

THE LATE '60s

Overview

A freshman planning to attend the University of Oklahoma in the late 60's was faced with a decision that could affect the rest of his life – whether or not to participate in rush. The Greek system was strong, and for those interested in the social and leadership experiences fraternities had to offer, there was no other alternative on campus.

Every fraternity had a culture that made it different from the others. Beta Theta Pi was one of only a handful, however, that defined itself largely by objective standards. It simply wanted to be the best in every facet of fraternity life, and to prove its status by winning in every competitive opportunity. We considered ourselves the best house on campus. There were two or three others that were competitive, but when it came to the combination of academics, intramurals, and student leadership, none could compare, and knowing that made the parties the best on campus.

During those years, there were major differences in pledge class size. Of those that pledged, only 27 were initiated from the class of '68. On bid day the following year, there were 65 young men who drank from the Loving Cup for the first time, and approximately 50 were initiated. It was a massive group, both in terms of Beta history and on campus. The class of '70 saw only 24 initiated. These wild swings in numbers affected the personality of the pledge classes and of the house once they were initiated. Given the stress of the Beta pledge program during those years, a young man's personality was much more apparent in a small class, and those in the small classes who finished the pledge year knew more about themselves and their pledge brothers than they would have ever thought possible only a few months before. Those in the larger classes developed a sense of collective strength and breadth of friendships that shaped their undergraduate years.

College life in America may have changed more during the late 60s than any other similar period of time, and our experience at OU was no exception. When we arrived, the University enforced mandatory study hall for freshmen, female students had curfews, and all housing was gender separated. By the time we left, there were no such restrictions, and there were co-ed dorms. Male students who arrived in 1964 were subject to a mandatory two years in ROTC, although that requirement ended the following year. We were all subject to the draft, but deferments were readily available for college students. That changed in 1969 when the first draft lottery since 1942 was held and virtually all deferments ended.

After 25 years of stable growth and continuity at the University under the leadership of George Cross, Herb Holloman arrived in 1968 to become President of OU. His years were marked by controversy over his style and his objectives. Campus activists, while moderate when compared to those at other major universities, contributed to Holloman's problems, and he resigned in 1970.

While there was turmoil in the nation and around the campus, in many ways life at the Beta house was sheltered. We were a conservative group, much more focused on ourselves, and

on Beta and its success, than on the political issues of the day. Most of us changed the way we dressed, some of us grew our hair, and a few of us became very involved politics and public issues, but ultimately, the views and attitudes of our upbringing were the prevailing values that we still held when we left the Beta house.

Another interesting aspect of the house at that time was that most of us came from small towns in Oklahoma, from families of modest success. There were a few from Oklahoma City, a handful from Tulsa, and some from out of state, but the overwhelming majority came from Enid, Norman, Ponca City, Lawton, Muskogee, Ardmore, McAlester, and even smaller towns such as Chelsea, Hooker, and Fletcher. A few came from families with wealth, but by and large our parents were middle-class. Our small town backgrounds may have had much to do with our competitive spirit and success.

None of the outside influences was more important than the continuing war in Vietnam. While it was not a daily topic of conversation, it was something all of us considered, and many of us dreaded. That changed with the draft lottery. After the lottery, those with high numbers knew they could get on with their lives after college. Those with low numbers scrambled to find slots in ROTC, the National Guard, or the Reserves.

While success in grades, intramurals, and activities was important, we were a social fraternity. We partied every chance we had. Most were in the house, but Barn Dance and the Spring Formal were held off campus. The Interfraternity Council was responsible for enforcing the no-alcohol rules of the University, so their representatives usually showed up at some point during the evening. Avoiding apprehension was easy, however, as long as you drank from a paper or Styrofoam cup.

Some parties were better than others. Long before the Dallas Cowboys made Bubbles Cash a brand name as the unofficial mascot of America's Team, the Pledge Class of 1966 invited Bubbles to participate in their pledge class walkout. While we know she made an appearance, unfortunately, only a handful of the pledge class actually remember the evening.

Some parties were worse than others. The tragic death of sophomore Bill Holland during Barn Dance of 1966 has never been forgotten. Bill was one of those members who always had a smile on his face and who every pledge knew would be his best friend after initiation.

While parties often provided the landmarks of the social year, the brotherhood of Gamma Phi, and the place it holds in our hearts, was based on the experience of living every day with a group of people with whom we shared both differences and commonality. Those of us who had been raised in apolitical or Democrat households met people who believed FDR was the devil incarnate. Those who came from families with academic and working class backgrounds were exposed to the parents of our friends who were doctors, lawyers, and business leaders, and vice versa. We watched and learned from the older members as they dealt with class selection, professors, university rules and those who administered them, alcohol, personal relationships, money, and career preparation. We ate steaks, spaghetti, cold cuts, pizza, and chocolate chip sheet cakes together. We sat on the front porch and watched the world go by. We played cards, listened to Sgt. Pepper, and saw Simon and Garfunkel together.

It was a great time for most of us. We were young, impressionable, and learning. We often did not get it right the first time, but most of us got it right by the time we graduated. We were capable when we arrived on campus or we would not have received a bid. We could have done it on our own, but we would not be the men we are today without Beta Theta Pi, and it would not have been nearly as much fun.

Class of '70

Every contributor to this series of articles on Gamma Phi history writes from the perspective as a member of a particular pledge class. Every pledge class had a personality of its own, shaped by events and individual members.

No discussion of the Beta house in the late 60's would be complete without reference to James Elder, and his impact on the pledge class of 1966 was deep and permanent. After a somewhat normal pledge year, Elder's rise to icon status began with the Line Speech during his sophomore year. No one was more dedicated to pledge activities than James. No one was more demanding than James. No one was more committed to his goals to shape the pledge class of 1966 than James. No one, no way, no how.

The Class of '70 was leadership rich. Of the 24 initiates, three served as president of the house. On campus, four were Top Ten Freshmen, five were members of Pe-et, men's (at that time) honor society for the top 10 seniors, one was named Dad's Day Outstanding Senior Man, another received the Gold Letzeiser Award for the Outstanding Senior Man, and another was Army ROTC Brigade Commander.

No class saw more change in the world around them than did the Class of '70. On bid day in 1966, former Gamma Phi President and Marine 2nd Lieutenant Doug Frantz, one of a long line of Frantz legacies, leaned against the living room mantle and symbolized all that had been important to young American men of our time. In May of 1970, some of us wearing uniforms at the final Army ROTC parade of the year were fearful of how we would react if the "flower children" chose to interfere. Sandals had replaced cordovan loafers. For many, marijuana had replaced alcohol. During our senior year, the pledge class rebelled and the members had no clue of how to respond. In hindsight, at Gamma Phi these changes were a relatively mild outward expression of support for the changes occurring around the country at that time. For some, however, including members of our class, they were changes that encouraged life choices that were very different than many might have made only a few short years before.

Popular Places

River Bottom – best off campus party location

Fears on Highway 9 – shuffleboard, and no ID required

The Mont – sophisticated drinking

Louie's – Thursday nights

Ole John's – the mail box was the only sign

Denco's – was it the grease, the hours, the post-cleanup debriefing, or Lurch?

Where to eat

Boomerang

Orin's Pizza (started on South Base; moved to Legend's current location?)

Copeland's late night delivery service from Beta kitchen

Pledge traditions (no explanation required)

"Statewide" rush parties

negative bids

line speech

Whirr/Humm

gunny sacks

Signs of the times

1966 - Co-ed protests disciplinary rules against Public Display of Affection by holding a kiss-in in Adams Center cafeteria. Beta pledges watch the power of the demonstration in awe.

1967 - Panty Raid at Walker Tower. Beta members stand guard to protect the Chi O's and Thetas.

1968 - King and Kennedy assassinations. Betas are shocked.

1969 - Woodstock. Betas exchange penny loafers, wool slacks and sweaters for sandals, jeans, and field jackets. Marijuana in the house. The 60's come to 800 Chautauqua.

1970 - Kent State. Some Betas participate as ROTC cadets in spring parade. Others protest at the ceremony.

Icons

Mom Vick – retired in 1967 after 14 years as Housemother

Dirty Dozen – 12 initiates of the class of '68

James Elder – slow start, pledge threat, Pledge Trainer, Outstanding Alum

Ronnie Pyle – the "older than dirt" quarterback of the Beta A Team

Frantz family of Enid – Gamma Phi's Dynasty

Bob Herlihy – most harassed pledge

Steve Edwards – played the bass guitar behind his head

Memorable Moments –

Knocks - better not ding John Mantooth's Jag

Home Improvement – digging the Mines

Home Improvement II – replacing door(s) to Randy White's room

Charlie Rainbolt's Power Sit-ups – 1966 pledge class meeting

Betas Really Can't Fly – Hank Meyer falls from second floor window to front porch and lands on his head

Pledge Class Victories

1966 - blocking the front entry with Elder's VW

Conclusion

Then, and I suspect now, the common characteristic in the Beta house was the competitiveness of our members, whether in academics, sports, or campus activities. The desire to excel, both individually and collectively, was the driving force that made Beta what it was and continues to be.

It is remarkable that institutions such as Gamma Phi retain their identity and their worth over many, many years. It is even more remarkable that they endure in the face of a constantly changing active membership and leadership. Clearly, in recent years, alumni involvement has been absolutely critical to our continuing success, but ultimately our leaders and values they seek to sustain are derived from the ever changing flow of young men who live at 800 Chautauqua. Whether one believes it is those who are selected, or how they are trained after they selected, that has provided the leadership to allow this wonderful organization to continue, we can all be proud to call Gamma Phi home.

Yours in -kai -
Jim Sharrock
Class of '70