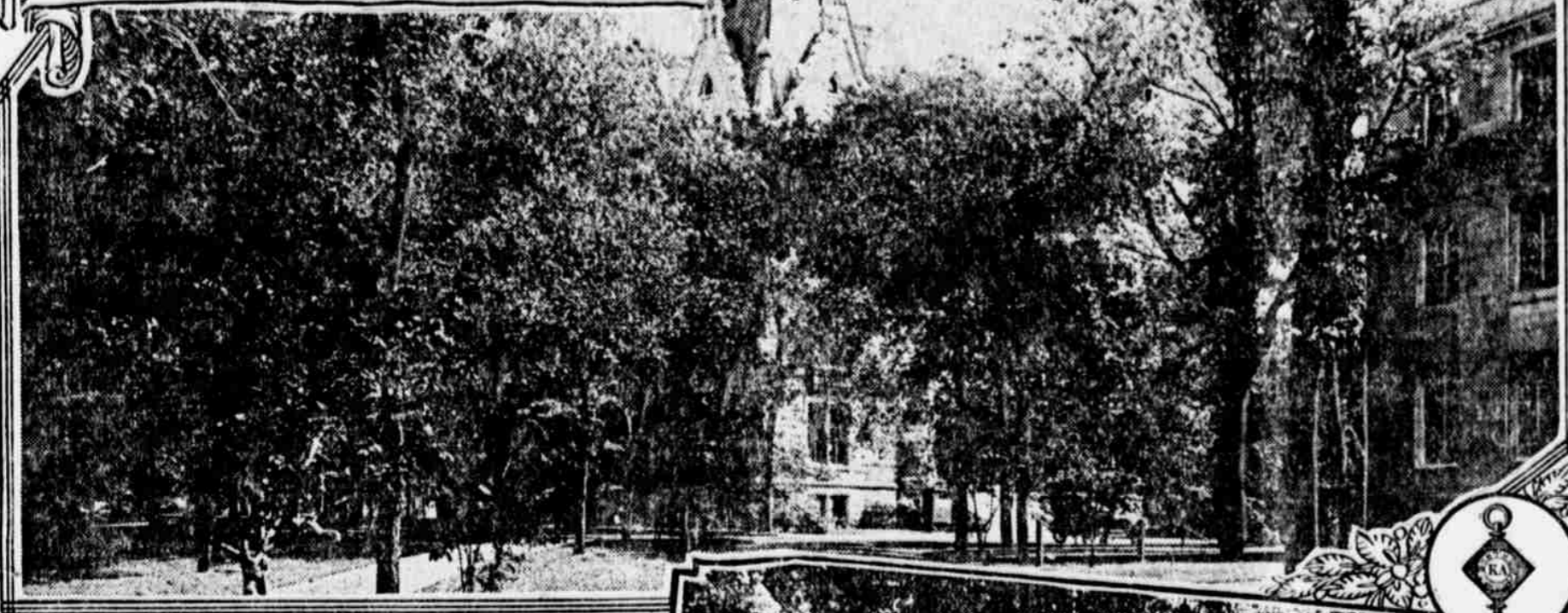


College Fraternities



COLLEGE fraternities—"Greek-letter societies"—are much discussed in these days of increased public interest in the higher institutions of learning. The public is discussing their place in the American scheme of life and their measure of success in fulfilling their mission. Consequently the college fraternities are criticized and defended, since they are a feature of student life of large importance. Are the fraternities an influence for good? Are they a detriment rather than a benefit to the student? What are they? What is their purpose? Should a boy join or keep out? These are the questions asked by fathers and mothers and guardians.

The titles of nearly all of these societies are Greek letters, which usually refer to a motto expressive of the purpose of the organization. They are secret societies, with grips, badges, rituals and initiatory ceremonies.

Probably the fraternities should be put in four classes: General, local, professional and women's. In the first group there are about fifty fraternities of established reputation. Their chapters vary greatly as to numbers; the range is probably from seven to eighty. Corresponding to these are the sororities for women, perhaps twenty in number.

Phi Beta Kappa was the first society with a Greek-letter name. It was founded in 1776 at the college of William and Mary, and was originally a secret society. Other chapters were established. Owing to an early prejudice against secret societies, its secrets were exposed in 1831. The letters stand for Greek words translated "Philosophy Is the Guide of Life." Since 1831 Phi Beta Kappa has been an honorary society in most of the large colleges and scholarship rank determines the membership. Women have been admitted since 1875.

In 1825 at Union college a group of congenial students began the organization of a secret Greek-letter fraternity. They divided over the ritual. Some of them founded Kappa Alpha. The rest founded Sigma Phi in 1827. This was the beginning of the college fraternities of today.

Membership in the Greek-letter fraternities is probably over 300,000. Alumni usually retain active interest. There are executive committees or councils composed of alumni, which are corporations and hold legal title to the property of the fraternities—which is worth millions. Most fraternities own their chapter houses. Conventions are held with supreme legislative power. The Inter-Fraternity Conference has met annually since 1900 to act on questions of common interest.

Thomas Arkle Clark, dean of men at the University of Illinois, has an interesting article with the title, "Shall I Join a Fraternity?" in the American Boy. Mr. Clark was not a fraternity man in college; therefore he is able to speak from the viewpoint of the outsider. On the other hand, he did join a college fraternity five years after graduation, has visited fraternities all over the country and has made a study of them. Moreover, as a college dean of men for more than twenty years he has had intimate relationships with thousands of undergraduates, including the active members of many fraternities. Mr. Clark, in short, is considered a competent authority on college fraternities. In general he approves them. Moreover, his article before publication was read to several college presidents and professors and high school superintendents, some fraternity men and some not, and approved by them. Here are some of the points he makes, pro and con:

The young man entering college is confronted with a good many problems which his father before him did not have to solve, and one of these is the fraternity question; for though the college fraternity was in existence thirty years ago, it did not, to anything like the extent it does today, dominate college life and control the direct undergraduate activities. Its influence was then confined pretty largely to a limited number of small colleges in a restricted territory; its membership was not large, and its members not closely associated.

In speaking of the college fraternity I do not wish to have it confused with the fraternity in the high school. Excepting, perhaps, in academies and boarding schools where the boys are away from home and need the training and the associations which come from an organized home life and the responsibilities which arise from bringing these things about, the high school fraternity has been pretty generally a detriment both to the character and to the scholarship of its members. It has often taken them away from the restraints of home when these were most needed. It has developed snobbishness, extravagance and social excesses which have been hurtful to the general morale of the schools. It has had many



of the evils of the college fraternity without any of its advantages. I have seen a good deal of the high school fraternity and the product which it turns out, and I am free to say that if I had a son I should not want him to join such an organization.

The college fraternity first came into existence almost one hundred years ago when college attendance and the conditions surrounding college life were very different from what they now are. In those days colleges were small, and the undergraduates were housed in college dormitories or scattered about the town and fed at boarding houses. There was perhaps no thought in the minds of the men who founded the first Greek letter fraternities of developing a home and home life for their members. The main purpose was to strengthen character, to develop good scholarship, and to emphasize and encourage certain qualities of friendship. Often there was a literary purpose. The men who founded the first fraternities were mostly very religious men who believed sincerely in the principles of life and conduct as expounded by the founder of the Christian church.

Fraternity rituals today still emphasize these principles and hold up to fraternity members the highest standards of daily life. The teachings of fraternities are distinctly religious in their influence, and the secret work to which some of the enemies of fraternities object has nothing sinister or vicious in it, but is really of the most harmless and innocent character.

It was not until within very recent years, when the attendance upon colleges began to increase and the conditions of undergraduate living began to change materially, that fraternities began to expand and to emphasize as they had never done before the function of the fraternity in developing for the undergraduate in college a normal and a healthy home life.

In fact, fraternities are not only increasing their own membership but they are doing everything they can to encourage the organization of new fraternities, so that every man who wants to join may have a chance to do so. Colleges, also, whose doors have hitherto been closed to the admission of fraternities are relaxing their regulations and are giving permission to fraternities to come in—and all this because those who know most about fraternities think their influence a good one.

At the present time national Greek letter fraternities, of which there are perhaps fifty, are the organized force in college activities. They take the place that was once occupied by the college literary society which taught men to speak, which interested them in the politics of college, and which in general controlled and directed what went on in undergraduate affairs outside of the classroom. But the fraternity does still more than this. There are very few fraternities now which do not have their own houses on every campus. These houses form centers of home life which do much to take the place of the life which the boy has known with his own family before going away to college.

It often costs more to live in a fraternity house than it does outside. The food at the fraternity table is ordinarily better than that the student gets at a boarding house, and the general living conditions are more comfortable and convenient; one has to pay for these. The social life of fraternity men is more active and so requires the expenditure of more money for clothing and social pleasures. Sometimes the living conditions have been made too luxurious for the doing of good work, and at times the social life is excessive and the expenditure of money extravagant; but these conditions do not frequently or generally exist. I

do not know any chapter of any fraternity—and I know hundreds of them—which does not contain men, respected by everyone in the chapter and in the college, who are earning their living in college through their own efforts; but in general, unless the man concerned has some special talent, this is not so easy to do unaided when in a fraternity as when out of it.

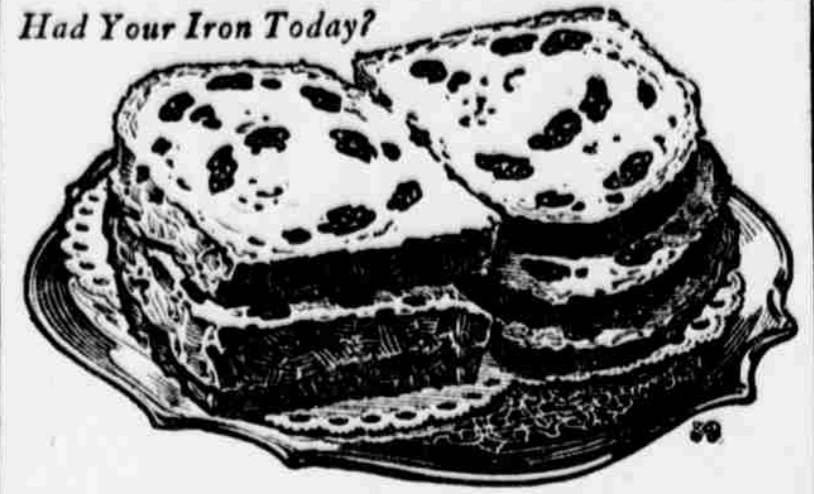
The man who joins a fraternity loses something of his independence. Being a part of an organized group of men, he is not so free to do as he pleases as he would be if he did not have this relationship. He must submit to regulations, he must learn to adapt himself to the conditions of home life, and to the idiosyncrasies of a score or more of people. He will often have to yield his desires and his rights, perhaps, to the will of the organization, for those who go into an organization must be willing to do what will bring the greatest good to the greatest number. He must learn to get on with people, to give up, to be unselfish, to do that which will be most helpful and advantageous to his brothers. Many fellows do not like to do this, and sometimes parents do not wish them to learn, so that such men would make poor fraternity men, and they would be unhappy and make their friends unhappy in the making.

There is a tendency when a man joins a fraternity for him to be satisfied with the friends he meets within its membership, and so to narrow his interests, to restrict his acquaintances, and to undervalue the broader training which comes from a more general contact with men. It is only the weak and narrow-minded man, however, who will fall into this snobbishness and who will restrict his acquaintances and his friends to the men whom he meets within his fraternity. The number of such men is fortunately not large.

But there are advantages in fraternity life and these I believe outweigh these possible evils or disadvantages which I have mentioned. The boy who joins a fraternity establishes himself in a home with many of the same duties and comforts of the home life to which he has been accustomed before going to college, and the fraternity house remains to him a home even after he gets out of college. He gathers around him immediately a group of friends who have his best interests at heart. It has been said by those who oppose the fraternity system, that his choice of friends is made too quickly to be satisfactory; that it is a very mechanical choice seldom based upon the principles which underlie true friendships, and that the friendship thus formed is an evanescent one. But the fact that fraternity brothers in every chapter in every college where fraternities exist are not only close friends while they are in college, but remain so throughout life, tends to disprove such a statement. A fraternity man is seldom dissatisfied with the friends he has chosen.

The ideals of life formally set before the fraternity man, and these as I have said, are practically always based upon Christian principles, are the highest possible. The character of the men who were responsible for the founding of these organizations and the character of the national officers who are now in charge of fraternity affairs in each organization will substantiate this fact. The interfraternity conference, which for the last dozen years has done more to bring fraternities and fraternity men together than any other agency, and which is constantly suggesting methods in the fraternity of developing good scholarship, of strengthening moral principles, and of encouraging loyalty to the college and co-operation with its officers, is composed of a most representative group of business and professional men—lawyers, doctors, ministers—and the best in the country.

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