the pages of *Spare Rib* and *Inner Bitch*. We see this from the simple fact that these publications existed. It is important to note that during this time period there were other publications like *In Your Face!* which brought awareness to LGBTQIA+ community, as well as *Uncommon Threads*, which was an "anti-racist, anti-homophobic, anti-sexist and anti-classist" publication.

In the 90's President Freedman was moving Dartmouth out of a conservative decade and towards a more progressive future but issues like racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia that the institution had been dealing with for decades and in some cases since its establishment were still present.

And now, close to 30 years after Molly Phinney's love child made its debut we are still talking about it. While the issues reported on by the Ribbers remain cogent on campus there has been change. Over the course of the fall term, I had the opportunity to work with Giavanna Munafo's Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Class, #MeToo: Intersectionality, Hashtag Activism & Our Lives. The students worked closely with archival material throughout the term and integrated the materials into their class projects. I am pleased to see how shocked they were to discover how women were treated at Dartmouth both as students and faculty members in the years leading up to coeducation and as recently as the early 2000s. Their reactions indicate that the experience of women on campus today has come a long way from the "many sighs" and "many cheers".

Hindsight is 20/19 is a production of the Dartmouth College Library, and is produced as part of the celebration of Dartmouth's 250th anniversary, highlighting selected objects from Rauner Special Collections library. This episode was written, directed and engineered by Julia Logan, and produced by Peter Carini. Additional sound engineering by Joshua Shaw. A special thanks to our voice actors, Caitlin Birch and Myranda Fuentes. Thank you for listening. We hope you continue to enjoy Hindsight is 20/19.

Hey podcast listeners, it's me again. The following songs were used in this episode: Gaena by Blue Dot Sessions, Surfing Day by Marcos Bolanos, and Deluge by Cellophane Sam. All songs were sourced from the Free Music Archive.