

A Clash of Mathematical Titans in Austin: Harry S. Vandiver and Robert Lee Moore (1924–1974)

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The mathematical scene at the University of Texas was dominated from the mid-1920s to the late 1960s by two towering, yet very different figures: Robert Lee Moore (1882–1974), and Harry Schultz Vandiver (1882–1973). Starting in the late 1930s, these two giants entered into a conflict that grew to mythic proportions and lasted for more than three decades. Though this affair permeated all aspects of departmental life, and even spilled over into the wider arena of academic affairs in Austin, it became most visible in 1945 when Vandiver—whose research focused exclusively on number theory and associated algebraic fields—was transferred to the Department of Applied Mathematics and Astronomy. In this unlikely setting, the alienated easterner and the feisty southerner carried on their own private cold war that echoed the politics of the post-war era.

In retrospect this conflict may seem rather preposterous. In fact, eye witnesses at Austin have never been able to say precisely when and how the enmity began, though many could later remember the icy non-relations between Moore and Vandiver. After the departments of pure and applied mathematics were joined in the early fifties, Moore and Vandiver made sure that their offices in UT's new Benedict Hall not only were on different floors but also could be reached by separate stairways.¹ Vandiver's son, Frank (1926–2005), a highly respected historian of the American Civil War and president of Texas A&M University, remembered Moore pointing a loaded gun at him when he was a child:²

I was . . . walking home from school one day, . . . and this car pulled up by me on the curb, and Dr. Moore was in it. I thought he was going to offer me a ride home which I was willing happily to accept. Instead of

that, he pointed this pistol at me, and said, "Ah ha, what do you think of this?" I was absolutely terrified. I thought he was actually going to shoot me. I don't remember what I said. . . . I realized that Moore and Daddy were not friends, and I had the feeling that maybe he was going to kill me, but I think it was sort of a grim joke he was playing. The gun was loaded, that I could tell, so I was not enamored of that moment.

In *R. L. Moore: Mathematician and Teacher*, John Parker devotes an entire chapter to this legendary feud, fittingly entitled "Clash of Titans." Here I offer a fresh view of this rather bizarre episode in the history of American mathematics against the background of the portrait of Vandiver—a somewhat forgotten figure—presented in my article in the last issue of this magazine.³ There, the focus was on Vandiver's lifelong pursuit of Fermat's Last Theorem (FLT); now I turn to broader themes in his career, many of which reflect ongoing conflicts at the University of Texas, as well as the particular antagonism that existed between him and Moore. Some of the main elements of this story appear in Parker's book, but I emphasize Vandiver's perspective and complement the picture with some interesting unpublished documents from the latter's archive in Austin.

It is also important, of course, to consider this conflict in context and proportion. There are undoubtedly many such stories of local feuds in mathematics departments or of local figures who single-handedly dominated departmental life. Still, this dispute had a special intensity and tone, heightened no doubt by the stature of both men in the American context at the time. Moore was certainly a much respected figure in the American community; he served as mentor to several students who went

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¹[Greenwood 1988, 47].

²Frank Vandiver, interview with Ben Fitzpatrick and Albert C. Lewis, June 30, 1999 (Oral History Project, The Legacy of R. L. Moore, Archives of American Mathematics, Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin).

³[Corry 2007].