

Recollections of Life at Mu Chapter 1936-1942

Verner F. Chaffin

My pledge class of about 20 men was initiated into Mu Chapter on February 22, 1937. The initiation took place at the Chapter House at 294 South Lumpkin Street. Formal dress was required for everyone. The initiation team had rehearsed the ritual and most of them knew their parts by heart. The initiation fee was \$75, and this included the official Sigma Nu pin, a membership certificate, and lifetime subscription to the *Delta*.

Following the ceremony, the entire chapter marched in a body to Costa's for cokes, milkshakes, and other snacks and treats. It was a short walk from the chapter house, and this custom was followed after every initiation. It was an impressive spectacle to witness some 80-90 men dressed in tuxedos, entering this popular student hang-out. Costa's was located on the ground floor of the Southern Mutual Building on College Avenue, across from the present location of the City Parking Garage.

It was also customary for the new initiates to pick up the tab for the treats at Costa's, and this came to about \$3 or \$4 that each of us paid.

The chapter house was a rambling two-story framehouse, painted white. It had been added to several times and provided housing for about 20-25 brothers. A wide porch stretched across the front of the house. A concrete walkway led from the front porch to Lumpkin Street, and the yard was enclosed by hedges. Candler Hall, a dormitory for freshmen and sophomores, was on the other side of Lumpkin

Street. The University Infirmary occupied a small wooden green building on Bocock Street leading from Lumpkin Street to Herty Drive. Denmark Hall (the "Beanery") was opposite the Infirmary. Denmark Hall at that time was a university dining hall; today it houses the School of Environmental Design.

Mrs. Bickerstaff's boarding house was to the south and just to the rear of the Sigma Nu House, and the Chi Phis were our neighbors in the other direction.

Our housemother, Miss Edith Brightwell, was in charge of the chapter house. She planned all our meals, purchased food and supplies, and supervised maintenance of the premises. Miss Brightwell arrived every day about 9 o'clock, and remained through lunch and until after our evening meal. We appreciated all that she did for us and she was extended every courtesy. At dinner, everyone waited for Miss Brightwell to be seated, after which the Commander would call upon a brother to ask the blessing.

Miss Brightwell was assisted by Freddie and Smitty who did the cooking and janitorial work, and Dowdy, the houseboy. Breakfast was served until 10 a.m. on an individual order basis. Dowdy always made sure that the eggs were cooked just right, that the coffee was hot, and that there was always plenty of "sweet stuff" on the table. The whole chapter, due to Dowdy's influence, always referred to jelly, jam or preserves as "sweet stuff."

Sunday was the day for brothers to bring dates to the house for lunch. The kitchen was closed on Sunday evening, and most of the chapter piled into cars and went out to Poss' Barbecue place on the Old Atlanta Highway for a barbecue pork

sandwich and a coke. Very few brothers had cars, and those who did had no difficulty parking them on Lumpkin Street in front of the house. There was no need for off-street parking in those days.

Money went a long way before World War II. Undergraduate tuition was \$37.50 a quarter, a room at Joe Brown Dormitory, the newest on campus, was \$10 a month. The "Beanery" charged \$18 a month for board. At the Sigma Nu House, board was around \$30 a month, room rent was about \$12, and chapter dues were \$7 a month. The Treasurer added an extra \$2 to pay off a house note we owed to National, and \$1 for the general fraternity's permanent endowment fund. Special assessments were also added as needed to pay for house dances, the White Star Formal, hayrides, and other Chapter activities.

The student body at the University totaled about 3,000, and the number of graduates each year was around 700. Campus extra-curricular activities fell into a definite pattern. Fraternities and sororities held their chapter meetings on Monday night; the two literary societies, Demosthen~~ean~~^{ian} and Phi Kappa, met on Tuesday night; on Wednesday night the Red and Black staff put the weekly issue of the paper together, working until the wee hours of the morning in the basement of the old Commerce-Journalism Building. Music Appreciation was held in the Chapel on Thursday night. I will begin on Monday and go through a typical week.

The Chapter met after dinner on every Monday night. Each meeting was opened and closed with an official ritual ceremony performed by the Commander, which included questions to the Chapter and response by the brothers. The roll was

called, and fines would be imposed by the Commander for unexcused absences in excess of a certain number. Each brother was expected to answer the roll by stating the name of another Sigma Nu Chapter, e.g., Gamma Alpha, Georgia Tech; Xi, Emory, etc. Since no chapter name could be used more than once, those in the latter part of the alphabet learned to be resourceful in coming up with chapters. Within a few months, we all learned the designations of most of our 98 chapters. None of us knew when our Executive Secretary, Malcolm C. Sewell, would show up at the house from national headquarters, then located in Indianapolis, Indiana. He seemed to enjoy coming to Athens to inspect Mu Chapter, especially during the winter quarter.

Demosthenian Literary Society was controlled by Sigma Nu and Sigma Chi plus a confederation of non-fraternity men, and this meant that a Sigma Nu would be elected as President on every third election. The other offices were also rotated in similar fashion. All of our pledges were required to attend Demosthenian meetings, and many of our upper classmen went with them. We learned a lot about politics and also how to debate and argue persuasively. The rival literary society, Phi Kappa, was controlled by a shifting coalition composed of SAE's, Phi Delta Thetas, KA's and independents.

Music Appreciation was an informal session conducted by Mr. Hugh Hodgson, head of the Music Department. He was witty and entertaining. Junior College women from the co-ordinate college (now the Navy Supply School) were allowed to sign out for Music Appreciation, and this was obviously a great attraction.

The Chapel was usually packed.

Woodruff Hall was the basketball arena and also the center for campus social events. It stood across from Memorial Hall on a portion of the site where the Journalism-Psychology Building is now located. On Friday and Saturday nights a dance was usually scheduled in Woodruff Hall. Some of these dances were open to any student who could pass Dean Tate's sobriety test and pay \$1 for admission. At other times Woodruff Hall would be reserved by a club or other student organization, but even these dances were generally open to all students who wished to attend. In addition, the sororities usually had "tea dances" at their chapter houses to introduce their new pledges to the campus.

During the Fall Quarter our chapter generally had two or three house dances, each having a theme such as the saddle shoe shuffle, shipwreck party, etc. The Winter Quarter featured our White Star Formal dance in Woodruff Hall. Winter Quarter was a busy season because most of the fraternity and sorority formals were held during this period, together with the military ball and the barrister's ball.

The two biggest social events of the year were Homecoming and Little Commencement. Homecoming was usually in November and Little Commencement was in April or early May. A big name band, such as Tommy Dorsey, Tony Pastor, Jan Savitt, Gene Krupa, Benny Goodman or Charley Spivak, was booked for a four-dance series over a two-day period. This included a tea dance, breakfast dance, and two evening dances. A block ticket (including date) for all functions could be purchased for \$5.50 or \$6.00. These events were sponsored by the Inter-Fraternity

Council.

We were the envy of the campus at the Little Commencement dances in the spring of 1938, featuring Kay Kyser and his orchestra. We knew that Kay Kyser was a Sigma Nu from the University of North Carolina, and we invited him to bring his band to the Sigma Nu House for a private party following the Friday night dance. He accepted our invitation and the band, with feature singers Ish Kabibble, Ginny Sims, Harry Babbitt and Sully, put on a great show for the brothers and their dates.

The Greeks played a major role in campus politics as well as in social life. There were 16 fraternities on the campus prior to World War II. The first fraternity came to Georgia in 1866. When Mu Chapter was established in 1873, there were five other fraternities on the campus: SAE, Chi Phi, KA, Phi Delta Theta, and Sigma Chi.

The 1941 *Pandora* has this to say about Sigma Nu:

"The first chapter of Sigma Nu was organized at Virginia Military Institute in 1869. Throughout the years, the fraternity has grown to its present size of 98 active chapters. These chapters are well distributed over the country, having at least one chapter in each state except New Mexico and South Dakota, which states do not allow fraternities in their colleges."

"Sigma Nu colors are black, white and gold, and the pin is in the shape of a five-armed star, with a coiled serpent in the center. This pin was voted the handsomest pin of any fraternity or sorority in ballots from

various sources."

"Mu Chapter of Sigma Nu was the sixth fraternity on the University of Georgia campus. It was organized in 1873, and has been in continuous existence since that time. The fraternity stands for high ideals, and it is one of the most versatile on campus. It has, and always has had, men in high campus offices, and almost all clubs and organizations."

The *Pandora's* assessment of Sigma Nu as being one of the most versatile fraternities on the campus was right on the money. Our brothers were regularly elected to Gridiron, to office on the Inter-Fraternity Council and chosen as student officers in the R.O.T.C. We were well represented on the editorial and business staffs of the *Red and Black* and the *Pandora*. We had men on the varsity football team, e.g., Brothers Alf Anderson and Jim Cavan were known as the "touchdown twins" of the 1936 team. We were also represented in other varsity sports such as boxing, swimming, rifle and tennis. Men from Mu Chapter were elected to Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Kappa Phi, ODK, Blue Key and Sphinx. Sigma Nus were also active in the Glee Club, the debate team and as earlier noted, the Demosthenian Literary Society. Participation in extra-curricular activities was encouraged in our pledge training, and our senior brothers stood ready to assist the younger men in getting a good start.

Our alumni brothers on the faculty were also a source of strength to the chapter and we could always count upon their support when the need arose. They

were Professor John W. Jenkins (Economics), Professor John Wade (English), Professor John C. Meadows (Dean of the Peabody College of Education) and Professor John Tison (English).

One of our most loyal supporters was Miss Moina Michael. The story we heard was that Miss Moina was engaged to be married to a Sigma Nu near the beginning of World War I. Unfortunately he was killed in action in France and was buried in the military cemetery at Flanders Field. Miss Moina was struck by the beautiful poppies that grew in Flanders Field, and wrote a poem paying tribute to those who were buried there. She conducted a national campaign for the sale of poppies on Armistice Day of each year (now Veterans Day) in support of our veterans and their families. Miss Moina was known throughout the United States as the "Poppy Lady."

Miss Moina never married and during her later years she lived in a suite at the Georgian Hotel. She would frequently walk down to the house to visit "my Sigma Nus" and have dinner with us. She rejoiced in the successes of Mu Chapter and looked forward each year to attending the White Star Formal.

In the early 1930s Miss Moina presented a marble bust of herself to the Chapter. It was always displayed on the mantel in the den, along with other trophies and cups. On one occasion, some prankish brothers removed the bust to the front lawn, where they proceeded to throw baseballs at it. Using Miss Moina for target practice was bad enough, but things suddenly got worse when the baseball tossers spotted Miss Moina walking down Lumpkin less than a block from the house.

Somehow they got the bust back to its place on the mantel and just made it to the front door to greet Miss Moina.

The chapter had accumulated an impressive collection of cups and trophies, but the brothers were always after another one. We decided to compete for the trophy for Sunday School attendance given by the University Class at First Presbyterian Church. This class was taught by Bob Gunn, the owner of a men's store in downtown Athens. The attendance contest went on for about two months. Each Sunday a count would be taken of the number present from different clubs or groups, mostly fraternities and sororities. Every Sunday our pledges and brothers would attend the University Class as one body. Any pledge who did not show would be held accountable, and brothers who missed without a prior excuse were subject to fines imposed by the Commander. We won the Sunday School cup hands down. The whole campus was surprised that so many sigma Nus had suddenly become so religious.

Our only other organized appearance at church services was to commemorate our annual Founders Memorial Day. Arrangements would be made in advance with the church selected, and the entire chapter would sit together, each man wearing a white rose on the lapel of his coat.

For quite some time our alumni and chapter leaders had been aware of the need for a new chapter house, and most felt that we should tear down our old house and build the new one at the same location, 294 South Lumpkin Street. This was in the days of the Roosevelt New Deal, and some of our prominent alumni,

working with University officials, decided to apply for federal funding from the Public Works Administration. The application was granted, and the funding was approved. In the spring of 1939 a sign was erected in front of our chapter house designating the project as funded by the Federal Administration of Public Works.

The old chapter house was razed, and the chapter moved to temporary housing on Hill Street to await the construction of our new house. A few months later we received the bad news. Somebody in the U.S. Department of the Interior had discovered that the new structure was not to be used as a dormitory by the University, but as a home for a social fraternity. After all, the plans showed a housemother's room and a chapter room.

The new building was almost completed, but the Secretary of Interior decreed that Sigma Nu would not be allowed to use it. Instead, it became a Graduate Dormitory for law and graduate students.

The next two years were troubled times for the chapter. We remained in temporary housing -- on Hill Street, then at the corner of Milledge and Hill, and finally at Lucas Hall, located between Memorial Hall and Milledge Hall. The chapter persevered, we continued to attract good pledge classes, and our alumni rose up to be counted.

Through the efforts of Senator Walter F. George (Mercer Chapter), Governor Eugene Talmadge, Brother Herman Talmadge, and Brother Hatton Lovejoy, we obtained a tract of land on River Road from the University of Georgia. Through negotiations with the University and federal officials, we received generous

reimbursement for the loss of our old house and lot on South Lumpkin Street.

The River Road location was envisioned as the beginning of a modern Fraternity Row overlooking the Oconee River. Funding was arranged, and no detail was spared in planning or construction. The general contractor was Fennell Construction Company, Gainesville, Georgia.

The new house on River Road was completed, and the chapter moved in after spring holidays in April 1941. The 1942 *Pandora* could not resist commenting on the completion of this grand project:

"The Sigma Nus are spending their first year at their palatial country estate out River Road way on the mythical Fraternity Row. The house which overlooks the Oconee River, is built according to French Provincial style of architecture and is the latest thing in fraternity housing at the University."

What happened to the federally-funded house built at 294 South Lumpkin Street? It continued to be used as a University Graduate dormitory for several years after World War II. With the passage of time its use as a dormitory ceased to be feasible, so federal authorities and University officials determined that the building could now be used for private purposes. Ironically, Sigma Nu was then offered the premises for use as a chapter house. Mu Chapter declined, since we already had our River Road home, which was incomparably superior to the Lumpkin Street building. The house was subsequently offered to the KA fraternity. It remains there today.

The new house was indeed a dream come true and well worth the wait for its completion. But less than eight months after we had moved in, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the United States entered World War II. That changed the lives of all of us. What was important now was to find some way to serve our country. Many Sigma Nus from Mu Chapter joined the armed forces, others served in the FBI, and others in civilian occupations for the war effort.

Some paid the supreme sacrifice. I know of at least two who did, but I'm sure there were more. A plaque hangs in the Law School. It bears this inscription: "In Memory of Those Alumni of the University of Georgia School of Law who Gave Their Lives in world War II So that Liberty Under Law Might Live." The twenty-five persons listed on the plaque were all friends of mine. But I especially notice two of my brothers from Mu Chapter every time I walk past the plaque down the corridor of the Law School: James A. Hungerpiller, Jr., whom I rushed and pledged, and William Franklin Norris, our Chapter Treasurer and my room-mate in 1939-40.