JAY SATTERFIELD: Welcome back to *Hindsight is 20/19*, the podcast where we look at 250 years of Dartmouth’s history through 25 objects from the library’s archives, one per decade. I’m Jay Satterfield. I’ll be your host for this episode.

So, I have here in my hands a piece of wood. It is about 7 inches long, just half an inch wide and maybe a quarter inch thick. There is a little cream colored paint along one side, but the other sides are exposed wood. It has splintered off of something, but you can’t tell what it is. If you found it by your wood stove, you’d think it was a great piece of kindling. If you found it out on the Green, you might be inclined to be a good citizen and pick it up and throw it away.

But it’s here in Special Collections, with a custom-made clamshell box—it is a really nice box with a little paper insert that helps you remove the stick, and a square of linen that wraps around the artifact. Did I just say artifact…? Well, I guess it is not trash anymore, but, really, what the hell is it?

There is an envelope in the box as well. It once held the wood fragment. Written on the envelope is “Splinter of wood from goal post of famous Dartmouth Yale football game in 1935.” Well, now we are getting somewhere… we know what it is, but really, I am still feeling a bit underwhelmed.

Now let’s take a look at “the D,” the student newspaper from 1935 to see why this game might matter. The banner headline across the front-page sums it up pretty well “Indian Football Machine Surges to Victory over Yale, 14-6, for First time in 19 tries;” ”College Stages Greatest Victory Celebration in Dartmouth History.” Ok. You get that? Dartmouth had played Yale for 50 years and had NEVER beaten them. Finally, the Yale Jinx, as it was known, had ended. Again, I can see how it was a big deal at the time, and I can appreciate some of the emotional attachment, but a student saving a fragment of the goalpost for all of these years then mailing it to Special Collections? And we kept it!? Don’t get me wrong, I grew up in Nebraska when the Big Red were wining national championships, I *get* big time college football, but Dartmouth?

What most people don’t know is just how big football was on campuses like Dartmouth in the 1930s. We relegate the current Ivy’s to a pretty lowly position, football-wise—they aren’t in the Bowl Championship Series, and ESPN’s College Gameday isn’t being broadcast live from the Green. “Go Big Green” is not immediately recognizable to the typical football fan like “Boomer Sooner” or “Roll Tide Roll!” But… if different decisions had been made…

[Music]

There are two letters here from 1936, a year after that Dartmouth Yale game, that might shake your understanding of College Football—at least they shook mine. The first is from a representative of Hull House in Chicago. The Chicago Bears were looking for a “suitable opponent” for a charity football game at the end of the season, and they thought of Dartmouth. Lest you think the Bears were having on off year, they won the championship in 1936. And Dartmouth was seen as a suitable opponent. The second letter is more powerful. It is from the president of Cal Berkeley inviting Dartmouth to the 1937 Rose Bowl. Holy shit, did I just say the Rose bowl? The Granddaddy of them all?

Yep, but get this, Dartmouth turned it down. You see, the Rose Bowl fell during the last weeks of classes, and Dartmouth President Ernest Hopkins reasoned that a trek across the continent by train right after Christmas break, with the distraction of a football game, would necessarily hurt the young men’s studies, so it wasn’t appropriate. Let me say that again, Hopkins turned down the Rose Bowl because it would hurt the players’ academics. Remember, I am from Nebraska—something here just doesn’t compute.

[Music]

Okay, now think of the term Ivy League. What does it elicit? Old schools with ivy covered walls, elite education, “the best and the brightest,” social success. Football probably wasn’t the first thing to come into your mind, but the Ivy League was formed as a football conference and many of the schools that are now part of the Ivy League helped define modern College football. It was a really big deal on the campuses and it was national news. These teams competed with the best in the country and were national powerhouses.

The Ivy League came late into college sports. Talk of forming a league had kicked around for years. Informal arrangements had been made and term “Ivy League” had been bandied about by sports writers and in the pages of college papers. An editorial in the D from 1936 noted that “The Ivy League exist[ed] already in the minds of a good many of those connected with football.” The schools involved were united by common interests and were “in a particularly advantageous position to assume leadership for the preservation of the ideals of intercollegiate athletics.”

But there was considerable resistance to creating a league. Football was a cash cow for several of these schools and a formal league meant sharing the profits and creating equal home and away schedules. Get this, before the formation of the league, Brown played Harvard every year for 36 years, but never had a home game! Their stadium was too small to turn the profit that Harvard Stadium could generate.

It wasn’t until 1954 that the League was actually formed and the “Ivy League” was transformed from a bit of sports slang into an actual conference. What was the impact?

Now we are getting into the speculative part—where a student could write a terrific paper.

If you think about Dartmouth in the mid 1930s, it is a small liberal arts college with the professional schools attached. It drew from a national pool of students, but about 65% of the students came from just five states: New Hampshire, New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts.

But by 1965, what was Dartmouth? A nationally known elite school drawing students from across the country. And by 1985? An internationally acclaimed institution drawing top students from around the world (and finally co-ed, I should mention).

Now, think of Dartmouth and think of Williams. The commonalities in the 1930s are striking: born in the 18th century, somewhat out in the boonies in New England, concentrating on undergraduate education, and drawing good students from the Atlantic coast. But there was one big difference—the quality of their football programs and their ability to fill the Yale Bowl on a Saturday in November.

How about the two schools today? They are both top notch academic institutions, still rural, and still committed to excellence in undergraduate education. But, my guess is that if you poll people in Germany, China, or India, you’ll find one school is far better known. Why? One has an amazingly successful brand attached to it. Why is that? Well, one school had a really great football team at a very crucial period of its institutional history, that helped it become associated with some of the best schools in the world. The phrase “I attend an Ivy League institution” is very powerful.

There is a luck factor here that a lot of people are afraid to acknowledge. For most successful people and institutions there are moments in their history where luck played a major factor in their success. I don’t think Dartmouth was considering the fact that having a good football team could one day translate into the adoption of a brand name synonymous with high academic achievement. The element of chance played a key role—but there is a fragility to that as well. Chance gives, but it can also take away, and a school like Dartmouth has to always be rebuilding itself to live up to the promise of that brand.

I want to be clear that this is not all luck, or solely a case of having a good football team. Hopkin’s rejection of the Rose Bowl and his emphasis on academics helped to position Dartmouth as a place that not only had a good team, but also had a deep respect for academic discipline that was not going to be undermined by sports. It was an academic institution with a good football team, not, as some have charged about big-time programs of today, a football team with a school attached. That was a philosophy shared by the other schools forming the Ivy League. Still, one has to wonder what direction Dartmouth would have taken had it not fielded the teams of the 1920s though 1940s that could draw fans and fill stadiums. Would they have entered the Ivy League? If not, would they have the same brand recognition they have today?

Fortunately for Dartmouth, the brand stuck, but things changed with football. And that change is foreshadowed by Hopkin’s rejection of the Rose Bowl, where he put academics above football and financial gain.

So, let’s turn back to our splinter of wood. It means more to me now. First, it was a window into how important football was on campus, but then it was a catalyst for a broader narrative. I love this stick—I first used it in a class. I laid it on the table and asked the students what it was. Then I kept tossing documents on the table, and we kept building context. With each new document, the stick took on more meaning. At that time, I saw it as a kind of talisman representing the football glory of Dartmouth’s past—when it did not just vie for the Ivy League championship, but was a national powerhouse. But, really, it’s so much more. It is a bit of kindling to light a fire of speculating on the causes of Dartmouth’s rapid ascension. The school changed so much between 1930 and 1980. And this stick helps to tell the story. In the right context, it can be encrusted with culture and has the power to make a bit of history very real.

*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 the Rauner Special Collections Library. This episode was written and directed by Jay Satterfield, and produced by Sara Holsten, our sound engineer was Laura Barrett. Thank you for listening and we hope you will continue to enjoy *Hindsight is 20/19*.