"MORAL INJUSTICE AT PENN," EISENLOHR HALL, 4 JUNE 1952. AS LATE AS THE EARLY 1950s, THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND THE COLLEGE FOR WOMEN WERE THE ONLY TWO SCHOOLS ON CAMPUS WHICH ADMITTED WOMEN IN SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS. WHEN THE CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION PROPOSED EXTENSIVE CUTS IN THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION CURRICULUM ("175 TEACHERS KICKED OUT!!"), WOMEN LED THE PROTEST. HERE, MEMBERS OF THE MUSICAL EDUCATION STUDENTS ASSOCIATION RALLY IN THE COURTYARD AT EISENLOHR.
Spun here are the beauteous fibers gleaned each from the distinctive qualities of our Queens. Poise, charm, beauty, and intellect radiate to our eyes, we feel the Aphrodite warmth emanating from the loom of goodness. Our sentiment abounds in the vain hope that we might partake in even a thread of this grand weave, where the woof of fairness mingles with the warp of refinement. These are the Queens of our lives.

—From the 1953 Record, the first coed issue of Penn's yearbook.

A lot has changed for women at Penn since that ode to collegiate pulchritude was written, and today's "coeds" are distinguished in the yearbooks and newspapers more for their grades and less for their measurements. This sparks a lot of questions for those of us more recent to the Penn Community. What was it like to be a woman attending Penn before the turbulent years of the '60s? What were the images of women on campus and in the school newspapers before the sexual revolution, and how did that image compare with the actual experience of those women who were attending the University? What happened to the "...women of Pennsylvania who typify the consummate standards of charm and loveliness"?

From some preliminary work of the environment of the '50s, what becomes apparent immediately is a persistent paradox that crops up frequently between the image and reality of the Penn coed. Many of the printed images portraying Penn women in the University publications show them in one of two major forms: first, lovely fashionable things, whose minds should not be taxed too extensively for fear of being thought "too brainy," thus putting them out of the running first, for a husband, and second, for jobs as secretaries. But these images contrast with the reality of the many motivated and intelligent women who attended the University during this time.

In late September, 1950, the Pennsylvania News, the official newspaper for women undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania, thought that it would be useful for the incoming coeds to have a list of the women who were most active in the student government and other extracurricular activities. The Pennsylvania News, unlike its male counterpart, The Daily Pennsylvanian ("a newspaper by, for, and about Penn's male undergraduates"), was a weekly paper, and put their freshman issue out weeks after the DP. There were about twenty or so women on the list in the Fall of 1950, including Marie Minnick, the President of the Women's Student Government Association, and Carolyn Lois, head of the Women's Athletic Association.

"You'll know her by her beautiful eyes" was how Miss Minnick was described, while Miss Lois had this blurb after her name: "giggles mixed with efficiency." In a weekly column written by the aforementioned Miss Minnick about the WSGA she refers to herself and her constituents as "girls," while their male counterparts are always "men." A series of ads for shirts in the Pennsylvania News ran along these lines, "Majoring in History? There'll be no battles for dates when you go places..."
in Judy Bonds!" On the fourth page of the November 8 issue is a chart listing engagement statistics about the Penn coeds along the lines of a baseball batting average. The image of the coeds in their own paper is that of enthusiastic, "perky" girls who should not be taken too seriously—Lightweight is an apt term.

The image in the Daily Pennsylvanian was not much better. Articles having to do with women in the fall of 1954 included the progress of the Campus Chest Queen pageant, an article entitled "Bueno Ballerina" about a flamenco dancing coed, and an announcement that women were now allowed to eat in the previously men-only enclave of Houston Hall, which contained the final corollary that "...it will take several years before women will get used to the idea of the males' last dining sanctuary being open to them." There was an advertisement for a campus restaurant tempting Penn's men with the promise that "Penn's prettiest coeds come to Mom's restaurant."

Perhaps the most straightforward opinion of the Penn coed was put forward by A.S. Carlin in his column entitled 'The Consistency of Women: Pounded and Propounded," where he describes woman as "a creature that is most inconsistent." He continues,

It is a known fact that many women attend colleges...for one reason. As a few coeds themselves have said they're here to get their MRS'. Classes to these girls are just something to break up the time between weekends or a place to make social contacts. Education is furthest from their minds - that is, book education. Yet the majority persist in attending predominantly male schools; their influx keeping out men who will need the education to earn a living.

When one looks closer at the women themselves, perhaps the reason that Carlin was so against the women in his classes was not so much their lack of academic seriousness as their competitiveness. A male dean refused to have the male and female Phi Beta Kappa chapters merged into one for fear that it would soon be overrun by women. In the 1954 Penn yearbook, the Phi Beta Kappa society had 14 members. Eight were women. The Pre Law Society of 1953 had 17 members, 13 of whom were women. It often appeared as if the men pretended in their paper that they were the only ones that attended the University, so that there would be no question of women heeling and writing at the Daily Pennsylvanian, working in the student government or appearing in the honor societies. In response, the women created female equivalents, but for the most part these lacked the status and tradition of the older and more dominant male organizations.

Articles that brought attention to any inequalities within the classroom were few and far between. Jeanne Pennypacker of the Pennsylvania News wrote about her semester in an article entitled "Looking Backward."

I took Sociology....the instructor sat on his desk while the girls lit his cigarettes for him....I took zoology 1 with a lab instructor who was afraid of girls and ran to the
other side of the desk when they wanted to ask him a question.

Incidents such as this crop up fairly frequently when one talks to those women that were at Penn during the '50s. One of the first women to attend the Wharton School, Penny Rubincam, remembered one popular professor who would tell off color jokes ("and I don't mean slightly off color, I mean really off color") in his class and would then look to her to see how thick skinned she was. R. Jean Brownlee, a Penn alumna and the Dean of the College of Women in 1959, told the story of how one professor used to lock his classroom doors to prevent the attendance of women during his lectures. The solution to these problems for women, according to Brownlee and Rubincam, was to know which professors were hostile and keep away from their classes.

According to data culled from the newspapers and the yearbooks, the highest position a coed could obtain on campus was to be selected one of the myriad of campus Queens, "the women who typify the consummate standards of charm and loveliness. Only a few of the many who graced our ivied halls, these girls fully represent the qualities which we call the essence of beauty." There was the Campus Chest Queen, the Class Queens, the Spring Queen, the Military Ball Queen, the Homecoming Queen, and the list goes on. Penn was even able to boast of a Miss America in 1954, Evelyn Ay. These were the women who received the most press space in the newspapers and especially in the yearbooks. While the step to popularity and success for a male student would be to define himself in terms of his actions as Quarterback or Mask and Wig President, the same level of popularity would only be possible for a coed possessing an adequate level of pulchritude and "charm."

The image of Penn throughout the '50s then is a place where football was played with an apocalyptic fervor ("Helmeted men hurtle towards each other in one horrendous flying wedge, to meet, to stand stunned for the instant, breaking into little desultory surges that sweep small eddying groups of bodies towards its peripheries"). It was a place where the Fraternity system was supreme, and even if the Penn coeds weren't your first choice to take your law boards for you, they were at least lovely and refined. The faculty was benevolent and patriarchal as befitted an institution that acted in loco parentis. For women it seemed a perfect setting in which to find a future doctor or lawyer husband who would then whisk them away to a beautiful home where their principle activity for the next twenty or so years would be the care and feeding of 2.4 children. The College for Women even had a course to help them, called "Preparation for Marriage" that was highly popular. "They fought to get into it," remarked a professor who taught the class for one year. It seemed as if the Penn coeds were gearing up for the feminine mystique in a big way.

The reality of women at Penn was slightly more complicated. Coeds ran more to graduate school and jobs than to caterers and china patterns, and often in greater numbers than the male students. In a Mademoiselle Magazine article on prestigious
colleges, the University of Pennsylvania had 15.6 female recipients of scholastic awards out of every thousand women compared to only 10.7 male awardees for every thousand men.

If some of the women didn't pay all that much attention to their studies, the same could be said of many of the men as well. After all, the coeds were going to the fraternities on campus with men, not guzzling brews in a bar by themselves. While many images in the papers gave the impression that the coeds were second class citizens in the Penn community, the opinions of the women who were there in the fifties as administrators and students was that their treatment was more equitable than it appeared. As Jean Brownlee says,

The young college aged male was viewed as a man; he was expected to behave as a man. They did not need any particular advice, they did not have any particular concern. The women, on the other hand, were viewed as a group that had to be protected and taken care of. This of course was absurd. Both men and women needed help.

When asked, most of the women interviewed did not feel or did not remember feeling that they, as women, had some special status, either of an adulatory or hostile nature, when they were at the school. The articles about Queens and "MRS" degrees in the school papers were either ignored or accepted passively as "the way things were. It didn't occur to us then that these images were harmful, although if they had appeared today, it would be a different thing." As a 1958 College graduate said, rather annoyed, "I know that it's very fashionable to talk about how slighted we all were back then, but in all honesty I don't remember feeling that I was being slighted. I had a fantastic time." When Penny Rubincam talked about her difficulties in a Wharton class, she remembered that it was her male classmates who approached the professor and protested his X-rated lecturing style. The friends that the women made at that time were through fraternities (male and female) and classes, through acquaintances in the dorm and in sports. Far from being a different species, the Penn women regarded men as their classmates, their friends, and most importantly, their equals.

This almost unconscious feeling of equality was very important to these women in terms of their goals. One College graduate of 1954 who was one of the guest editors at Mademoiselle Magazine with Sylvia Plath before going on to a career as a writer summed up her feelings about her status at Penn by explaining that she was confident of her talent as a writer and a student, not despite or because she was female, but because she was confident of herself as a person. Male or female didn't enter into the personal evaluation.

Despite their frivolous press and expectations, the majority of Penn coeds of the '50s used their four years planning for a career and not for a family. For example, the College of Women's graduating class of 1953 (for the 29 percent of those who listed a career in their reunion directories) included three doctors, a stock broker, a lawyer, a piano teacher, two vice presidents, one executive secretary, a president of a film company, two executive consultants, a psychiatrist, a painter, a newspaper reporter, an administrative director of a private school, three librarians, six high school or college professors, one elementary school teacher, a project supervisor, a sales representative, and an associate director of Cytology. None of the women listed their occupation as "housewife." Other Penn women grads from the early 1950s became vice presidents, professors and department chairs in colleges, anthropologists, hospital directors, chemists, city representatives, publishers, and microbiologists. One woman from the class of '50 became an Associate Dean for the Harvard Medical School, another a nurse in San Salvador. The occupations of the other 71 percent of the women remain a mystery, but this doesn't automatically mean that these women became housewives. Forty percent of the 1953 male graduates of the College did not list their higher degrees or their occupations, but this doesn't automatically make them unemployed or househusbands. People are busy, questionnaires get lost, stamps to mail alumni forms in can't be found, etc.

If some of the Penn college woman in the '50s seemed less serious in their studies while at Penn, sacrificing study time for extra-curricular activities and dates, it must be stressed that this was not gender specific by any means, and depended more on the individual person, as it always has and still does today. The Fraternity (both male and female) system was the hub of the social life at Penn. While the dorms were segregated in terms of sex, there was a mingling of men and women in classes and parties. A woman at Penn defined herself less for her grade point average and more for her associations outside the classroom, in sports and fraternities, and she was still able to achieve in a "man's world" once she had left Penn. Compared to the highly competitive atmosphere among students today, the University of Pennsylvania of the '50s was a kinder, gentler place to study and learn. As one woman summed up, "we had an awfully good time."