



5-2018

# Nameless in Worthy Deeds: The Scarabbean Society, Victor Davis, and the concentrated nature of campus power

Jarrold Nelson

*University of Tennessee, Knoxville, jnelso47@vols.utk.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_chanhonoproj](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj)

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Other History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Nelson, Jarrod, "Nameless in Worthy Deeds: The Scarabbean Society, Victor Davis, and the concentrated nature of campus power" (2018). *University of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects*.  
[https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_chanhonoproj/2176](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj/2176)

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Tennessee Honors Program at Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects by an authorized administrator of Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [trace@utk.edu](mailto:trace@utk.edu).

Jarrold Nelson  
04-25-2018  
Dr. Richard Pacelle

## Nameless in Worthy Deeds: The Scarabbean Society, Victor Davis, and concentrated nature of campus power

The year was 1915. In Knoxville, Tennessee, the University of Tennessee lacked many of its current architectural and traditional trappings. Neyland Stadium existed as an idea yet to be grafted onto an unfurnished, badly maintained field in the ground. The ziggurat tiers of John C. Hodges Library did not yet rise on campus as one of “the 8 Ugliest University Buildings in America.”<sup>1</sup> Ayres Hall, the symbol of the neo-Gothic revival that now dominates the area, did not exist. However, the man for whom it would be named sat in the office that provided him that honor. Brown Ayres, 12<sup>th</sup> President of the University of Tennessee, presided over a university that had just added medical and dental colleges.<sup>2</sup> It was also home to Ayres’s son, John. John Ayres, a well-liked and ambitious student habituated into thinking about the big issues of his institution, recognized the blandness of his campus before many did. He believed that the school needed a group of dedicated students, specifically men, who were interested in and exceedingly dedicated to the betterment of the University and the creation of a common university spirit. Among the first men John identified for this purpose were Professor Elliott Frost, George Clark, Evan McLean, James Matthews, Van Ochs, R.F. Thomason, Spence Tunnell, Clifton Cates, and Alexander Cameron. All were men chosen to follow the motto of being “Nameless in Worthy Deeds.”<sup>3</sup> It is unknown why or how they settled on the name of their group, but L.R. Hesler later speculated that the group could provide a man “an experience where he can activate his spirit in the direction of improving his moral and emotional nature; where he can learn something from

---

<sup>1</sup> Huber, Hannah. “The 8 Ugliest University Buildings in America.” *Architectural Digest*. Sep. 14, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> The University of Tennessee. “History of the University of Tennessee.” <http://tennessee.edu/history/>

<sup>3</sup> Black Book 1956-1957. Alumni Association Records. AR.0499. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

the stout-bodied scarab beetle, a symbol of his own resurrection.”<sup>4</sup> Whether this is the origin or not, Ayres’s group came to be known as the Scarabbean Senior Society, a portmanteau that would come to dominate some part of the University’s collective consciousness up to the present day.<sup>5</sup> The group continues to exist in some form, operating in secrecy with motives and accomplishments that are unclear to those outside its ranks. However, a picture of its development and history can be formed through the papers of former members, letters, official documents, University archives, organizational records, member rosters, newspaper articles, interviews, and previous investigations. What emerges is a picture of a group that claims credit for many of the institutions and traditions that those who attend the University of Tennessee, Knoxville know as sacred, but whose actual influence outside of networking and relaying the interests of its administrative and faculty aligned members seems scant. This paper shows through investigation and timeline construction how Executive Secretary of the Alumni Association Victor Davis used the structure of the Scarabbean Society to further his own work in making a cohesive series of University traditions for all students, often through taking advantage of the connections the Society provided to student leaders on campus and administrators further up the University bureaucracy.

Such an investigation is warranted due to the wider need to understand exactly how university traditions are made and the inherent power struggle that exists between administrators and students on college campuses across the country. Secret societies similar to the Scarabbean’s exist at many of America’s oldest and most venerated institutions, including Harvard University and Yale University, and have produced men and women at the highest levels of business and

---

<sup>4</sup> Hesler, L.R. “The Scarabbean Society 1915.” Box 19, Office of the University Historian Collection, 1819-1996. AR.0015. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>5</sup> Black, Don. “The Torchbearers with no name...” *The Daily Beacon*. Sep. 28, 2017.

government. What is unknown, however, is what say those societies have over campus life and campus culture. Do they function merely as complex networking groups for students to reach alumni, or as bona fide student administrations? A finding in either direction would have vast implications for the way that students wield collective power on campus. If these societies truly do exert large scale influence over campus culture and life, then questions regarding how just such a concentration of power would be would naturally follow. If not, what purpose do they serve beyond giving a sense of self-inflated grandiosity to their members? While the exact generalizability of the Scarabbean Society's history and practices is unknown, the findings suggest that these societies wield very little influence outside of the pre-existing influence of their faculty or administration members, who actually pull the levers that these societies often claim their student members control and use these groups as easy channels with which to pass administrative ideas onto influential and well known students. Essentially, they are used as launderers, attempting a kind of "doctoring up" of administrative goals into a more palatable version for students. The contrast between the years when Victor Davis was an active member of the society and those after his untimely death provide perhaps the best evidence for this conclusion. In the years before Victor Davis arrived though, its goals did not seem to conflict with that diagnosis at all.

### **Early Society Operation**

To understand how the Scarabbean Society is viewed now, it is necessary to understand its early history. While much of the founding remains mythical, contemporaneous sources lend credence to the basic structure of the legend. Member rosters (known as "black books") from

multiple years list John Ayres as having founded the Society in 1915.<sup>6</sup> An article from a 1920 issue of the University of Tennessee Magazine mentions the Society as having its ideological genesis in an investigation of the student honor system run by Professor Elliott Frost and student representative John Ayres.<sup>7</sup> This comports with former Dean of the College of Liberal Arts L.R. Hesler's short history of the Society from 1975, wherein he listed that the Society "was organized for but one purpose, the furthering of the interests of the University of Tennessee, its traditions and its ideals."<sup>8</sup> While Hesler would not have interacted with Ayres directly during Ayres's time as a student, since Hesler began his nearly 40 year tenure at the University only in 1919, his induction into the Society in 1920 means he was certainly around during the formative years and could speak accurately of its original mission.<sup>9</sup> It is easy to see how an investigation into the standards that the University of Tennessee was holding its highest performing students to could lead to a conversation about using those students to help advance the University's interests, traditions, and ideals.

What is perhaps most surprising about the early Society is their lack of secrecy comparative to how they operate in the present day, as well as the relative tameness of their goals. Indeed, the only thing of note that the Society can be said to have definitively accomplished during the years before Victor Davis's induction was the establishment of the "Scarabbean Scholarship for Sophomores," an award designated for promising sophomores who performed service for the University.<sup>10</sup> This award was very publicly announced and reported on.

---

<sup>6</sup> Black Book 1956-1957. Alumni Association Records. AR.0499. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>7</sup> UT Magazine, 1920. Office of the University Historian Collection 1819-1997. AR.0015. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>8</sup> Hesler, L.R. "The Scarabbean Society 1915." Box 19, Office of the University Historian Collection, 1819-1996. AR.0015. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>9</sup> Hesler, L.R. "A Kind of Bio-Chronology." Box 1, L.R. Hesler Collection, 1888-1970. AR.0078. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>10</sup> Description of the Scarabbean Sophomore Scholarship, Dec. 1916. Box 19, Office of the University Historian Collection 1819-1997. AR.0015. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

At the same time, the Society was listing all its members in each annual copy of *The Volunteer*, the old University yearbook. Further inspection of these yearbooks in University Archives revealed the official 1919 copy to have been vandalized, with the Society's membership roll torn out.<sup>11</sup> Despite this, digital copies remain as testaments to the early Society's openness and recognition of its members.

This recognition was by design, as the Society seemed to incentivize men to be well-known, public, and extremely active on campus. The description of the sophomore award mentions the Society using an induction system based on points, with the 15 highest scoring senior men being inducted every year.<sup>12</sup> Investigation revealed a single copy of what appears to be a record of this point system, with differing achievements on campus being assigned specific point values. What stands out most clearly is that the most public facing positions are almost universally awarded more points. The President of the All Students Club (ASC), a predecessor organization to the Student Government Association, received the most points possible for a single position, with 75 points awarded on the basis of that position alone. The football team captains each received 65 points, with decreasing point values assigned to less popular sports' team captains. Class presidents also found themselves with significant point increases as they moved up in age.<sup>13</sup> While the document itself lists these point values as having been assigned based on the demands of "Leadership," "Responsibility," and "Service," it is hard to see how any man selected by this system would be "Nameless in Worthy Deeds" given its emphasis on elected and public facing positions rather than community work or academic achievement.

---

<sup>11</sup> Researcher notes. Picture link included in the Appendices.

<sup>12</sup> Description of the Scarabean Sophomore Scholarship, Dec. 1916. Box 19, Office of the University Historian Collection 1819-1997. AR.0015. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>13</sup> "The Point System Scale." Box 3, Alumni Association Records. AR.0104. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

The only other significant accomplishment of the Society in these years is also one of extreme grandiosity and an almost revolutionarily mythic quality. As claimed by L.R. Hesler's history, the construction of Neyland Stadium and the development of Shields-Watkins Field is, at its core, the responsibility of the Scarabbean Society. Hesler says that, despite the initial investment of W.S. Shields (which the University recognizes as the genesis of the idea), the project stalled due to lack of labor. This languishment was apparently solved when MacGregor Smith, a member of the Society as acknowledged in member rolls, rallied students on a day without classes to finish the landscaping and preparation of the field so that the project could move forward.<sup>14</sup> However, no other credible documentation of the incident could be found by the researcher, and the event remains unlisted in any official recounting of the stadium and field's construction.

Thus, the evidence suggests that in its early years, the Society seems to have existed as a small dedicated group of senior men and faculty advisors at the University, all interested in creating some sort of honored group of respected and influential men on campus who were rewarded for their achievements and prior recognition by peers. There was the (potential) odd foray into collective action, but it seemed mostly focused on the uplift of recognized, well-known senior men.<sup>15</sup> Up to 15 were selected each year, with promising upstarts tapped for consideration during their sophomore year with the presentation of a small scholarship. The actions of these men seem to stand on their own rather than because of their involvement with the Society, while entrance into the Society was based on a point system that rewarded those already standing out on campus. At the same time, faculty advisors such as L.R. Hesler and

---

<sup>14</sup> Hesler, L.R. "The Scarabbean Society 1915." Box 19, Office of the University Historian Collection, 1819-1996. AR.0015. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>15</sup> "Men" is a gendered term here. The Society did not have a documented female member until 1974. A deeper examination of the gender dynamics within this and other societies of its type is warranted. Black, Don. "The Torchbearers with no name..." *The Daily Beacon*. Sep. 28, 2017.

Elliott Frost connected these men with administration and were themselves admitted on some unspecified basis.<sup>16</sup> With the arrival of Victor Davis though, the agenda and accomplishments of the Society began to increase exponentially, and the lens through which the Society allows a view of how campus power is distributed becomes much more focused.

### **Early Davis Accomplishments**

It is hard to overstate the impact that Victor Davis had on both the Society and the University at large, as numerous documents, letters, memos, memorials, and slavish dedications show. But when Davis arrived at the University of Tennessee in 1925, he was merely the General Secretary of the University's chapter of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Before this, Davis had graduated UT in 1920 and received his master's in education in 1924 from the University of Chicago. For someone born in the small town of Millington, Tennessee and who had survived the horrors of World War I, it must have seemed like life was finally settling down after years of service. Indeed, Davis's involvement with the YMCA stemmed from his service, having started as a YMCA worker at Camp Jackson in South Carolina.<sup>17</sup> But Davis was not one for settling in anything. Whether it was in the army or in the classroom, Davis brought an indefatigable work ethic to his position as General Secretary, and soon found himself slotted into the simultaneous role of Executive Secretary of the University Alumni Association, a position he would remain in until his untimely death in 1948. It was in this position that he would transform UT and blur lines between the Scarabean Society and administration.

---

<sup>16</sup> As an aside, it is still not exactly clear exactly what led the society to admit some faculty over others. While some became advisors after having been members as students, others like L.R. Hesler and Victor Davis were admitted only upon joining the University as faculty. Hesler himself notes in his own short "biochronology" that he was admitted in 1920, one year after arriving at UT after having no prior connections to the University.

<sup>17</sup> "The Tennessee Alumnus," Spring 1948. Box 46, Office of the University Historian Collection 1819-1997. AR.0015. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.



For some perspective, Hesler's 1975 history lists 17 accomplishments of the Scarabbean Society that have transformed UT into "a Greater University." On this list are traditions such as Carnicus, All-Sing, the Torchbearer, the Alma Mater, Aloha Oe, and Torch Night. Of those 17, roughly 11, including all the ones named previously, are listed as having been the work of Victor Davis alone or with the help of his colleague Ralph Frost. "Davis-Frost Projects," as Hesler refers to them, almost always had "the moral support" of the Society, but it is never clear exactly how involved the Society was with their creation and implementation.<sup>18</sup> Research has shown it is certainly less than Hesler implies. Indeed, much of what the Society claims to be the result of its work between 1925 and 1950 seems to be the mis-credited work of Victor Davis operating above and beyond his official job description as Executive Secretary of the Alumni Association.

Perhaps the earliest and most explicit example of this is Aloha Oe. Aloha Oe (or, "Farewell to Thee" in Hawaiian) is a ceremony, held typically in March or April of every year, where graduating seniors gather to celebrate their achievements, be presented awards, hear speeches, and finally eat a free, crowd sourced cookout meal. The particulars of the ceremony have changed since its inception in 1926, and there was a period from 1967 until 1994 in which the ceremony was not held. While a 1932 issue of *The Orange and White* rightly states that "no one person or group can claim the credit for devising the *present* Aloha Oe" it is indisputable that Victor Davis owns the idea at the heart of the event.<sup>19</sup> Earl Zwingle, a noted alumni of the University and friend of Davis who was a student during Davis's tenure as Executive Secretary, backed up his case for naming a new plaza after Davis by noting that "Vic built a great number of University traditions around the Torch idea...the Freshman handbook...the Aloha Oe night

---

<sup>18</sup> Hesler, L.R. "The Scarabbean Society 1915." Box 19, Office of the University Historian Collection, 1819-1997. AR.0015. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>19</sup> "First Aloha Oe Was Held As May Day Six Years Ago." Box 18, Office of the University Historian Collection 1819-1997. AR.0015. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections

for departing seniors.” Two years after Zwingle’s letter lobbying for the plaza, administrator Mike Brookshire wrote a memo to Jerry Walker that fact checked Zwingle’s claims and noted that Davis’s creation of Aloha Oe was “confirmed by the Tennessee Alumnus and our records.”<sup>20</sup> While copies of Davis’s work and notes around Aloha Oe remain elusive (indeed, Brookshire says that “University records of the 1920s and 1930s are almost non-existent”) these testimonies firmly establish Davis as the idea’s originator. Hesler is quick to claim this as a Scarabbean accomplishment in his history, and while the very first Aloha Oe did feature the “presentation of Scarabbean medal to best all around sophomore and scholarship to best all-around freshman,” Hesler’s claim is reaching.<sup>21</sup> Simply put, Davis was not a member of the Society at the time he created Aloha Oe. Black Books from 1935 place Davis’s year of induction as 1927, while the first Aloha Oe was held on May 17, 1926.<sup>22</sup> Further, the 1926 issue of *The Volunteer* does not list Victor Davis as a member of the Society, but the 1927 issue does.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, rather than Victor Davis originating Aloha Oe as a result of being in the Scarabbean Society, it seems more likely that he was inducted into the society because he originated Aloha Oe. Thus within one year of arriving on campus, Davis established a tradition that continues to this day, and subsequently found himself inducted into the Scarabbean Society as a faculty advisor.

Davis’s induction marks a turning point for the Society and the beginning of its period of highest productivity and notoriety. After joining, Davis quickly moved to create Carnicus, another University tradition that survives to the present day, by combining the annual carnival and circus on campus into one unified event of sketch comedy, talent performances, and student

---

<sup>20</sup> Brookshire, Mike. “Memorandum to Mr. Jerry W. Walker.” Box 1, Warren Kennerly Papers. MS.2656. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>21</sup> “First Annual Aloha Oe” Program. Box 18, Office of the University Historian Collection 1819-1997. AR.0015. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>22</sup> Black Book 1935. Box 3, Alumni Association Records. AR.0104. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>23</sup> *The Volunteer*, 1926. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville.

involvement.<sup>24</sup> It has been performed almost every year since 1929, and appears on Hesler's list of noted accomplishments of the Society. At the same time as Davis was creating Carnicus though, he was working on what would come to be his most lasting achievement, the records of which would provide the clearest window into the operation of the Scarabbean Society and just how involved it was with all its claimed accomplishments. In 1929, Davis began mailing other institutions, asking for advice on how to regulate an artistic contest that would come up with "a Volunteer Symbol."<sup>25</sup> Today, it is called The Torchbearer.

### **Society's Operational Process Under Davis**

Unlike Aloha Oe and Carnicus, Davis's process when it came to the Torchbearer is well documented and provides fascinating insight into how the Society operated to create these revered traditions. Mainly, it seems like it had almost nothing to do with their creation. To clarify, The Scarabbean Senior Society, from its earliest days, has claimed to consist of the 15 or so brightest and most promising men of merit in each senior class. Faculty advisors have certainly existed since the beginning but are certainly not the majority of its members nor the focus of its mission. When it comes to the new "Volunteer Symbol" though, the faculty were on the front lines throughout the entire process. Indeed, what the notes from the Volunteer Symbol Committee reveal is a group of dedicated University employees pursuing the establishment of some type of unifying symbol, all the way from idea to implementation. They were certainly working towards the betterment of the students. But they were doing so without true student involvement, whether those students were a member of the Scarabbean Society or not. For

---

<sup>24</sup> Brookshire, Mike. "Memorandum to Mr. Jerry W. Walker." Box 1, Warren Kennerly Papers. MS.2656. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>25</sup> Letters from Victor Davis to Carnegie Institute, Ohio State, etc. Volunteer Symbol Committee Papers. AR.0776. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

example, notes spanning from January 1936 to May 1947 document the work of the “Traditions Committee,” a group composed (at different times) of Davis, Ralph Frost, L.R. Hesler, Ralph Dunford, and Bill Freis, and chaired at different times by Henry Carmichael and Holly Hornbeck.<sup>26</sup> Many of these men (specifically Davis, Frost, Hesler, and Hornbeck) were involved in the Scarabbean Society as students or faculty and clearly carried the traditions and spirit of the Society into their office, but the work here consists of nothing done outside of their official capacity as faculty, as all were employed as either professors or administrators by the University. For example, it was Victor Davis who sent letters across the country, looking for advice on how to administer the contest to choose a Volunteer Symbol. After the contest went through and the Torchbearer design was chosen, it was Davis and Frost who wrote to almost a hundred different construction firms, looking to secure supplies of marble, bronze, and granite for the winning artist.<sup>27</sup> Later, it was Frost who was appointed to chair the Volunteer Symbol Committee in 1937. No student work, ideas, or input is ever truly mentioned as having played a part in the genesis of the idea. No student is ever listed as having taken on substantial logistical work in the project. At one point, in a meeting on April 13, 1938, L.R. Hesler suggested letting students onto the Volunteer Symbol Committee, but the debate is never referenced again in subsequent minutes and it seems as if the idea died in the room.<sup>28</sup> At one point in February 1938, Holly Hornbeck presented the Symbol’s design to fraternity houses on campus, but only to let them know of how to purchase small statuettes or rings emblazoned with the design if they so choose.<sup>29</sup> Student involvement seems non-existent, or limited at best.

---

<sup>26</sup> Traditions Committee Reports. Box 3, Alumni Association Records. AR.0104. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>27</sup> Letters from Victor Davis to Robbins Company. Volunteer Symbol Committee Papers. AR.0776. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>28</sup> Volunteer Symbol Committee Minutes, Apr. 13, 1938. Volunteer Symbol Committee Papers. AR.0776. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>29</sup> Traditions Committee Minutes, Feb. 11, 1938. Box 3, Alumni Association Records. AR.0104. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

Despite this lack of actual seniors working on the things the Scarabbean Senior Society claims credit for, these men definitely believed themselves to be working as part of the Society. Throughout the minutes of the Traditions Committee, which always seems to be a completely administrative group of faculty, members are referred to with the appellation “Comrade,” the term members of the Society reserve for one another.<sup>30</sup> Beyond mere titles, the group also seems to have been performing routine administrative upkeep for the Society. A meeting on April 14, 1937 featured a discussion of filing systems, with “Comrade Davis” suggesting that “as a double check on our filing system, which seems to not be operating satisfactorily, each committee be assigned to a Scarabbean Faculty member so that a permanent and central filing system for that committee might be kept.”<sup>31</sup> A later meeting on May 19, 1937 shows that this has clearly been on the committee’s mind since Davis suggested it, since their end of the year report “recommended to the Society that a faculty member of the Society be assigned to each committee...in addition to the present filing system kept byh (sic) Amonophus.”<sup>32</sup> The committee dives even further into the weeds of Society business on November 1, 1938, when they discussed the initiation ceremony of the Society and their desired changes in great detail:

*“Preclude actual ritual with historical statements concerning traditional accomplishments such as the Torch Ceremony and Aloha Oe. It is proposed to have Comrades give short statements from the background. In addition to change the final step so as to initiate by class rather than individually. Another step would be to prepare a form questionnaire for use while the “neophyte” is on the point. The form is to ensure tha (sic) certain essential points are brought out, but additional questions and alternative approaches can be used to suit the individual.”<sup>33</sup>*

---

<sup>30</sup> “The Pirate,” Summer 1994. Alumni Association Records. AR.0499. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections

<sup>31</sup> Traditions Committee Minutes, Apr. 14, 1937. Box 3, Alumni Association Records. AR.0104. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections. While it is unknown which “committees” Davis is referring to, it is interesting that he is again concerned with further administrative control over the Society’s operation.

<sup>32</sup> Traditions Committee Minutes, May 19, 1937. Box 3, Alumni Association Records. AR.0104. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections. A further discussion of the more esoteric naming conventions of the Society, such as “Amonophus” will come later.

<sup>33</sup> Traditions Committee Minutes, Nov. 1, 1938. Box 3, Alumni Association Records. AR.0104. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

Thus, it is clear that despite being a group made up solely of administration and faculty, the Traditions Committee, and the sub-group Volunteer Symbol Committee, seemed to be an integral part of the management of the Society. Exactly how the group interacted with students and the student members of the society is made clear through other projects Victor Davis worked on. These paint a picture of a group primarily concerned not with being Nameless in Worthy Deeds, but in acting out the wishes of certain influential administrators on campus during a time when no unified vehicle for such a task existed.

Two example projects illustrate this perfectly: the Forensic Committee and the woodland park. The Forensic Committee discussion appears throughout minutes from 1936 to 1938. Based on archaic definitions, “forensics” here means the study of legal practice and procedure. The Traditions Committee was extremely concerned with finding ways to “further the cause of Forensic work” on campus and appointed a “Dr. McWhorter” to chart those ways out.<sup>34</sup> A year later, in February of 1937, Holly Hornbeck and Henry Carmichael reported that “Comrade Derryberry” had come up with the idea to appoint certain students on the All Students Club (ASC) to a committee on Forensics.<sup>35</sup> “Derryberry” likely refers to Everett Derryberry, a faculty member of the Society who would go on to become the President of Tennessee Tech University.<sup>36</sup> Two months later, Hornbeck implemented this by pitching the idea of increasing Forensic studies and investment on campus to the ASC retreat on April 25.<sup>37</sup> One month after that, an All Students Club Committee on Forensics was created and President James D. Hoskins

---

<sup>34</sup> Traditions Committee Minutes, Jan. 19, 1936. Box 3, Alumni Association Records. AR.0104. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>35</sup> Traditions Committee Minutes, Feb. 18, 1937. Box 3, Alumni Association Records. AR.0104. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>36</sup> "Past Presidents." Tennessee Tech. April 11, 2016. Accessed April 12, 2018. <https://www.tntech.edu/president/past-presidents>.

<sup>37</sup> Traditions Committee Minutes, Apr. 14, 1937. Box 3, Alumni Association Records. AR.0104. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

was considering appointing a new Forensics Council as well.<sup>38</sup> The intellectual line here is incredibly easy to trace. The Traditions Committee, which is at least quasi-synonymous with the faculty side of the Society, believed pursuing an effort for more forensic study on campus was a worthy cause. The committee brainstormed, identified the best ideas, and then presented those ideas to the students who proceeded to carry them out. Further buy-in to the idea was secured after student support was shown, and the President of the University lent his support after learning students were on board.

The idea for a woodland park on campus demonstrates this process to be a pattern that was still taking place a decade later. In a meeting on February 3, 1947, the Committee identified an old idea that had been proposed at some point in the past: using open land across the Tennessee River for a woodland park owned by the University. They found this idea agreeable and decided to pursue it.<sup>39</sup> Two months later, some progress had been made. By the time of their meeting on April 19 of the same year, “The Committee ha[d] investigated the proposed location of a woodland park for University Students and ha[d] decided that the present is the best time to further efforts in obtaining such a park.” These efforts consisted of the “need for such a park” to “be expressed in O & W (the Orange & White), A.S.C. Committee, L.S.O. committee, and Vol Vet.” Further, the committee for the park was to “be appointed and joint petition for woodland park be submitted.”<sup>40</sup> Less than a month later, the ASC met and appointed “Tom Vaughn,

---

<sup>38</sup> Traditions Committee Minutes, May 19, 1937. Box 3, Alumni Association Records. AR.0104. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>39</sup> Traditions Committee Minutes, Feb. 3, 1947. Box 3, Alumni Association Records. AR.0104. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>40</sup> Traditions Committee Minutes, Apr. 19, 1947. Box 3, Alumni Association Records. AR.0104. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

Elanor, and Ed McConnell” to investigate plans concerning the establishment of the park.<sup>41</sup> Five days later, the ASC sent a letter to President Hoskins advocating for the woodland park.<sup>42</sup>

While it seems that such a park was never able to truly come to fruition (the proposed spot seems to now be occupied Cherokee Farms), the story that these notes tell is very clear and provides insight into exactly how the Society was functioning during what Hesler considers its most productive period. Members of administration, like Victor Davis and Ralph Frost, sat on the Traditions Committee, which operated as a meeting and working group for faculty members of the Society. This group generated a great many ideas on traditions and improvements to student quality of life on campus, including the Torchbearer, a new Forensics Committee, and a new woodland park. These ideas were workshopped and eventually passed down through committee representatives to student groups like the All Students Club and the Orange & White newspaper. These groups took administrative urging and appealed to students, while simultaneously representing student opinion to higher-ups like President James Hoskins to make them a reality. At the same time, the committee kept shop for the Society, cleaning up its administrative and record keeping practices and even debating changes to induction ceremonies. This was, at its core, a group of administrators running a program that advanced their ideas for improvements on campus, in the guise of a semi-secret society that recruited only the most involved and well-connected students who could help spread those ideas with as much agreeability as possible into all corners of the student body. Victor Davis ran an elaborate lobbying system to the student body for his ideas to improve campus, and based on the results he ran it extremely well.

---

<sup>41</sup> May 8, 1947. All Students Club Minute Book, 1947-1954. AR.0461. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from ASC to James Hoskins, 1948. Box 3, Alumni Association Records. AR.0104. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.



Thus, through this process that ran from 1926 to 1948, the Society claimed nearly all the big items on Hesler's list of accomplishments. Carnicus, Nahheeyayli Club, All-Sing, University Concerts Inc., The Torchbearer, the Alma Mater, Aloha Oe, Torch Night, and the Tennessee School of Religion were all founded, created or solicited during this period.<sup>43</sup> It is not a stretch to say that, outside of specifically athletic traditions like the Vol Walk, Victor Davis and this group were responsible for the creation of close to all University traditions that survive to this day. It can thus be shown that, at least at the University of Tennessee, administration was exercising the lion's share of control and power over campus culture and life. The Scarabbean Society was a helpful but ancillary part of implementing the ideas of administrators and making them palatable to the student body, not a group of powerful students cooperating in the running of the university with administration. While Victor Davis did not create the Scarabbean Society (as Earl Zwingle speculated and Mike Brookshire disproved) he was responsible for the form closest to what people imagine it to be: a slightly secretive group of well-connected idea men running certain parts of the University behind the scenes.<sup>44</sup> The only issue is that these men were not students.

Davis's impact is only made starker by what happened to the Society after he left it. Who knows what else the man would have produced through this group if he had not suffered a sudden, fatal heart attack and aneurism on May 31, 1948. After all, in an ASC meeting on February 17, "it was suggested that since the finances of the ASC are in such a bad condition that the award to the outstanding faculty member be turned over to the Scarabbean." The motion passed.<sup>45</sup> Not only was the idea suggested, but the statement itself suggested that Victor Davis was running his system right up until the end.

---

<sup>43</sup> Hesler, L.R. "The Scarabbean Society 1915." Box 19, Office of the University Historian Collection, 1819-1997. AR.0015. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>44</sup> Brookshire, Mike. "Memorandum to Mr. Jerry W. Walker." Box 1, Warren Kennerly Papers. MS.2656. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>45</sup> Feb 17, 1948. All Students Club Minute Book, 1947-1954. AR.0461. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

## Life After Davis

For 10 years after Victor Davis's death, it is hard to find any information on what the Society was doing. Names appeared in yearbooks, and a 50-year celebration was held in the Andrew Johnson Hotel in 1955, but other than that, there is silence. Plans for a "permanent symbol to be placed in a prominent place on campus" seem to have gone nowhere.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, L.R. Hesler's report details no significant accomplishments during this period, and it was not until his retirement in 1958 that the Society seems to come out of hibernation. Even then, however, it seems to be looking backwards rather than forwards. The issue of *The Pirate* (the Society's newsletter that seems to have been published quarterly) that was sent out in November 1958 mostly describes Hesler's retirement, the annual banquet, and the potential creation of a bowling alley on campus.<sup>47</sup> The Society did manage to run some fundraising operations, raising \$1,612 for The L.R. Hesler Fund, a private grant set up to help the old Dean finish publishing his "Mushrooms in the Southeastern United States."<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, this fund was described as "the first time the members of the Society have been solicited for funds, and, in the opinion of the Committee, it will be the last time." As the letter to all members states, "there is only one Dean Hesler."<sup>49</sup>

The letter seems to be telling the truth. After Dean Hesler's retirement, the Society seems to have continued what was, at this point, a pronounced decline. The 1961 issue of *The Pirate* mentions attendance at the yearly dinner being so low that cancellation might be in order, and the only projects to be "revamping the intramural system; obtaining scholarships for the College of Law; establishment of an Academic Code of Honor; revising the ritual of the Society to bring it

---

<sup>46</sup> Letter announcing 50 Year Celebration. Alumni Association Records. AR.0049. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>47</sup> *The Pirate*, November 1958. Alumni Association Records. AR.0049. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>48</sup> *The Pirate*, November 1958. Alumni Association Records. AR.0049. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>49</sup> Newell, Edward. Letter to all Scarabbeans, 1958. Box 1, Warren Kennerly Papers. MS.2656. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

up to date.”<sup>50</sup> As with most of these projects, there is no evidence any of them was followed through with. It seems possible that, as the Society found its bigger efforts to exert power on campus stymied, it turned inward and became more insular. Throughout this period, more mentions are made to the strange and esoteric naming conventions and offices that the Society members used and held. All seem to be based on a random mixture of pirate veneration and Egyptian mythology. Adulations to “great Bubastis” are made in letters related to the L.R. Hesler Fund.<sup>51</sup> Each issue of *The Pirate* makes sure to refer to who holds the position of “Worthy Osiris,” which seems to be the nominal head of the Society. Mentions in later issues of *The Pirate* describe even more titles, with different members being listed as “Henry Morgan,” “Edward Davis,” and “Amenophis III.”<sup>52</sup> The functions of those offices do not appear listed in any records, but perhaps as the Society’s active, demonstrable influence waned on campus, it became more focused on creating a mythology of itself. Indeed, if campus power had been funneled through the Society by administration for such a long time, and it was now largely devoid of that power, it may have sought different ways of reinforcing its presence and prestige.

This certainly does not mean they were not trying though. The 1965 issue of *The Pirate* mentions Scarab influence in the new SGA constitution, the founding of *The Daily Beacon*, and the creation of the Student Activities and Services Fee as projects of the Society that year.<sup>53</sup> However, an interview with Frank Gibson, a former Editor-in-Chief of *The Daily Beacon* and admitted member of the Society in 1970, cast doubt on the first claim, with Gibson saying that he “talked to the first editor of *The Daily Beacon*, and they don’t know anything about the

---

<sup>50</sup> *The Pirate*, 1961. Alumni Association Records. AR.0049. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>51</sup> Hikes, Charles. Letter to “Comrade Hutchison,” Dec. 31, 1958. Box 2, Lexemuel Ray Hesler Collection. MS. 1384. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>52</sup> *The Pirate*, 1994. Alumni Association Records. AR.0049. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>53</sup> *The Pirate*, 1965. Alumni Association Records. AR.0049. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

Scarabbeans or were involved with any of that.”<sup>54</sup> Further, Hesler’s 1975 history of the Society does not list any of the accomplishments compiled in this 1965 issue, despite them being long lasting and rather notable reforms that survive to the present day. Thus, it becomes hard to establish claim or purchase on any of these accomplishments. What Gibson could establish though was further evidence of a focus on internal reforms in the Society at this time, saying that he had been invited onto the Society solely because of his position as Editor-in-Chief of The Daily Beacon, and that other spots in the Society were reserved for influential office-holders on campus, with no point system being involved anymore.<sup>55</sup>

Regardless, the Society’s influence on campus certainly became less visible. Aloha Oe, the original tradition mentioned in all of the Society’s initiation speeches, was discontinued in 1967, and no Scarabbean Awards were presented at the last ceremony.<sup>56</sup> In 1969, the Society stopped publishing its graduating members in The Volunteer, something that they have not resumed except for one year in 1981.<sup>57</sup> With no Aloha Oe ceremony, no awards were published either. All public mentions of the Society seem to end around this time as well, as the practice of listing all graduating Scarabbean members in The Daily Beacon ended in the early 1970s. Frank Gibson believes this secrecy to have come from tension surrounding the Vietnam War, and the idea that the Society was too collaborative with administration was a public relations nightmare on a campus mired in anti-authority rhetoric and protest.<sup>58</sup> Thus, by the 1970s, and 20 years after

---

<sup>54</sup> Black, Don. “The Torchbearers with no name...” *The Daily Beacon*. Sep. 28, 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Researcher notes, audio recording of Interview with Frank Gibson. Gibson noted that the President of the Interfraternity Council and the President of Student Government Association were also given reserved spots, but that Jimmy Baxter, the first black president of SGA, was not given a spot. Gibson speculated that this was indeed due to Baxter’s race. The racial makeup of the society is unknown, but they were accepting some black members by 1994 at the latest.

<sup>56</sup> Aloha Oe Program, June 8, 1967. Box 18, Office of the University Historian Collection 1819-1997. AR.0015. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>57</sup> The Volunteer, 1981. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville.

<sup>58</sup> Researcher Notes. Audio recording of Interview with Frank Gibson. Link included in the Appendices/

Victor Davis died, the Society was fully underground, with its influence more ephemeral, or non-existent, than ever.

All throughout this period though, one man would not forget what Victor Davis had done. While the Society became more withdrawn and secretive, Earl Zwingle, ever a devoted, non-Scarabbean alumni, fought tirelessly to memorialize Victor Davis in some way. While the large, permanent Torchbearer statue based on the design Davis solicited had been unveiled in 1968, it did not mention its creator and no explanation of how the statue came to be was published or made official. Zwingle sent countless letters to administrators and University Officials in order to rectify this.<sup>59</sup> He sent letters to Chancellors, Presidents, Scarabs, and others, eventually prompting a fact checking memo by Mike Brookshire to make sure that all of what Zwingle claimed about the man was true.<sup>60</sup> Nearly all of it was. Thus, in 1973, the Torchbearer Scholarship was created, and the Davis Memorial Plaque was dedicated in Circle Park at the foot of the Torchbearer. The Torchbearer truly did have a name.

### **The Society and Vic Davis Today**

Even more years passed. Despite being included in a co-curricular handbook as a registered student organization in 1991, the Scarabbean Society largely seems to have passed from the University's collective memory throughout the 1970s, 80s and early 90s.<sup>61</sup> The silence was not indicative of dormancy, however. The Pirate continued to be published, with a 1994 issue directed mostly at alumni showing a membership roll including the SGA president, past SGA president, sorority and fraternity leaders, and other influential positions on campus as still

---

<sup>59</sup> Box 1, Warren Kennerly Papers. MS.2656. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections

<sup>60</sup> Brookshire, Mike. "Memorandum to Mr. Jerry W. Walker." Box 1, Warren Kennerly Papers. MS.2656. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>61</sup> Directory of Student Organizations. Box 21, Office of the University Historian Collection 1819-1997. AR.0015. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

having prominent roles within the Society.<sup>62</sup> Of those listed in this issue, the most interesting is Keith Carver, at the time the leader of TeamVOLS but now the Chancellor of the University of Tennessee, Martin. Carver later admitted he had been a member during his time as a student in the 90s, but refused to discuss the Society any further.<sup>63</sup> Without other sources, it is nearly impossible to glean any information on their projects, goals or members during this time and until the present, with one notable exception. In 1997, the graduating Senior Class attempted to institute a new senior farewell ceremony based on Aloha Oe, which at this point was still relegated to the annals of history. Aiei Proso seems to have only existed for one year, but the program from that year's event was startlingly in its bold connection to what is now a truly secret society. The font used on the program bears a striking resemblance to the font used in all issues of *The Pirate* and in other Society documents. The program notes back to both Aloha Oe, the Scarabbean Awards and the preparation of Shields-Watkins field, although it lays the later accomplishment at the feet of Harcourt Morgan instead of MacGregor Smith.<sup>64</sup> Finally, this same senior gift group established a scholarship to be given out at Aiei Proso, the "Volunteer of the Year, Torch of Service Scholarship Award." This scholarship was granted on the basis of who showed the most promise as they headed into their senior year. The motto of the scholarship was to be "Nameless in Worthy Deeds."<sup>65</sup>

Thus, it is clear that the Society still exists, along with its iconography, but the role it plays on campus and in campus life is more secretive and perhaps less influential than ever. A bench dedicated in 2005 in Ayres Hall bears their name, as does a brick in Circle Park and a

---

<sup>62</sup> *The Pirate*, 1994. Alumni Association Records. AR.0049. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>63</sup> Black, Don. "The Torchbearers with no name..." *The Daily Beacon*. Sep. 28, 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Aiei Proso Program. Box 18, Office of the University Historian Collection 1819-1997. AR.0015. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

<sup>65</sup> Press Release on Aiei Proso, Apr. 21, 1997. Box 18, Office of the University Historian Collection 1819-1997. AR.0015. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

banner that sometimes appears on Neyland Stadium during Homecoming, but it is hard to find any other visible signs of their affects on campus, or what is done now. It seems likely that the Society still consists of a mix of students and faculty advisors, but whether its operations extend beyond mere networking is murky at best. Nothing is definitively known about how they choose their members, how many there are each year, or where meetings are held, if they are held at all. Besides the small tokens discussed above, the only knowledge that they still exist comes from an event during the course of research. At one point, a reporter was sent anonymous photographs of documents purporting to describe the Scarabbean induction ritual, as well as recently graduated students standing atop Ayres Hall striking a distinctive pose.<sup>66</sup> The researcher viewed all of these documents and photos along with the reporter. Due to the unverifiability of these documents, and the anonymous nature of their sourcing, they are not further discussed or included.

What is clear, despite this obfuscation, is the contrast between now and then. Between the Society of Victor Davis and the Society that followed him. Victor Davis created, in the course of his work at the University, nearly all of the traditions, events, and accomplishments that the Society claims credit for. He worked tirelessly to ensure the University was more of a home for students and a more memorable experience for all. Earl Zwingle once wrote to Leonard Raulston that “Vic...had a way of suggesting matters to student leaders and then the student leaders would carry the ball and institute the procedure.”<sup>67</sup> What is remarkable about this quote is that Zwingle, for all his love of the man, actually undersold just how much work Victor Davis put into each and every thing he suggested. As documents, records, letters, and pictures have shown, he was often the driving force behind much of the work that others are credited with. Nearly 30 years

---

<sup>66</sup> Black, Don. “The Torchbearers with no name...” *The Daily Beacon*. Sep. 28, 2017.

<sup>67</sup> Zwingle, Earl. “Letter to Leonard Raulston, May 7, 1968.” Box 1, Warren Kennerly Papers. MS.2656. University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections.

passed from the time Victor Davis died to when L.R. Hesler wrote his history of the Society. In those 30 years, not one achievement was made that found its way onto Hesler's list of accomplishment. In the 40 years that have come and gone since then, it is hard to find any documented proof of influence, changes, or new traditions that the Society has managed to truly raise off the ground. A brick here, a bench there, but nothing else apparent. Perhaps they are just being nameless in worthy deeds more effectively than Davis ever was.

Evidence suggests, however, that Davis was simply doing his job extremely well, and using all avenues available to him to do it. For him, the Scarabbean Society was a useful way to get relevant administrators to reach relevant students quickly. His reforms certainly could have happened some other way, but the Society allowed an ease of communication and sense of commonality of cause that made them easier than they would have otherwise been. The contrast between the period of time when Davis led the Society and its existence now is striking. The gulf between them only serves to reinforce that these groups, secret or not, are only as influential as far as their faculty members or administrators are willing to go. The distribution of power over campus culture and life at the University of Tennessee, and perhaps many similar ones, lies not within the student body but between the student body and administrators. Society membership may have slightly bridged that gap, but only so far as it provided a convenient road from the top to the bottom, from administration to those who follow administration. It is of course still possible that the Society operates now in the shadows, more influential than it has ever been. But this seems unlikely, because what Victor Davis's life shows is that if you find a way to be truly nameless in worthy deeds, the people around you will not let you remain nameless for long.



## Appendices/Additional Resources

Relevant pictures can be found at the following address:

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/SEWC5QpQ1DPnscMq1>

Interview audio with Frank Gibson can be found at the following address:

[https://drive.google.com/open?id=1W3whacFIGSL3CtrW\\_b7nm7g1w2vLsb62](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1W3whacFIGSL3CtrW_b7nm7g1w2vLsb62)

A timeline of relevant information, as well as a complete source list, archival guide, and copy of researcher notes, can be found at the following address:

[https://drive.google.com/open?id=14gh\\_HM7njRmGpJ0y2J2qMI9IHyYgAd0](https://drive.google.com/open?id=14gh_HM7njRmGpJ0y2J2qMI9IHyYgAd0)