MORGAN SWAN: 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 archival collections, one object per decade. I’m Morgan Swan and I’ll be your host for this episode.

The first blows came early on the morning of January 21st of 1986, long after the memorial to Martin Luther King Jr. had concluded on the previous day. Lillian Llacer and Kim Porteus, both members of the class of 1988, were asleep in a small decrepit shanty in the middle of the Hanover green that had been christened “Blackburn Hall.” Other shanties sat empty nearby, their unappealing mishmash of scrap-wood and metal meant to serve as a disturbing and visceral illustration of the effects of South African apart-tied. The homely shacks had been sitting on the Green now for over two months, their names -- “Mandela Hall,” “Biko Memorial Hall,” and “Blackburn Hall” -- paying homage to various activists who had struggled for decades to overthrow the white supremacist political party that enforced South Africa’s racist system of laws.

The shanties had been built by the Dartmouth Community for Divestment, or the DCD, a student organization committed to the college selling off anything in its investment portfolio that was connected to companies doing business with the South African government or in South Africa. When the shanties first went up, they had stood as a very powerful and visible rebuke of Dartmouth’s board of trustees, who were loath to commit to radical and complete divestiture. They had also served as a site for debate and discussion surrounding the administration’s obligation to support social justice in South Africa.

But now, with Winter Carnival fast approaching, and the temperatures making it difficult to engage in any sort of lengthy outside discussion, many members of the Dartmouth community felt that the shantytown had outlived its purpose. In fact, unbeknownst to the rest of the campus, the DCD had recently met and reached a consensus to remove the shanties on January 27th, instead placing a single shanty on the lawn of Parkhurst Hall as a continuing reminder to the administration of their inaction.

The DCD would never get the chance. Shortly before three in the morning, twelve students with sledgehammers climbed down from a rented flatbed truck and began to pound the shanties into pieces. Llacer and Porteus, startled from their sleep by the sounds of splintering wood and shattering glass, at first decided to stay in their shanty but then decided to make a run for it so that they could alert the authorities. The assault on the shanties was over almost as quickly as it had begun, leaving behind scattered debris and broken boards. The students who had taken it upon themselves to clear the green of the uncomfortable and unsightly slum identified themselves as members of a group named the Committee to Beautify the Green Before Winter Carnival. Tellingly, many of the ad hoc group’s members were also on the staff of the Dartmouth Review, the sole conservative student publication on campus who had published an article only a week earlier about the administration’s inaction regarding the shanties. In that article, to her credit, the author had acknowledged that apartheid was a “wicked problem,” even though she would soon join her colleagues in the assault on the shanties.

Apartheid. An ugly word, for those who know its meaning. In brief, it was the name of a system of institutionalized racial segregation that existed in the countries of South African and its colonized neighbor South West Africa (now the country of Namibia). The laws of apartheid, first formally codified in South Africa in 1949, were a vestige of white colonial power in Africa and enforced by the white-ruled National Party in South Africa. Apartheid enforced segregation in these countries on both a small and grand scale, barring black South Africans from attending the same social events as white people or from conducting business in designated “white” spaces. Apartheid-centered legislation forbade interracial marriages (or even sex between a European and “non-European” and established racial classifications based on the color of one’s skin or perceived ethnicity, which had a direct impact upon where one could live or one’s level of access to government services. Apartheid persisted in South Africa until 1994, when the power of the Nationalist Party was broken and Nelson Mandela was elected as South Africa’s first black president.

The road to an actual democracy in South Africa, and the elimination of a racist system of laws, was in part due to the efforts of anti-apartheid activists around the world, who had been working against the prejudicial policy since at least 1959. The strategy enacted by these activists, many of whom were exiles from South Africa, was simple: countries who believed in the moral depravity of apartheid should withdraw their support from South Africa by not purchasing their exports or doing business with the African nation. However, here in the United States, the federal government initially balked at taking steps to isolate South Africa economically. So, instead, in 1977, US protestors began to lobby individual companies and institutions directly through an organized campaign that was centered on a set of principles called the Sullivan Principles. These principles were generated by Leon Sullivan, an African-American minister who was also a member of the board of trustees for General Motors. GM was the largest employer of Black South Africans at the time and Sullivan was committed to using his clout to encourage the elimination of apartheid. There were originally six Sullivan principles that a company was expected to demand for its employees as a condition for doing business:

1. Non-segregation of the races in all eating, comfort, and work facilities.
2. Equal and fair employment practices for all employees.
3. Equal pay for all employees doing equal or comparable work for the same period of time.
4. Initiation of and development of training programs that will prepare, in substantial numbers, blacks and other nonwhites for supervisory, administrative, clerical, and technical jobs.
5. Increasing the number of blacks and other nonwhites in management and supervisory positions.
6. Improving the quality of life for blacks and other nonwhites outside the work environment in such areas as housing, transportation, school, recreation, and health facilities.

These six principles, with an additional seventh introduced in 1984, in theory made it impossible for any company who agreed to them to continue to support South Africa’s pro-apartheid government. In the same spirit, on college campuses across the US, organizers were working with students to urge their administrations to “divest” or to stop investing their endowment funds in companies that operated in conflict with, or refused to formally agree to, the Sullivan principles. The first prominent university to completely eliminate support for the South African economy was Hampshire College in 1977, and many other colleges and university followed suit over the next decade.

At Dartmouth, students began protesting against apartheid against as soon as 1978, primarily through divestment. At the time, it was estimated that 30-50% of Dartmouth’s endowment was invested in companies that did business with South Africa. Still, not much significant change occurred well into the 1980s, as numerous faculty, staff, and students on campus continued their protest of the college’s indirect support of apartheid.

At this point, it is tempting to cast the Dartmouth Trustees, or President McLaughlin, in the role of the villains. But in hindsight, it’s important to acknowledge that the situation was more complicated than it might have seemed. For one, the trustees weren’t turning a deaf ear to the concerns of the Dartmouth community, and they did begin to take steps to respond. In 1984, the trustees began to make incremental changes to Dartmouth’s investment policy, and in 1985 they voted not to invest in banks loaning money to the South African government.

However, by then, campus protests against apartheid had reached a fever pitch at universities and colleges all across the United States, Dartmouth included. On April 29, two hundred and fifty students, faculty and community members rallied outside of Parkhurst Hall, the college administration building, and called upon the trustees to completely and fully divest. The very next day, the trustees approved a clarification of policy that would require all companies with interests in South Africa to affirm an anti-apartheid stance within a year’s time or be removed from the college’s endowment portfolio. Still, this sort of action wasn’t radical or swift enough in the eyes of the students, and their peers at other colleges around the country agreed.

In October of that same year, Columbia University became the first Ivy League institution to divest itself completely of any economic connections with South Africa. Soon after, on October 11th, anti-apartheid activist Dennis Brutus came to the Dartmouth campus and spoke to hundreds of protestors at a solidarity rally. A few weeks after that, on November 15th, the shanties appeared on the green. President McLaughlin, although he announced his preference that the shanties come down, emphasized that there was no timeline for their removal as long as they remained “a center of honest dialogue.” A little more than two months later, the Committee to Beautify the Green took matters into its own hands.

Ironically, the group’s attack on the shanties only served to revive the campus’s commitment to the issue of divestment. The same day as their destruction, over two hundred and fifty students and faculty rallied on the green to protest the vandalism of the structures. The speakers at the event framed the attack as being not just about a rejection of protests against divestment, but also an attack on Martin Luther King Jr. and his legacy. Some speakers used the moment to speak out against other issues including racism, sexism, and homophobia. Rajiv Menon, a member of the class of 1986, encouraged his fellow community members to stop talking about protest and instead act on their beliefs. The next morning, on January 22nd, over 200 students put their money where their mouth was and took over Parkhurst Hall, flooding into the building and taking up residence in the president’s and dean’s offices, the hallways, and the stairwells. Most of them would stay there for the entire day and through the night, until finally, early the next morning, the executive committee of the faculty voted to suspend classes on Friday. In their place, the faculty scheduled a day-long series of discussions on intolerance in the community. By the following Monday, more than fifty proposals to combat racism, violence, and disrespect for diversity on campus had been generated during the teach-in. The attack on the shanties had become about more than just apartheid; it had brought to the surface years of societal ills on campus that now had reached the tipping point for many of the students, faculty, and community members.

But what about apartheid? What about divestment on campus? In a perfect world, or in a perfect narrative, the attack on the shanties and the following protests would have been swiftly followed by the college’s admission of culpability in supporting pro-apartheid business interests and its complete divestment from all such entanglements. The reality, however, is that it took at least another three years, and several more student protests, before the trustees formally voted in the fall of 1989 to abandon all investments that supported apartheid, whether directly or indirectly. The road to systemic change is rarely a short and quick stroll but, rather, a long and often arduous trek. The memory of past milestones, such as the attack on the shanties, can serve as motivation for the continuation of the journey as well as an undeniable monument to past struggles.

With that in mind, we finally turn to today’s object: a rough plank of pine wood, about the length and width of a person’s forearm. It is splintered and cracked and covered with dirt and bright orange paint. The center of the board has a hole through it, the only remaining mark of a long-lost screw or nail. Other than these unremarkable features, there is nothing else about the board to distinguish it or indicate why it has been kept in the college archives. Yet here it is. And its presence bears weight once the story surrounding it is known. This scrap of humble kindling is all that remains of any of the student-built shanties that once stood on the green for two short months during the 1985-1986 academic year. Their presence at the center of campus was brief, but during their tenure there, the shanties became a lightning rod for debate about freedom of speech, valid forms of student protest, equitable enforcement of institutional discipline and, most importantly, the social responsibility of an American college with regard to the abolition of apartheid.

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. This episode was written and directed by Morgan Swan, produced by Laura Barrett, and our sound engineer was Peter Carini.

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