

DEATH OF A FRATERNITY

BULLETIN: January 20, 1972-Sigma Beta Fraternity of Michigan State University died today. Death was attributed to lack of funds and interest. Surviving are twenty brothers, a flag, and two bells. Funeral arrangements were not immediately available.

Tom Johnson, president of Sigma Beta Fraternity, MSU chapter, sat in a wicker rocking chair in his comfortable off-campus apartment and talked about his fraternity and why it died.

"It's hard, really hard to believe it's actually gone," he said, rocking slowly back and forth. "The 'Rules of the Game' say when you fight and struggle for something you believe in, then you'll win. We didn't. "I guess you could say our troubles began about the same time they did for everyone else, in the autumn of 1968," he continued. "I had joined the year before, and that was my first term in the house. I guess it wasn't the best time to get in."

Fall term, 1968, was a bad time for all fraternities. The Greek System, long the recognized way of getting through college while living the "good life," was suffering from a general lack of interest by the student body at MSU.

For many years membership in a fraternity had been the highest possible status attainable by young college men. At Michigan State as well as other universities, fraternity men were the leaders in government, the athletes, the social lions. Fraternities were the only alternative to the dormitories, for all practical purposes, and the Greek System dominated campus life in almost every facet.

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But by the middle sixties, a change was becoming apparent. Interest in parties, the bars, homecoming floats and water carnivals began to wane, replaced by social activism sparked by anti-war sentiments. Anti-military-establishment-facist-capitalistic-industrial-complex movements made themselves felt. The New Left, the counter-culture, the movement had begun, and with its beginning, a corresponding decline in interest in fraternities and other traditional forms of college life appeared.

Fall term, 1968, was the last term, according to older Greeks at MSU, when rush brought out a respectable showing of men interested in joining a fraternity. In previous years it was not uncommon to entertain as many as 350 to 400 men per night at a large house. Winter term of 1969 most houses recorded nightly rushes of 35 to 40, or fewer.

Another factor that fall was the emergence of the "party guys" as the dominant group in the fraternity. So called because of their penchant for parties and good times, but little else that was constructive, they became, according to Johnson, the rule rather than the exception in the chapter. The new pledges, accordingly, looked up to them as the best example of a Sigma Beta and followed their lead.

Every chapter, Johnson noted, has party guys in a minority. They add some depth and balance to the group. When they become the majority, however, negative forces are set in motion.

"The result was that we kept developing more and more guys who looked to the fraternity as a good time and nothing else," Johnson said.

Still another factor in the beginnings of the Sigma Beta downfall was the easing of standards for entry. Many fraternities, faced with the recruitment and activation of a large pledge class or the possibility of going under, eased or eliminated entire requirements for activation into the fraternity.

Sigma Beta followed suit, to the detriment of the pledge program and eventually the chapter. By eliminating much of the work and knowledge requirements, Johnson said, the pride and feeling that you have had to work and sweat for something was also eliminated, resulting in a lack of spirit and feeling of accomplishment once pledging had ended.

Johnson stubbed out a Marlboro in the already overflowing ashtray in front of him. "I always figured we had a pretty tight house, you know, in comparison with others at State. By spring term of '69, though, things had changed. You couldn't really put your finger on it, but the differences were there."

One change had been the retirement of the housemother at the end of winter term. The effects were subtle but noticeable, as manners deteriorated at supper, the traditional fraternity song at the end of a meal became history, and the general volume of noise rose in the house. A housefather was hired for spring term, but failed to have the desired effect, and in the interest of money was not rehired the next fall.

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“party guys” as the dominant group in the fraternity.**

Pledge programs became more lax term by term. Spring term of 1969, the pledge marshall sat down with the fairly good-sized class and asked them, “What do you guys think you should have to do in order to go active?” “We lost about half of those guys,” Johnson grimaced. “But then, can you blame them? What kind of pledge program is that?”

At the end of spring term, 1969, Sigma Beta outwardly appeared to be in good shape. Inwardly, the cracks were beginning to appear. The physical shape of the house was poor, dangerous cliques had formed with definite lines among brothers; financial responsibilities were beginning to be regarded as a joke.

“Guys kept saying, ‘wait until next year, we’ll be better.’ We had a lot of new guys moving in, and we still had some guys who cared about the house, who would pick up after the others and carry the responsibilities.”

Fall term, 1969, however, brought new troubles to Sigma Beta.

Rush was “way, way down,” according to Johnson, and the few men who did come through the house seemed unimpressed. A small pledge class was formed, but again the mortality rate of pledges dropping out was high, over fifty per cent. In addition, relations within the house were strained.

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“People seemed to forget about consideration, other people, brotherhood if you want to label it. Guys would have their girlfriends up in their rooms, and their roommates would burst through the door half drunk, yelling, banging on the walls, stuff like that. You couldn’t study around there, people had stereos up loud, and there always seemed to be some commotion going on.”

Fraternity traditions continued to fall victim to the efforts to streamline pledging and make the house “easier to live in, with less complications.”

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Take away the traditions, all of them, and as Tom Johnson and Sigma Beta found, only the house and some guys living in it are left. The idealism, the goals, the “brotherhood,” the feelings of belonging after accomplishing the same thing that others for years and years have accomplished, are gone.

Sigma Beta is a non-secret fraternity - non-secret in that it does not have a grip or passwords or long, mysterious rites and rituals of activation. The MSU chapter had always prided itself on that, Johnson said, and even though the Sigma Betas had only been on campus since 1952, they were among the six or seven biggest chapters in terms of numbers.

“When other guys told us of two-day rituals and stuff like that, we always laughed and said we didn’t need it to have a good chapter. And before then, we didn’t.”

“I still don’t think you need it to have a strong fraternity,” Johnson continued, “but I see now where we cut our own throat by taking away everything that made us different from, say, some co-op or something.”

Leadership was another problem. The president elected that fall term was, as Johnson put it, a “good guy, a good leader.” But winter term, 1970, he left to student teach. His replacement was a second term active who had moved into the house just that fall. He was young, naive, and inexperienced in the position. He was unable to cope with the pressures that were to bear upon him the following terms, resulting in a loss of confidence in house leadership at the very time strong and efficient people were needed to put Sigma Beta back on its financial feet.

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Johnson, by now the unofficial leader of the element in the chapter that saw the problems developing, tried to raise enough support to have the president replaced with someone with more experience and ability. He failed - the majority of the brothers felt that to take away the young president’s position would hurt him and alienate him from the house, and thus he stayed on.

By now financial problems were plaguing the troubled chapter. An addition to the house had been built several years previous, and the entire structure had been re-mortgaged, resulting in a higher house bill. With the decline of numbers of men in the house, and the irresponsibility of brothers in payment of bills, the financial problems were compounded.

"The last meeting of spring term of '70 was a real zoo. Things came to a head, I guess, and you could have heard the shouting at the west complex across the campus."

"Some of the stuff was cleared up, and we made plans for the coming year to be a kind of building year for the house, with a return as far as possible to the old days. I guess it sounds kind of funny now, but then things seemed to be shaping up a little."

The young ex-president leaned forward, gesturing with his hands.

"We weren't even sure whether we could open up the house that fall, because we wouldn't have enough guys to keep the bills down, to break even, much less make a profit. But some of the upperclassmen said they'd stick it out, for another year, for the fraternity. It made me feel good, to hear stuff like that. It was the old Sigma Beta spirit, you know?"

Fall rush was planned in great detail. Meetings were held that summer, work committees named to clean the house and yard; advertising space was purchased in the State News. Only one thing went wrong, Johnson said. No one came through rush.

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"We should have figured, but nobody really thought that things had changed that much. We just thought that if we did things like we had done them before, then everything would be okay, back in order again. By then no amount of posters or ads would bring people through rush, you had to have the dorm contacts and go out and get rushees. We didn't have the horses."

Johnson spoke softly, the words coming slowly, carefully, as though he was unwrapping an old wound.

That fall of 1970 was "an abortion," he said. Although a few people eventually came through the house, due to frantic efforts by Johnson and several others, only two pledged. It was a heavy blow to the sagging chapter spirit, and its effects were felt to the end of the term.

Noise and lack of consideration for others in the house reached monumental proportions. Many of the seniors who volunteered to live in the house for the entire year called it quits after final exams in December of 1970. "They were just bummed out with the whole thing, and no amount of talking, promises or threats would make them change their minds," Johnson said.

The alumni advisor, who had maintained casual relations with the fraternity over the past three years, now said they had to pay off some of the debts run up over the '69-'70 school year. With even fewer brothers in the house, with the possibility of raising the house bill and forcing even more out, with mortgage payments due and no immediate source of money available, the fraternity fractionalized and split up. With rush at a standstill, the Sigma Betas made the only possible decision - to close the house.

The rest of the story is standard cause and effect. Many of the brothers moved into an apartment complex east of the fraternity house on River Street in East Lansing. Some didn't. Others deactivated.

Those that moved into the apartments tried to maintain the chapter integrity but found too many restrictions, too many walls. Rush was attempted in the spring of 1971 but failed miserably. Johnson, who had been elected the previous fall, decided to tool up the brothers left for one more crack at rush the fall of '71. It failed again. On January twentieth, 1972, Johnson and 19 remaining brothers voted the fraternity out of existence. Their chapter remains with the university, to be used again perhaps someday in the future when another group of young men will want to form a chapter of Sigma Beta at MSU.

The big colonial-style house still stands at the northwest corner of River Street and Park Avenue, but the tasteful gray paint has peeled away, leaving ragged patches of bare, worn wood. The green trimmed shutters hang at crazy angles, with slats broken or missing, and most of the windows are shattered or cracked. The lawn is overgrown with weeds and strewn with litter. Students with classes in nearby Aker-Fee complex and construction workers resurfacing Park Avenue near the house use the potholed and dusty parking lot.

The Sigma Betas thought that by letting the house fall to ruin, the city of East Lansing would change its zoning of the corner and allow a gas station to be built, thus giving the fraternity about \$250,000 in payment to pay off debts and construct a new house to be used for parties, meeting and social functions only.

"The city hasn't backed off, though," Johnson said. "I'm not sure what we'll do with the old wreck right now. I get sad every time I walk by it."

"I guess everyone does," he continued. "The guys who worked, who cared, sure, we got discouraged, wanted to quit, but we always figured we'd somehow pull it off, that it would never get this far."

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Johnson rocks very slowly now. His voice is thick, and trails off at times.

“Sometimes I’ll get a call from the police—they know me by now—and I’ll go over to the house; it’ll be around four in the morning, and there will be maybe five or six brothers, some of the guys who cared. They’ll be drunk, back from the bars or a party, sitting on the living room floor singing the old songs. I can’t help it, I’ll sit down with them, and we’ll talk about the old Hell Weeks, and raids and parties, and the house.”

The old Sigma Beta bell, rung at all MSU home football games for years, is gone now, stolen from the front yard, Johnson thinks by a fraternity from the University of Michigan.

Johnson smiles quietly. “It’s kind of ironic,” he said. “I guess they figured we’d chase them and hassle them for it. I’m surprised they got it out of those weeds.” The second, newer bell is hidden deep within a Sigma Beta’s closet somewhere in East Lansing - Johnson won’t say where.

The reasons why Sigma Beta folded - and there are many - could be written down and labeled like a diagnosis of a disease. Poor leadership. Lack of education for new members. The almost frantic cutting away of all traditions and ideals to appeal to more people. Division of the fraternity into separate, polarized cliques. Financial irresponsibility. Lack of good alumni relations and a strong, smart fraternity advisor to help them. Insufficient peer pressure to stifle noise level and lack of consideration. And many more reasons, except one, for Tom Johnson and some of the brothers.

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“I, well, if I had to do it all over again, I’d do it, because I think it was worth it, whether we lost or not,” Johnson smiled sadly. “The old Sigma Beta spirit, you know?”

The above story is factual, accounting the demise of an important fraternity at Michigan State.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dave Westol has been an Assistant Prosecuting Attorney for Kalamazoo County, Michigan, National Vice President and Executive Director of the Theta Chi Fraternity. In addition, Westol has served as the Fraternity Advisor at Michigan State University and has lectured at over 90 campuses and 40 national fraternity/sorority conventions. As an undergraduate, he served as the IFC president and as his chapter’s rush chairman (two terms) and pledge educator. Westol is best known for his presentation, “Hazing on Trial,” a graphic presentation of the prosecution of a chapter president following the hazing death of a pledge.