

## Fraternities: The Beginning of the End

By Bob Seidman, Class of 1963

When our class entered Williams in 1959, my recollection is that 95% or so of the upperclassmen were in fraternities. That left a tiny group of Non-Affiliates, or N.A.s. Some of these folks were strong-minded and self-assured and, for reasons of conscience or indifference, had voluntarily rejected fraternities. But many other N.A.s had been rejected by the system, and most of those guys were unhappy if not miserable about their pariah social status.

In 1958, a year before we entered the College, Williams instituted a system known as “total opportunity,” which was an attempt to make the fraternity selection process more equitable. And also, I’m told, to reduce the severity of “hazing,” which occasionally inflicted mental and physical harm. I believe our class was the first class to operate under total opportunity. An earlier reform had pushed frat pledging back from second semester freshmen year to the beginning of sophomore year, a good idea since freshmen had a chance to get to know their classmates before affiliating with one of the 15 Greek letter societies that were the center of social life for most of the upper classmen. Of course the delay transformed our spring term 1960 into a pre-rushing period, one that could be intense for those who were “courted” by several frats and dispiriting for those who were not.

Total opportunity attempted to alleviate one major misery of the old approach by mandating that anyone who wanted would be assured of a “bid.” To assure oneself of at least one bid, the candidate was required to list all 15 frat houses on his bid sheet in preferential order, and it was agreed upon that at least one house —by a method yet to be decided—would offer the candidate a place. The frats, too, listed their potential brothers in preferential order.

In the fall of 1960, we sophomores were instructed to arrive on campus a week before the beginning of the semester to be “rushed.” I already knew that I would pledge Alpha Delta Phi. (Along with many other people, I’d been secretly recruited and had indicated my preference. This was not kosher, termed “dirty rushing,” but most of the frats and many prospective pledges did it.) Anyhow, our class went through two days of conventional rushing, with each of us visiting each fraternity house and chatting about why this house and not that house was a good fit for the candidate and vice-versa for the “brotherhood.” The second day the candidate completed his round of the 15 houses. Then came a much needed day of rest. On the fourth day the candidate returned to the six houses he’d listed highest— if the fraternities also listed him. Some guys got four or five or even six of their top choices. Less popular candidates received only one or two bids. (I’m told that the process was conducted on IBM punch cards. Without today’s computers, the matching must’ve been time-consuming and tedious.) In the best cases, the sophomores continued the conversation with the upper classmen. With those deemed pariahs, the candidates felt the chill blast of disinterest that indicated the house would not

be offering a bid. When rushing ended on that fourth day, the houses were supposed to announce their bids to us. Everyone anxiously awaited the moment that settled one's social fate for the last three years of school. We waited. And waited. It turned out that one of the roughly 300 sophomores did not receive a single bid. He had fulfilled the requirement and listed all of the frats. We weren't sure then—and even now, fifty years later—about the identity of the rejected fellow. Indeed, there may have been more than one man who, as the jargon went, “bounced” through the system. Whomever it was, imagine how terrible it was thinking that you were that undesirable.

Two chaotic days passed uncomfortably. During that time confused sophomores and frustrated upperclassmen milled around and debated and grew increasingly restive, angry and/or angst-ridden, not knowing what would happen next. Finally, one house did what it had to do, and they offered the bouncee a bid. Problem apparently solved, but that experience left a bad taste in the collective mouth of the Class of '63.

After I received my bid, I pledged A.D., went through the silly and often offensive hazing process that included multiple laps around the frat house for less than servile responses to the brethren's inane demands. The anti-climax of the entire rigamarole was being tasked to crawl in our underwear up three flights of stairs while holding the desiccating agent alum in one's mouth. Not such an uplifting introduction to frat life. After we were initiated, I took an informal poll of my pledge class. Would you subject another person to the process you just endured? Or would you stop the hazing? I got too many 'yes' answers to the former, and too many 'no' answers to the latter.

Over the years there were multiple attempts to ameliorate the frat system. One was the 1960 “Delta Phi” experiment, headed by Morris Kaplan, John Jobeless and Steve Stolzberg. In a way, the fraternities had the College over a barrel because the fifteen frats housed and fed 90 plus percent of the students. But at least one house, Delta Phi, was suffering from financial and morale issues, undoubtedly the result of it being unofficially regarded as an unattractive frat. Delta Phi was in danger of closing. Morris Kaplan wrote recently: “To guarantee a full pledge class and keep Delta Phi from failing, a group of us were allowed to pledge before rushing and to participate as members. . . . We were not ourselves much interested in saving the system but in creating a more intellectually oriented model of student community.” The reformers in D. Phi initiated a Friday afternoon tea open to faculty and interested students along with weekly reading groups. Many professors supported the innovations, but trouble began over the hazing rituals, which many old timers supported and which caused a serious schism in the house.

Trouble kept on brewing in spring, 1961. A young man from South Korea, Myong-Ku Ahn, had been assigned to the house as a “Social Member.” (Foreign students were often affiliated with a fraternity.) Ahn was a pleasant guy, rather quiet. For most of the year he'd eaten two meals a day with us. In the spring of 1961 several of us, including Bruce Grinnell, were outside doing yard work at the “House.” As usual, Myong-Ku was helping. I turned to Bruce, who was President of the frat, and suggested that we make Myong-Ku Ahn a full member. After all, he was always helping out. He ate with us every day; on occasion he came to our parties. But he could not vote on frat

business. Nor could he enter the “goat room,” the secret sanctum reserved for the brethren.

[Recently I read that Myong-Ku Ahn was born in North Korea, managed to emigrate to South Korea and eventually traveled to the U.S. I know he was a Chemistry major and on the Dean’s List. He graduated with the Class of ’63. The yearbook lists him as a member of Alpha Delta Phi, but I am certain he was never a full member of A.D. He completed his Ph.D. in chemistry at Yale and taught chemistry at Indiana State University.]

I stood up at the April meeting in the paneled “goat room” and suggested Ahn be elevated to membership. Then all hell broke loose. One fellow accused him of not knowing English well. Another actually said, “If you make him a brother, I’ll never be able to bring a date to the house.” I was stunned. President Grinnell was stunned; several other guys couldn’t believe their ears. The debate roiled on. As I remember, a large majority of members supported my suggestion. But there were individuals who insisted that full membership would never happen as long as they were A.D.’s. I offered an ultimatum: If Ahn was not given membership, I’d quit the house.

Then came the vote. In the ballot, three men indicated that they could not live with Ahn. Technically, the house did not have a blackball, but it had—strange term—the “butter.” A.D. Phi’s bylaws required three negative votes to prevent an individual from becoming a full member. The “butter” was a soft blackball: “I like the man,” it stated in its weasel-like fashion, “but I could not live with him.” In 1961, many Williams’ fraternities maintained the “blackball,” which required merely a single no vote to deny membership.

I walked out of the meeting in an angry fog. I don’t recall this precisely, but my classmate and anti-frat ringleader Morris Kaplan remembers Bruce Grinnell and me walking into the Student Union snack bar and gesturing him over from his crowded booth. When he joined us, apparently I stated, “This is the last straw. What are we going to do about fraternities?”

The plot quickly thickened. For the rest of the next day Morris and I circulated around the campus, approaching each of the students we thought would be sympathetic to the nascent anti-Greek letter society rebellion. Meanwhile, Bruce Grinnell, then a Junior Advisor, discussed the fraternity question with other J.A.’s. (Junior Advisors were Juniors chosen to live in the Freshmen Quad and served as informal advisors to the freshmen.)

Morris or Bruce or I proposed a meeting that night. We wanted the gathering to be secret. Of course at Williams, then and now, it ain’t easy to keep a secret. There was a certain amount of fear of discovery. There was also a well-founded suspicion that one or more of the militant pro-fraternity houses or, more accurately, a handful of their hardcore brothers, would harass us. But that was also part of the excitement and challenge of the moment.

Prior to the clandestine meeting, no one really knew the extent of opposition to fraternities. In the spring of '61, suddenly there was seemingly spontaneous pressure to do something about the system-wide inequities and hierarchical assumptions that many of us believed were divisive and unnecessary. For when we did convene in the physics' lab lecture room for what became this band of non-brothers a legendary midnight session, the first night turned out 15 to 18 militants. A week later the second meeting produced 40-50 young men. And the final meeting in late May, right smack in the middle of exam week, was attended by 90 or so. The meeting was heated and contentious, for a number of vocal pro-fraternity supporters showed up that evening.

Looking around the room at that last meeting, I can remember feeling a considerable lift—that many of the thinking people on campus had gathered together to begin a process that would benefit all of us and the college. There were 46 signers of the Grinnell Petition, among them a frat President and Gargoyle (Bruce Grinnell), the chairman of the Athletic Council and Gargoyle (Paul Worthman), a J.A. and President of the Williams Chapel Committee (Joe Bassett), a frat Vice President (Irving Marcus), a Phi Beta (Simon Green), another Gargoyle (Mike Keating), and yet another Gargoyle (Frank Wolf) along with the Gargoyle President (Jere Behrman) and Vice President (Mike Brimmer). And so on. Many signers had distinguished records at the College and, what's more, represented constituencies of consequence.

I have a Xerox of the original Grinnell Petition beside me. It was produced on what seems now an archaic piece of technology, a manual typewriter. The Petition called for "the immediate establishment of a committee" of Trustees, students, faculty and alumni "to investigate the social system and to recommend the plan they feel will be most effective in meeting the objections outlined below." Each of the 46 original signers stated that they were "willing to leave our fraternities" but deferred action "in the hopes that serious and concerned discussion with the Administration and Faculty will result in the possible program for the College."

Not surprisingly, when the news about the anti-frat coalition spread, most faculty members were overjoyed; most had been hoping to get rid of the Greek societies for years.

In May, the Petition was submitted to President James Phinney Baxter III, President of the College from 1937 to 1961. Baxter chose to reject the draft, stating, "I came in with 15 fraternities, I'm going out with 15 fraternities." However, Baxter retired that summer and was replaced by John E. Sawyer '39. The Petition was on his desk when Jack Sawyer officially took over on 1 July 1961. On Bastille Day, July 14, 1961, Bruce Grinnell got a call from Kay O'Connell, Secretary to the College's President. Grinnell drove up to Williams from his home in Northampton, Mass. Sawyer was cordial and, as Bruce said to me, seemed to be willing to do something about fraternities. President Sawyer created the committee that the petition requested, which was named the Angevine Committee after the Trustee who chaired the group. Just one year later in the summer of '62, the Committee called "for the College to assume full responsibility for the housing and feeding of all students." The Board of Trustees voted for the

recommendation in time for our return for senior year in the fall of '62. The phrasing was inspired—It mandated the abolition of fraternities without overtly saying so. In barely two years, frats were on their way out. Then, in 1970, the College initiated co-education and expanded from 1200 to 1800 students.

Why the Grinnell Petition? Because Bruce was and is a man of conscience. Because he was a co-conspirator at the start of our journey. Because he was A.D. President and then resigned the post. A Junior Advisor, Grinnell was the football team's first-string quarterback and a member of Gargoyle, the senior honor society. Bruce, one of the most respected men on campus, became our most prominent leader, indeed he was and is the John Hancock of the movement.

The old system created an implicit campus hierarchy. Everyone knew the identity of the "best" houses, and almost everyone felt his social position was defined by his affiliation. The system created an unnecessary sense of superiority in some guys while consigning others to second and even third class citizenship. Bottom line: None of this social inflation and deflation seemed necessary in our small, "elite" liberal arts college.

Almost finally, there's an impressive difference between the way Williams handled the frat issue and, say, Dartmouth's awkward, ongoing and divisive attempts to deal with the very real problem there. At Williams, the anti-fraternity impulse and almost all of its motive power came from students, many of them campus leaders. At Dartmouth, the administration has been and is still attempting to legislate from the top down. That makes it a much more dodgy undertaking.

Not to overstate this, but, for some of us, the Sixties were born in the Physics lab basement that night. Certainly, we entered a college that was a preppy, conservative, relatively complacent institution.

Finally, one of the great privileges of being at Williams in the early Sixties is that we came to believe in our right to resist unfair and/or nonsensical policies and the need to make an effort to change them. If that's not the privilege and burden of democracy, what is?