

The life and times of Beta Theta, Chapter 14

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The prehistory of any social group in which the turn-over occurs in short cycles is generally a vague or even non-existent account. What went before is the subject of tales passed on until lost in time. For Beta Theta most of those stories are gone now. What happened to spur the Founders to get together and buy a second-hand fraternity house, the events of the 20s, 30s, the war years of the 1940s, even the 50s – largely gone.

Sure we know that the Tuttle brothers were great guys, one became president of Pi Kappa Alpha (Grand Princeps or something) and then a Federal Appellate Judge. We know that in the early 30s Art Stallman, Frank O'Brien and others led the chapter in heady days (so Art told us when he, still loyal and active to the end, would come by to see just how badly or well we were treating the building in the 1960s and into the '70s). But we never really thought to get more information from him - he was rather stern. So what he knew of the secret staircase, the war years never got written down. Yes, the navy took over during WWII - painted everything battleship gray (do other ships get their own subtle shades of gray??) and many a pledge class worked to strip the paint and restore the woodwork. But the rest? Who knows. Gibber knew. Again we didn't think to get it down.

So this is to call on all of you to put in your contributions to the collective memory. There won't be a prize to be awarded – nothing like the now-gone Beast Of The Week Award - a coarse though humorous thing perhaps best remembered for its Sherlock Holmesian involvement in solving the mystery of the Mad Shitter. Changes in active membership means that by the 5th year or so the events are already fading into the mist. So I call on you all to put down on paper (real or digital) your recollections of the years in the House. As you can already see, no great literary talent is needed. There is still time for the 40s, 50s and certainly the more recent past to be preserved for posterity. No one need wonder just who Ambrose Peany was any longer.

So here are we few, we happy few, we band of brothers What was life like in the House when you were here at Cornell? Parties, studies, jocks?, thumb suckers?

I'll start with my account of the late '60s. When I pledged in the Spring of 1966, Beta Theta was a smaller group. My class added 19 men. There were lots of engineers, some artsies, several architects (notable including two Latvians), some aggies and one hotelie. What had impressed me in rush was that, unlike the other houses I visited that wanted to present themselves as very proper and smooth (despite possible reputations to the contrary) the Pikes just let it all hang out; joking, introductions to members with nicknames like "the fondler" and "pig-shit", clearly having a good time while rushing. They were willing to let the world see them as they were. It impressed me. I joined.

There were 2 or 3 men to a suite. If you wanted, you could post a wake-up time on your door and Gibber would come in shake you gently and go on. While you were away Gibber would make your bed, changing sheets once a week. Breakfast was on demand with Ellen the cook doing her best work at that meal. Lunchtime most guys would come down the Hill and again food would be ready at noon. Dinner was more "formal". Jackets and ties were required (yes, it's true), and the dinner bell would ring at 6 and the assembled brothers would head down to the

dining room. The president would say Grace (I think) and the food was served by waiters who were also brothers. (They, as part of the kitchen crew were the committee selecting the unfortunate occasional recipient of the B.O.T.W. award). Wednesday night was a date night when you could bring a date to dine. Saturday night no meal. Sunday lunch was a suit and tie event and again dates were allowed. No Sunday night meal.

Food fights had been banned. There was a loophole since the definition of food in the bylaws did not include wet napkins. Troughing was an occasional event at dinner, thanks to the combination of the white oil-cloth under-table cloth with the linen cloth over it to conceal the creation of the trough and the travel of the poured glass of water making its way to an unsuspecting lap down the way.

At night the house was quiet, lots of engineers, aggies and a few artsies studying at their desks, Thorne Wiggers and I finishing up and meandering our way around to other rooms, drinks in hand, cheering up the engineers as they pushed their slide rules back and forth.¹ Architects would show up late, back from Sibley where they did their mysterious things. Engineers would be trooping up to the computer center with boxes of punch cards for programs they needed to run. Sometimes you might hear a howl of anguish from an engineer when the box of cards dropped and now were out of sequence.

The living room was in good shape with heavy leather/vinyl couches, a big black grand piano in the corner and a working fireplace - used very rarely. There was a coin telephone in the mail room (some guys did have their own phones installed but it wasn't common). The front room was called the "Green Room", the library was in good shape, trophies in locked cases, old copies of the Cornelian in the bookcases, odd old stuff in the lift-up storage under the benches, and a non-working fireplace. The back room had a pool table (hand crafted by pledges from a billiard table) with dubious pockets, there was a Bridge table (yes, in those days it was Bridge, not Poker), and there was a full size Xerox machine in the corner - a very handy and, at the time rather novel item - leased, you couldn't buy them back then. The second floor had a soda machine outside Room 2.

We partied well, cleared out the living room for dancing big weekends, had the bar set up downstairs (no windows visible back then). Major party weekends: generally formal - tux for the sit-down dinner on Saturday. The third floor would be set aside for out-of-town dates. The third floor guys would move to share the 2nd floor or live out for the weekend. Homecoming, Fall Weekend, IFC Weekend and Spring Weekend, we partied. Generally that meant starting Friday night through Sunday lunch. Saturday night we would have a band or join with another house in a bigger joint-party. There were also a few parties planned for off weekends. (Someone else will be able to fill in the social situation better than I - my memory fades - and I only came close to getting the BOTW Award once - runner up.) On Saturdays guys would go up to Wells, over to Elmira, up to I.C. to see about picking up a date. Co-eds were also prospective dates but were better encountered in Ivy breaks - weeknight breaks from studying when students would troupe over to the Straight Ivy Room (now called something odd like Mr. Oakenshields).

¹ Slide rule, a calculating device back when there were, gasp, no pocket calculators. I even had one - Chem class, you know.

Before many a dinner there would be games of Polish chess, played while we waited patiently for the bell to ring. Julius Gall, the inventor of the game was the unrivaled champion: I can still hear his “take, take, take, take” as he would sweep the board of his pieces. Ambrose Peany rarely made it to dinner but his subscriptions to assorted X rated publications apparently lasted long after his departure.

Sports: we had teams for just about all the intramural sports. Our hockey team, football and basketball teams all vied for the trophy.

Pledging took a lot of time. The guys from the class of 67 were hit particularly hard with their studies suffering for it. They let the brothers know with a great skit. The fact that the house was not heavy on poetry and philosophy was made clear when Jim Campbell, an Artsie, read his pledge essay on what the House meant to him. “Pi Kappa Alpha is a hot buttered roll” nice metaphor though it might have been, it did not resound well with the engineer majority and Jim got hooted down.

We had to carry the brick, had the Diamond and Shield positions (phi phi kay a to any pledge out there reading this). Pledge raids were an expected event. Apparently no longer a custom (and perhaps for the better considering the possible disciplinary outcome these days), were an effort by the pledge class to show its unity in managing to capture the entire house in the wee hours of the morning while the brothers slept. All brothers in the building had to be captured. Even one escape was fatal to the raid’s success. And if one had a phone and managed to call out to brothers off campus, the raid was doomed. In general at the end the raid was gonna be doomed. But you had to try. The no surgical tape rule instituted by the brothers after one particularly gruesome raid (who knew just how much hair could be ripped off by a bit of tape) made the task even more daunting.

The pledge program started with a big party at the house when the new pledges got to know the taste of Purple Passions and keg beer. The program came to a close with Pledge Week - a rather rough time of games of Lincoln Logs using pledges in the Shield position and then the Pledge Banquet in the dining room with all the pledges lined up to partake of yummy food - chili colored purple, green stuff, an errant sock or pair of jockey shorts being pulled from the kettle as, lined up with one hand tied to a 2 by 4 (for unity) and the other tied behind, each pledge was given a serving to eat in unison - by hand. My year it was actually quite tasty and later on some of the brothers could be seen eating it in the kitchen (no kidding, good though vile-looking chili, and the socks and undies were clean anyway). But to show our unity, led by Rick Wenklar and Fred Wege we followed the chants of “one, two, three” to pick up our plates in unison and fling them onto our Pledge Master, Tom Paul. Since he was wearing a suede sport coat he wasn’t amused. Initiation followed the next night, with a real fancy dinner afterward. Then came the traditional grabbing of the pledge master and throwing him in the lake. Life was good.

Neighborly relations: Snow-ball fights. Since we hated Theta Chi (Turkey Coop) down at the corner every winter we would have snow-ball fights from the heights. Some of their windows might get broken, and on occasion they actually nailed one of the leaded glass windows in our house. Water balloon battles mostly were reserved for Lambda Chi Alpha, launched with a

surgical tube catapult. No real involvement with Triangle (the engineering fraternity behind the parking lot, the Italian fraternity down on Stewart, Young Israel, or Chi Phi. Kappa Alpha, across the street were a bunch of prissy guys all proud that instead of a badge *they* had a *key*.

The clash of booze and pot. The first whiffs of grass breezed through the house around the Fall of 1967 as I recall (a recollection perhaps influenced by the whiffs.) By 1968 there was a significant part of the house partaking and by the Spring of 1969 it had become an issue. Party weekends would find half the house downstairs partying and drinking beer as was proper and seemly. The other half would be up in their rooms stoned out of their gourds and not participating. I managed to do both. That's all for now.

I'm sure I've left stuff out but this is a start. NOW all you have to do is sit down and send in your own memories and help out. We really need to put this together before we are just drooling old coots. (Well o.k. so I already drool ...). Just a simple letter to the editor will help. English majors might need to do a bit better. Math majors can send in a complex formula showing just how all the elements of house life still came out to 1 – or whatever.