

June 27, 1975.

Dear Mike:

In response to your letter of May 27, which has just reached me, I am glad to write down a few random reminiscences that come to my mind. You can select from them any that you think might be of interest to the modern age

I entered M.I.T. in September, 1914, which put me in the class of 1918, but two and a half years later the war threw everything into confusion so that I graduated as of 1920 (actually in March of that year). I did, however have the inestimable privilege of two years in the old M.I.T. at Copley Square. Of course the buildings were long outdated, crowded and inadequate, but Boston in those days was a thoroughly civilized place, and Copley square had a charm all its own that sheds glamour over the memory. So the most squalid rookeries of Paris or Göttingen have acquired a glow in retrospect for the students who inhabited them.

We all wore high laced shoes (with hooks inserted in the top four holes), felt hats, (only a few rare eccentrics went hatless), vests, and detachable starched collars fastened front and rear by means of brass collar buttons. Shirts with attached collars began to appear only a few years later, as did the Herbert Hoover collar with rounded corners. Vests disappeared in summer, and straw boaters appeared. Student beards were unknown, and only a few professors wore them, usually in the form of decorous goatees, though one who had a really opulent brown beard was known as "Creeping Jesus".

The Sigma^{Chi} House in those days was at 1067 Beacon St, between Carlton and Hawes Sts. This put it in Brookline, just beyond the Boston city limits. The D.U. house was next door, and S.A.E across Beacon at the corner of Carlton. Most of the others were in the Back Bay. At that time the Boylston St. subway cars surfaced at Arlington, proceeded to Mass. Avenue, North to Beacon and thence, ^{on} the surface before they reached their surface divergence to Beacon and Commonwealth. This later brought fearful congestion as auto traffic grew, and getting Kenmore tracks all underground was a major operation. Student cars were a rarity, so we used the subway or walked to Copley Square.

I pledged Sigma Chi in October and moved into the house, which only held 20 or so, and a few lived outside. Meals had a pleasant patriarchal flavor, with a T shaped table, and Whit Brown '15 as Consul carving the roast at the head. There was a wind-up Victrola in the front hall, and a good supply of 78 rpm records. Electric pick-up was then unknown but it still sounded pretty good, at least to our uncritical ears. Caruso sounded like Caruso all right, singing Tosti's Addio and the Street song from Naughty Marietta (Victor Herberg) sounded just as it does still. Alexander's Ragtime Band was in full swing, likewise Oh You Beautiful Doll.

After the Armistice on November 11, 1918, de-mobilization proceeded rapidly, and those of us who fought the war on this side of the Atlantic got our discharges beginning in December and January. So when the second semester opened late in January there were a good many members of the chapter looking for a place to live, the Brookline house having been vacated earlier. We took quite a number of rooms in the old Fritz Carlton Hotel (it seems hard to believe, but that was its name) on Boylston St. between Massachusetts Avenue and the Fenway. Perhaps it still stands, but not under that name. So we had a nucleus for the chapter. I think I was the first member of the chapter to see the 532 Beacon St. house.

As consul, I made a few trips around the Back Bay with John B. McPherson, chairman of the chapter trustees. In contrast with the housing shortage after world war II, there were a number of vacancies, and 532 looked to us like the best bet. The house had been vacant two or three years but was in fair condition. We took out of storage the furniture from 1067, bought some more, and moved in very soon. Exact dates and the details of financing have faded from my memory, but it was a rental arrangement and I think it was ten years or more before the chapter purchased the House. It had belonged to Thomas Lamont, the financier, and followed the somewhat pretentious Back Bay style of the 1890's, e.g. the columns in the second floor living room and the really beautiful pipe organ in the lower hall. This last was greatly admired and was regarded as a rushing asset. Now and then we would have a member who was a real musician and was also willing to make the organ his hobby. This was none of your modern electronic instruments, but a real pipe organ in the old tradition. The trouble was that as the years went on its devoted caretakers would graduate, the rats would eat the bellows and it became a nuisance. As I remember it was in the late 1930's that it was replaced by a telephone booth. It was during my 30 years as a trustee of the chapter, but I can't nail down the date. The same can be said of all the major expenses that crowded upon us: a new roof, a new heating plant, kitchen range, dishwasher and so on.

A major problem arose as a result of the Coconut Grove fire in Boston about 1943, which took nearly 500 lives. Fire regulations were drastically revised, and this entailed major structural changes in all the houses.

An interesting detail was the great hot water story. When we took the house in 1919 there was one vacant lot west of it, then several more houses to the corner. When the Fensgate Hotel was built, taking all this space, they were anxious to rent our garage for storage. They made a deal with the chapter to supply it with hot water in lieu of rent, and simply ran a pipe through the wall. So an unlimited supply of hot showers became a chapter habit. I think either the management changed, or they simply forgot about it, but eventually they caught up with it and found it was costing them a lot, and the deal was terminated.

John B. McPherson whom I mentioned above deserves a chapter to himself. A graduate of Gettysburg college, he worked for the Wool Manufacturers' trade association in Boston, a job which I think he found less than congenial. People who did not know him well were apt to be misled by his stiff, grumpy manner; he might have been a character out of Charles Dickens. But he had a heart of gold despite his extraordinary pessimism. Sigma Chi was his hobby, his continual occupation and the breath of life to him. He knew every member of the chapter complete with his entire

ancestry and life history, and his keen scent could detect a legacy for pledging sometimes several ~~down~~ the road of the future. We might think of him at first as an old fuddy duddy, but as we really got to know him we came to realize how much we owed to him over his long years of interest in the chapter. I was honored to be asked to succeed him on the board of trustees, but nobody could ever take his place. He died, I think in the early 1930's, at least it was when I was teaching economics at M.I.T. I took over as director of admissions at the Institute in 1936 and continued in this until my retirement in 1961. After that I was around for five years on a half-time basis which gave me time for a number of outside projects in the educational world.

I greatly enjoyed my many years of association with Alpha Theta Chapter both as student and alumnus. I think that partly through historical accident and necessity the fraternities at M.I.T. have played a more responsible part in student life than in many colleges, and have been a formative influence. This is because each group had to run its own affairs, manage a house and meals and in general make ends ^{meet}; this is always a profoundly educational experience. The system now in effect, I believe at Amherst and Brown, involves central college management of meals and housing, yet leaves in effect the social separatism and the petty inter-house chauvinism that constitute the less admirable side of the fraternity system. In my experience the best chapters are those that either through accident or design have managed to get together a group that is more than ordinarily heterogeneous in origin and tradition. Many college students have not outgrown the late adolescent phase of being unable to feel at home except ^{amongst} that resembles themselves. It is so much easier to not be forced to entertain any unfamiliar ideas. So far as education goes the natural human tendency to want to associate only with one's own kind is highly counterproductive.

That is enough philosophizing. Unrelated details keep popping into my mind, like the early morning baseball games at the Dean Road playground when we were in Brookline. Then there was the visit from Mme. Ernestine Schumann-Heink, the Metropolitan's great Wagnerian soprano. She was in Boston on one of her many "farewell tours". It was her unique distinction to have had a son in the German army and one in the U.S. army who had been Alpha Theta, 1910. She had pleasant associations with the group and accepted our invitation to dinner. She had planned to sing for us, but her accompanist was ill. However she put on a marvelous solo performance at dinner, just put together out of sheer energy, exuberance and high spirits. She was a regular three ring circus all by herself. I can't remember at all what we talked about but everybody had a wonderful time. This was, I think, in 1919. If you ever see a copy of Irvin Cobb's book "A Laugh a Day keeps the Doctor away" look up the story in it about one of her other farewell tours. Here is a challenge to the chapter Scholar if you have such an one.

My best regards to you all. I am sure that you are collectively a great deal smarter than we were, and I trust you will also turn out to be wiser after you have completed your normal quota of instructive mistakes,

Hopefully yours,

"Bat" Thresher

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