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Alpha Theta Chapter
Sigma Chi Fraternity
532 Beacon Street
Boston, MA

Dear Brother Sigs,

Your telephone call and invitation to the Alumni get together was greatly appreciated. When you asked about conditions at the chapter house when I lived there, it occurred to me that this might be of further interest as it happened a long time ago: 1923-1927.

Academically, it was difficult, as I'm sure it now is in a much more sophisticated way. If we talked technically, I probably wouldn't understand your words, much less the subject being discussed. Since the academic accomplishments of the time, Jim Killian's era at the house, have been well documented, I'll stick to some of the lighter incidents.

Arriving at the Institute as a green high school graduate, I was considerably awed on entering Walker Memorial to try out for the Musical Clubs. I was a bashful, moderately accomplished saxophone player. This visit turned out well in two ways: I was invited to join a four man dance band of undergraduates as a fifth member: two saxophones, piano, banjo and traps. We played together for four years under the name of the "Tech Tunesters", doing many fraternity dances and reaching a high point playing for a Dartmouth Winter Carnival Ball. The beauty of this work lay in enjoying an evening and then being paid for it: \$12 till 12 P.M., \$15 till 1 and \$18 till 2, (Big Money).

The second but more important outcome of the Walker visit was meeting a Sigma Chi rushing committee member. This resulted in being rushed and later accepted as a member of Alpha Theta Chapter.

The chapter house looked, from the outside, much as it appears in photos today. Inside, the first room on the left held a grand piano and was reserved as a music room and parlor. At the rear left of the front hall, was a pipe organ with impressive gilded pipes. Unfortunately, the organ was seldom played since rats enjoyed gnawing through the controls from the keys and stops. These were frequently repaired but the rats won out in the end.

Rats were plentiful in all the houses near the river, living in spaces beneath cellar floors. They came out to feed from back yard garbage cans and we declared an open season on hunting them with 22 caliber rifle from a second floor window. This was fairly successful but many survived and I'm sure you are blest with some of their descendants.

The rifle, which seemed to belong to no one in particular figured in another event. It was during summer when the house was sparsely inhabited. In fact, on this day there were only two visiting alumni in residence. They had refreshed themselves more than once and felt no pain as they decided to have target practice.

The top floor hall seemed to form an excellent gallery. An old, decrepit alarm clock made a fine target. The big question was a suitable backup for the target. They finally found a large carton which, when tested, stopped the bullets nicely. Everything went smoothly. The alarm clock suffered little damage and the incident went unnoticed until the carton was opened in the fall disclosing a large supply of toilet paper rolls well perforated.

Perhaps a little background information will shed light on some of the events noted. It was during prohibition and liquor was readily obtainable from certain sources at some risk to personal health and safety. The safest, it was believed, was bought in the form of gallon cans of grain (it was hoped) alcohol which was then mixed with water and juniper flavoring to form the well publicised "Bathtub Gin". This was rather widely consumed, but not too often to excess, and was deemed safer than bootleg Rye which contained God knows what.

Drinking was pretty much confined to weekend parties and dances and it is interesting to note that, while there were many happily exuberant people, I can't recall any unpleasant or violent incidents. There was frequently the one overindulgent soul who quietly passed out and was carried off upstairs.

The period of the so called "Roaring Twenties" was a very interesting time that I'm sure will never be repeated. Radio was in its infancy and sent out little but occasional music and farm reports. With no TV blasting all the unpleasantness of the earth at you, life was very unstressed. The only news was in the Newspaper or put on the movie screen by Pathe News. By today's thinking, I suspect that time would be considered naive, romantic and selfish. Romantic it certainly was and, for a student of moderate means, it was an exciting and very pleasant time to be alive. Technology was excitingly expanding. Beauty in art, music and entertainment was not frowned upon and could be savored to the full.

To further set the scene, my first airplane ride was in a surplus world War I Jenny biplane at Boston Airport (now Logan). The airport was a cinder paved expanse with one corrugated iron hangar. The plane owner proudly pointed out his home made self starter. When turned on, it rotated and the engine caught, kicked back and stripped the starter gears. When we climbed into the forward cockpit, he shouted from the rear, "The belt is missing from that seat. Just hang on to the ends of the rope there".

The only crime that we heard of was connected with bootlegging and rival gangsters. Boston was a safe place to walk at any time and, my sister, who lived in Manhattan, could walk alone in the city or ride the subways with no fear of molestation.

A seat in the dance band was an excellent vantage point for watching the crowd of dancers. At a typical Alpha Theta dance, the women were generally beautiful, wearing attractive evening gowns in a variety of pastelle shades. The men were tuxedo clad in well fitting, all black tuxedos. Dancing was mostly variations of Fox Trot, slow and fast and waltzes. We usually started the evening off with slow, melodic numbers. As the evening progressed, we'd increase the tempo and volume and watch the dancers change from a slightly self conscious, slow moving group to a crowd of uninhibited swingers. The tunes were mostly ballads ranging from slow and melodic to "Gut Bucket Low Down".

Our meals at the house were quite good as I remember. We sat eight to a table and someone discovered that, if two diners on one side lifted the table, others responded in self protection and the table rose rapidly toward the ceiling. As pledges, we all remembered sitting on infinity, the front 1/4 inch of chair.

Many incidents come to mind: the Model T Ford cars, mine with the top bows and straps but no material, how to skid one diagonally into a curbside parking place in winter, (the beauty of two wheel brakes), the member of another fraternity who brought his date to a formal dance on the back of his motorcycle and drove up the front steps of the Somerset Hotel and into the lobby. This could go on, but only at the risk of becoming a rambling and verbose nonagenarian.

I hope this somewhat extended missive will give you a little of the light hearted feeling of an age you wont ever experience and that you'll make some fun for yourselves in an over serious climate.

Sincerely,

R. J. Dexter 27